

Article

Transatlantic Abolitionist Discourse and the Body of Christ in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"

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Academic Editor: Kevin Hart

Received: 29 November 2016; Accepted: 23 December 2016; Published: 27 December 2016

Abstract: Despite renewed interest in roles played by Christianity in the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB), few scholars have discussed her treatment of the body of Christ—understood as both the figure of Christ and his body of followers—in her antislavery poem, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”. This article argues that “The Runaway Slave” reworks portrayals of the body of Christ in transatlantic abolitionist print culture. It examines the poem in its original context of publication in the 1848 issue of *The Liberty Bell*, the Boston-based antislavery annual. As EBB would have known from earlier issues of the annual that she received before writing her poem, its contributors—primarily though not exclusively privileged northern whites—represented themselves as messianic martyrs whose Christ-like suffering would liberate slaves. EBB’s poem challenges this self-glorifying rhetoric, in part by making a refrain out of words from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s well-known poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. This refrain indicates that the symbols used by *Liberty Bell* authors to portray themselves as messianic martyrs might, to those they labor to liberate, seem perversely bound up in slavery and the color binary used to justify it. “Runaway Slave” further suggests that the *Liberty Bell*’s messianic rhetoric, like the slave system itself, parodies Christ’s sacrifice of himself for the good of others. In both cases, wittingly or not, whites seek to turn the bodily agony of blacks to their benefit, whether ethical or economic. Stressing that such parodies of the crucifixion only perpetuate racial violence, the poem pursues what we might call a post-secular vision of Christ’s body, suggesting that people can through love act as members of Christ outside of any official church body. EBB’s poem nevertheless risks trading in the abuses it critiques—a risk, the material history of her poem indicates, of which she might have been aware.

Keywords: Elizabeth Barrett Browning; The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point; abolitionist propaganda; transatlantic; print culture; Christianity; the body of Christ; crucifixion; *The Liberty Bell*; post-secular

1. Introduction

The speaker of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s (EBB)¹ poem “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”, a fugitive slave woman, ironically stands at Plymouth Rock, the mythological point of origin of American freedom, to recount her murder of the white-faced child to which she gave birth after being gang-raped and flogged by her masters.² This shocking poem has become one of EBB’s most

¹ I refer to Elizabeth Barrett Browning as “EBB”, following the practice of the authoritative collection of the Brownings’ letters, *Brownings’ Correspondence* [1], and the 2010 five-volume *Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* [2]. When referring to the latter by title, I use the standard scholarly abbreviation: *WEBB*.

² I am grateful to my research assistant, Elizabeth Travers, for her assistance with research for this article. I also extend thanks to the outside reviewers for their perceptive suggestions, many of which I have adopted.

intensely discussed works in the critical commentary on her poetry that has rapidly proliferated since the 1980s [3]. This theoretically and methodologically diverse scholarship has redressed the neglect and dismissal of “Mrs. Browning” in literary studies from the 1920s to the 1960s, even as it has challenged the reduction of EBB in popular culture to the “Miss Barrett” of Wimpole street, celebrated almost exclusively for her memorialization of the nineteenth-century’s most famous literary courtship in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* [3]. “The Runaway Slave” has figured centrally in scholars’ reconstruction of EBB as a cosmopolitan, erudite, experimental, and often counter-cultural poet. In the 1980s and 1990s, critics concentrated on “The Runaway Slave’s” racial and sexual politics and its connection to EBB’s slave-holding history as the descendent of Jamaican plantation owners. Discussion has since broadened to consider the poem’s textual and manuscript history, transatlantic antislavery contexts, treatment of infanticide, usefully disruptive impact on classroom discussions, and relation to postcolonialism: for example, it inspired the postcolonial novel *Strange Music* (2008) by British-Caribbean novelist and critic Laura Fish [2].

Religion, however, has not figured centrally in this varied and (by now) vast critical response to “Runaway Slave”. Linda Lewis, in the longest existing study of religion in EBB’s poetry, dwells only momentarily on the poem ([4], pp. 190–93). Little has been done to develop the conversation, despite Marjorie Stone’s call for attention to religious dimensions of “Runaways Slave” in her brief treatment of it in a portion of a 2005 essay ([5], pp. 28–32). This remains true of outstanding work on EBB’s complicated (re)formulations of Christianity by scholars such as Corinne Davies, Kirstie Blair, Charles LaPorte, and Karen Dieleman, all of whom prioritize other works by EBB, especially her epic verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh* [6–9]. In particular, scholars continue to underemphasize the complex roles played in “Runaway Slave” by the body of Christ, understood as both the figure of Christ and the Christian community. This essay argues that in “The Runaway Slave” EBB reworks portrayals of the body of Christ circulating through transatlantic abolitionist print culture. I build on Marjorie Stone’s comparison of the poem with other entries in the antislavery literary annual in which it was first published in December 1847 for sale in 1848: *The Liberty Bell* [10] (Figure 1), sold each year at the Christmas bazaar organized by the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society to help fund antislavery propaganda ([11], p. 29). Stone does not discuss portrayals of Christ’s body, but she focuses, as I will, on the 1844 and 1845 issues of the annual, since EBB received these around the time she was invited to contribute ([12], pp. 39, 42).

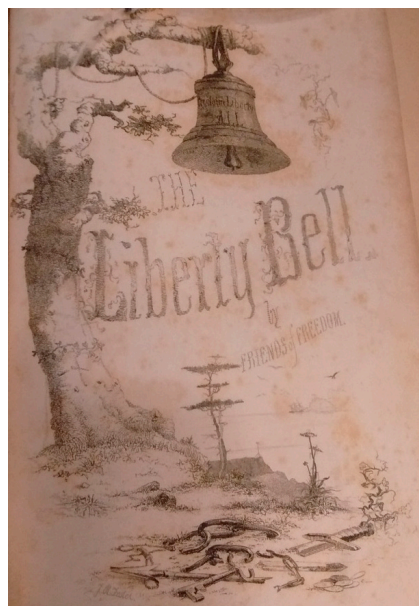


Figure 1. Frontispiece to *The Liberty Bell* for 1848 [10], in which “Runaway Slave” was first published. Reproduced by permission of the Armstrong Browning Library.

The Liberty Bell was published by the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. A few years before inviting EBB to contribute, the Society had by April 1840 split over conflicts about the role of women and clergy and reemerged under *The Liberty Bell*'s editor, Maria Weston Chapman ([13], pp. 45, 59). The reconstituted society resisted clerical domination, championed the rights and leadership of women, and supported William Lloyd Garrison's call for immediate abolition. Prior to the 1840 disbanding, these radical causes were promoted by white, upper-class leaders of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) operating in a loose coalition with more conservative, middle-class, and pro-clerical Congregationalists and Baptists focused on legislative answers to slavery, as well as influential African Americans who prioritized direct assistance to blacks and their local communities over participation in the white members' policy debates ([13], pp. 46–48). Shedding many of the middle-class members after 1840, the reformed society consisted primarily of upper-class white Bostonian women of Unitarian, Quaker, Episcopalian, and Universalist persuasion ([13], p. 59). Most of the roughly twenty-five African American members supported this reformed and radicalized BFASS ([12], p. 44), although they generally devoted themselves to ethnic church and community organizations while their affluent white collaborators pursued antislavery projects in the public sphere, such as *The Liberty Bell* and the annual fair ([13], pp. 55, 62–63). The BFASS was nonetheless unusual in practicing the mixing of races and genders at abolitionist gatherings, unlike many other New England antislavery groups that maintained seating and social segregation between blacks and whites ([12], p. 44). *Liberty Bell* entries reflected the sympathies of the elite and religiously radical white women who oversaw it, though contributors also represented different confessions, including EBB with her Congregationalist background. They hailed from New England and the United Kingdom, and included notable male abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass and James Russell Lowell.

"The Runaway Slave" reveals EBB's sympathy with *The Liberty Bell*'s ecumenical vision, commitment to integration, call for immediate action, and support of women's rights. EBB has her female slave address topics and assume roles then regarded as unsuited for women: she recounts her doubt in God, her sexual violation, and her infanticide before boldly asserting the possibility of a slave insurrection against white masters—*Liberty Bell* writers were themselves in general unwilling to connect these subjects and attitudes to slave women and mothers ([12], pp. 51–54). Yet by taking a stand on such issues as a woman author, and by creating a powerful voice for a female slave, EBB exceeds while supporting the general effort of *Liberty Bell* writers to defend the active public roles taken by women in Garrisonian abolitionism—in contrast with the resistance to women's leadership by both male and female British abolitionists ([14], pp. 309–13, 320–28).

Despite these convergences between EBB's poem and values widely represented in *The Liberty Bell*, "The Runaway Slave" also interrogates and defies representations of Christ's body by *Liberty Bell* contributors, particularly their tendency to portray white abolitionists as messianic martyrs. The poem critiques the symbolic system used by *Liberty Bell* writers to authorize their messianic martyrdom, and it does so in ways previously unremarked by scholars. One of the poem's central refrains is almost certainly a reformulation of haunting lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. By suggesting disturbing connections between the narratives of the slave and mariner, the refrain calls into question the symbols—the sea traversed by Pilgrims seeking liberty, and the stars often likened to northern abolitionists burning bright for freedom—that are fundamental to the *Liberty Bell*'s brand of white messianic martyrdom. The poem thereby further indicates that such a symbolic network could, to a slave such as the one speaking the poem, seem inextricably bound up in the color binary used to justify slavery. Through improvised rituals in honor of her lover and syncretic appropriation of Christian images and practices, the runaway slave recognizes her membership in Christ's body outside of any institutional church, and in ways that elude and challenge visions of Christ's body in *The Liberty Bell*. The runaway slave of EBB's poem envisions what we might call a postsecular body of Christ, even as in articulating this perspective she suggests that both her oppressors and her would-be *Liberty Bell* liberators are performing parodies of Christ's crucifixion, trying—wittingly or not—to turn the bodily suffering of slaves to their economic or ethical benefit. Yet several details in "The Runaway

Slave” and its material history indicate EBB’s awareness that the poem was itself vulnerable to some of the criticisms it directs at other *Liberty Bell* contributions.

2. White Messianic Martyrs for a Cause: “A Starry Abdiel mid Unstable Hosts”

Using rhetoric that Marcus Wood has analyzed throughout Anglo-American—particularly North American—white abolitionist poetry, authors in the 1844 and 1845 *Liberty Bell* portrayed themselves and their sympathizers as messianic martyrs continuing a holy war for liberty fought by a long line of persecuted Protestant reformers, including the Pilgrims, Milton, and martyrs celebrated by John Foxe ([15], pp. xxvii–xxxii). The rhetoric of martyrdom was shared by African Americans who helped Garrison establish *The Liberator* antislavery newspaper and otherwise advised him; as mentioned above, the BFASS included several African American activists, such as Susan Paul ([16], p. 113). *The Liberty Bell* nonetheless exemplifies the tendency of northern abolitionists to foreground white rather than black activists as martyrs. Harriet Martineau, an early transatlantic ally of Maria Weston Chapman and a regular contributor to *The Liberty Bell*, influentially contributed to this trend in her *The Martyr Age of the United States* (1839), reprinted across the Atlantic after initial publication in the *London and Westminster Review* ([16], p. 113). Martineau represents Garrison and his supporters among the BFASS, including Chapman, as martyrs while largely overlooking black abolitionists such as David Walker, who was rumored to have been assassinated ([16], p. 113). Yet the incidents she recites—such as the murder of white Illinois abolitionist printer and minister Elijah Lovejoy, the narrow escape of Garrison from death at the hands of a Boston mob in 1835, and the ostracism and terrifying harassment faced by Chapman—remind us that “abolitionists in America had some sort of case” for regarding themselves as martyrs for a cause ([15], p. xxvii).

The language of white martyrdom is pervasive in *The Liberty Bell*. For example, in the 1844 *Liberty Bell*, Connecticut poet and reformer George Shepard Burleigh describes deceased abolitionists as “crowned martyrs” ([17], p. 45), likens slavery to Milton’s Satan in his rebellion against God and the angelic hosts “A merciless demon, with armed multitudes” ([17], p. 44), and compares abolitionists of “the North” to Milton’s “starry Abdiel” ([17], p. 43), the angel who broke from Satan’s ranks to stand faithful alone amidst vast opposition. In the appropriately Miltonic sonnet that opens the 1845 *Liberty Bell*, Bernard Barton, a minor English Quaker poet, catches George Burleigh’s allusion to Abdiel, paraphrasing the appropriate lines from *Paradise Lost* in a transatlantic salute to Garrisonian abolitionists: “Ye who are ‘faithful ‘mid the faithless found’” ([18], p. 1).

The 1845 *Liberty Bell* includes a poem by Ann Greene Chapman, sister to Maria Weston Chapman’s husband and member of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. Describing herself as a holy antislavery warrior, Ann anticipates her heavenly reward and likens her suffering to that of Christ: “The glorious Prize awaiteth me, if I will firmly bear/This cross that Christ on earth has borne, and thus for heaven prepare” ([18], p. 77). An epigraph to the poem notes, “This faithful, devoted, lamented one died in 1837; —and in the Anti-Slavery ranks” ([18], p. 77). The poem involves readers in public recognition of a martyr for their cause, even as it invites them to consider making her aspiration their own.

Some entries not only compared Christ’s sacrifice with that of white abolitionist martyrs, but identified them or nearly replaced the first with the second. “The Maiden’s Harvest” for the 1845 *Liberty Bell*, by Maria White of Massachusetts, who married James Russell Lowell in 1844, is a poetic fable about a maiden casting seeds that later bountifully supply the needs of the poor. The maiden’s “pure white hand”, “face as morning bright”, and promise to “come again” ([18], p. 156), align her with several figures: the white female abolitionists of *The Liberty Bell* who scatter the seeds of freedom; Christ who sows the seeds of the kingdom (Matt. 13:1–23), who promises to come again and make all things new (Rev. 21:5), whose face shines transfigured like the sun (Matt. 17:2, Rev. 1:14), and who compares himself to “the bright and morning star” (Rev. 22:16); and Christ’s body, the people of God, often taken

to be symbolically represented by the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation (12:1).³ Comprising within herself and her charitable labor the messianic deliverer, his faithful laborers, and all those who receive redemption, the maiden of Maria White's poem assures white women abolitionists and their supporters that from the seeds planted early in the season of their sacrificial agitation they will reap, for others and themselves, a harvest "A hundred-fold." This is a rather self-confident application of Jesus's parable of the seed—or believer—that bears "a hundredfold" (Matt. 13:8, 23), as well as his promise that those who sacrifice all for him "will receive a hundredfold" in return (Matt. 19:29). White northern abolitionists are the messianic source and the ultimate beneficiaries of this life-giving harvest, with the Christ they resemble and those they liberate either absorbed into or praising their saving agency: "[the poor] bless the unseen giver dear,/Who sent this daily bread" ([18], p. 158).

It should come as no surprise to find *Liberty Bell* poets such as Bernard Barton, in the sonnet mentioned earlier, portraying the antislavery cause as a religion and even an object of worship: "Your Cause must triumph: is triumphant now,/In countless votaries, daily, hourly won/To swell your ranks!" ([18], p. 2). Closely related to this, and in keeping with Garrisonian anti-clericalism ([19], p. 297; [20], pp. 5, 43–48), *Liberty Bell* authors often represented abolitionism as a widely dispersed church in which activists were ministers and pulpits were replaced with antislavery propaganda. In the 1844 *Liberty Bell*, Charles K. Whipple declares that "the church and the clergy" have failed to call the people to fight the Lord's "battles" against slavery: "The staff thus dropped from their hand, the abolitionists have taken it up; [and must now] expose to a misguided people the treachery of their predecessors" ([17], pp. 198–99).

All of these trends—identification or replacement of Christ with white abolitionist martyrs, and of churches with abolitionist societies—characterize an 1841 letter by Harriet Martineau, author of *The Martyr Age*, to fellow British abolitionist Elisabeth Pease that is reprinted at the end of the 1845 *Liberty Bell* sent to EBB. EBB would have surely read this letter, since by the time she received the 1845 *Liberty Bell* she had been in intense—sometimes tense—correspondence with Martineau for several years ([1], vol. 4, pp. 325–27).⁴ With astonishing self-importance, Martineau likens activism by herself and other abolitionists to Jesus's healing of the woman who touched the hem of his garment: "We are bound . . . to work for millions of poor creatures, so grateful for our care that they are ready to kiss the hem of our garments" ([18], pp. 250–51). Martineau describes Garrisonians as the true body of Christ, a substitute for the church: Garrison is "the chief of apostles" and "his corps of devout, devoted, and catholic fellow-laborers, with the Bible in their heart of hearts, and its spirit in all their ways...need our support" ([18], pp. 252, 255).

3. Subversive Refrains: "I Am Black"; "I Look at the Sea the Sky"

In letters during and after her composition of "Runaway Slave", EBB agreed with *Liberty Bell* contributors that Christ's body cannot be limited to any form of worship or creed ([1], 1453, 2538, 2650, 2684, 2698, 2726).⁵ Yet in the poem she resists the tendency of *Liberty Bell* contributors to overlook slaves' bodies while praising their own messianic reforming body, a trend evident in the frontispiece to the first issue of the *Liberty Bell* (Figure 2), even though it was commissioned from the black engraver Patrick Henry Reason ([21], p. 212).

³ All quotations from the Bible are from the Authorized Version.

⁴ The first number in this citation represents the volume number and the second the page in that volume. Unless, as here, I am discussing editorial notes, I use letter numbers instead of page numbers when referring to letters in *The Brownings' Correspondence*. I do so to facilitate ease of use for readers who have access to the scholarly digital edition freely available through the Armstrong Browning Library's website, but who do not have access to the expensive and massive printed edition. The digital edition also contains corrections to material in the printed version.

⁵ As explained in the previous note, I provide letter rather than page numbers for *The Brownings' Correspondence*.

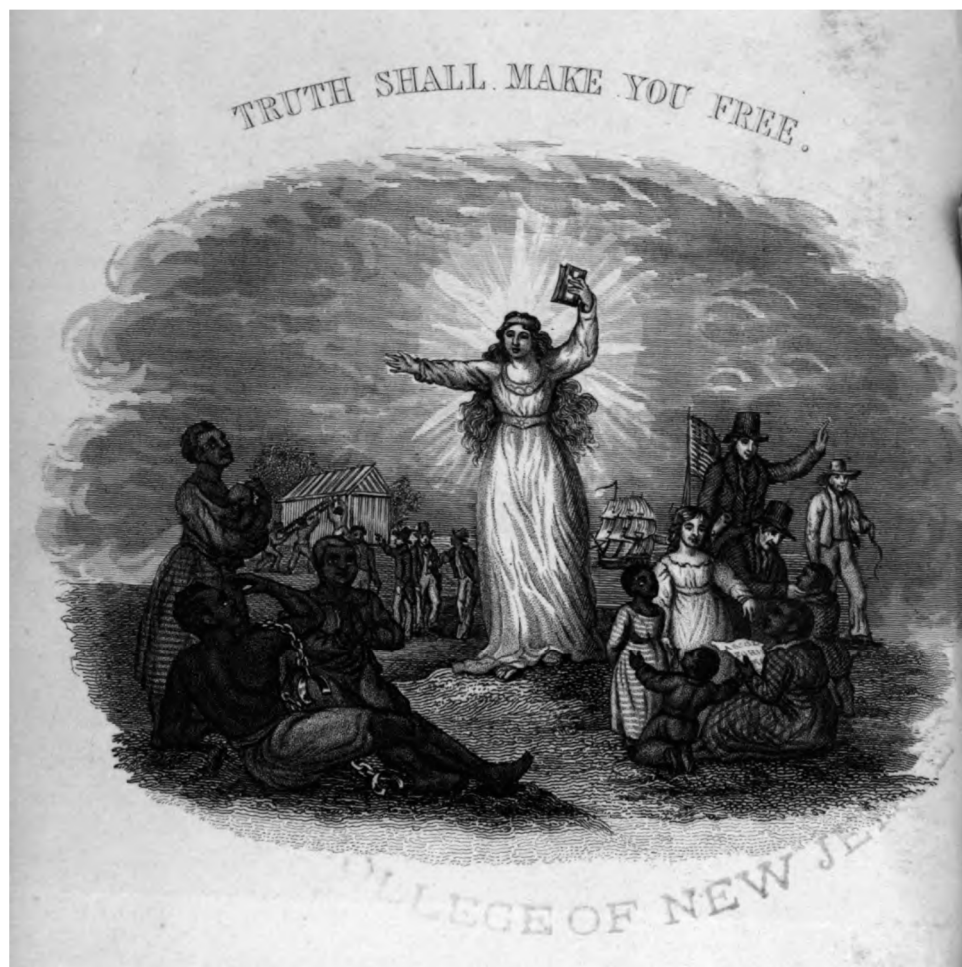


Figure 2. Frontispiece to the first *Liberty Bell* (for 1839), engraved by Patrick Henry Reason.

Pushed to the margins, black figures gaze in adoring supplication at the radiant lady Liberty with her raised Bible, a stand-in for white women saints who, like Christ, proclaim “The Truth” that “Shall Make You Free” through their holy book, *The Liberty Bell*.

By contrast, the fugitive slave of EBB’s “Runaway Slave” insists on her bodily presence. Variations of the phrase “I am black, I am black” ([10], p. 30)⁶ occur five times, acting as a refrain. This refrain reminds us that EBB did not call this poem a dramatic monologue, a term now regularly applied to the poem by literary critics but unavailable to EBB herself; instead, she referred to it as her “antislavery ballad” ([1], 2654; [22], pp. 239–41). In the folk and Romantic revival ballads known to EBB, refrains stress key images and themes even as their recurrence reinforces the poem’s meter. The refrain “I am black, I am black” foregrounds the fictional black body of EBB’s speaker both thematically and in the reader’s bodily experience of pronouncing the rhythmic lines—silently or aloud. Readers of “Runaway Slave” in *The Liberty Bell* are thereby ironically asked to enact and revise the self-applauding relationship that previous *Liberty Bell* contributions had imagined between the voices of northern abolitionists and those of slaves. In the 1844 *Liberty Bell*, Richard Hildreth of Boston praises abolitionists for making “articulate” the otherwise unintelligible and coarse “cry” of slaves:

⁶ Unless noted otherwise, I cite the text of the poem from the 1848 *Liberty Bell*. EBB made several substantial changes to the poem for its reprinting in her 1850 *Poems*. WEBB [2] uses the text from the fourth edition of *Poems* (1856), but the editors usefully note variants, including several from the 1848 *Liberty Bell* and from manuscripts of the poem discussed later in this article.

It was no longer a low, faint murmur, in an unknown tongue; they gave it words in polished idioms [...] It became a voice, everywhere present and intelligible, ever sounding, [...] in the assembly, in the market-place, in the church, in the newspapers; [...] a voice at first still and small, but which swelled stronger and louder, till all men listened, and the slave-merchants and the slave-drivers trembled in their palaces. ([17], pp. 53–54)

Alluding to the “still small voice” of God that speaks to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:12, Hildreth likens abolitionist propagandists to the voice of God and of conscience, in the process losing or translating out of existence the presumably ineffective and unpolished slave voices for which these white agitators effectively speak. Given that Frederick Douglass would contribute to the next issue of the *Liberty Bell* ([17], pp. 166–72), Hildreth’s suggestion that slaves could only gain a voice through white activists is ironic, to say the least. Although Hildreth’s essay disregards the (admittedly slight) authorial diversity of the very annual in which it is published, it nonetheless articulates assumptions that did often find expression in *The Liberty Bell*. EBB’s refrain “I am black” calls conscious attention to the awkward act of white authors and readers speaking for and in the place of slaves, even as it asks whites in turn to lend their voices, minds, and bodies to an imagined black fugitive slave woman. By rhythmically repeating “I am black,” the primarily white and affluent readers of *The Liberty Bell* offer their voices to the control and consciousness of the runaway slave while simultaneously declaring their own skin to be black.⁷ The fact that EBB’s name is advertised prominently in the Table of Contents and at the head of the poem in *The Liberty Bell* means that her own figurative sharing of bodies and minds with this fugitive slave would not be lost on readers. The by-line and refrain of EBB’s poem defy the ethical and agential distance and hierarchy often rhetorically and visually enforced in *The Liberty Bell* between messianic white liberators and their grateful black supplicants, while making unavoidable the black bodily presence, agency, and voice this rhetoric frequently effaces.

In fact, the identification between EBB and the fugitive slave of her poem elicited a movingly admiring response from the African-American educator, abolitionist, and author Charlotte Forten. In her 1854 journal, Forten praises the “earnest” and “touching” manner in which “the writer portray[s] the bitter anguish of the poor fugitive as she thinks over all the wrongs and sufferings that she has endured, and of the sin to which tyrants have driven her but which they alone must answer for!” ([24], p. 343). Forten’s pronouns—“she” could at times seem to apply to “the writer” and to “the fugitive”—indicate the degree to which EBB’s figurative identification with the fugitive slave could motivate a feeling of sympathetic multiracial community in ways that proved politically forceful across time. Forten writes these comments as she reflects on the arrest of a fugitive slave under the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), and she finds renewed energy for her struggle with fellow abolitionists against such oppression by contemplating the sympathetic community imagined in EBB’s poem: “[it] most suitable to my feelings and to the times... It seems as if no one could read this poem without having his sympathies roused to the utmost in behalf of the oppressed” ([24], p. 343).

In effect, EBB reverses the thought experiment proposed in the 1844 *Liberty Bell* by leading Boston abolitionist Susan C. Cabot: “Is there not great danger, that, with all our convictions and acknowledgements to the contrary, the covering that God has been pleased to put upon the negro hides from our faithless hearts the truth that he is one of us? [...] If slaves had our skins, would it be so difficult to find time to think about them?” ([17], p. 104). Rather than asking white readers to imagine slaves with “our skins” so as to discover that “the negro...is one of us” behind “the” black “covering”, EBB encourages them to ponder, “Would it be so difficult to find time to think about slaves

⁷ Since, as discussed later, the runaway slave dies by the poem’s conclusion, in taking up her narrative readers are in effect not only submitting their bodies to her voice, but also becoming channels for her spirit to speak. Given EBB’s strong interest at this time in spiritualism and the related writings of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, this dimension of the poem deserves further consideration that my focus on the body of Christ does not permit. Although she does not consider the role of the reader in channeling the runaway slave’s voice, Rebecca D. Soares discusses the poem’s participation in transnational spiritualist discourses ([23], pp. 364–68).

if I had their skin?" White readers are prodded to wonder how being in the skin of those they wish to liberate could throw into unsettling light the assumptions they bring to *The Liberty Bell* and their abolitionist cause.

This defamiliarizing act of identification is perhaps most apparent in one variation on the "I am black" refrain, "And lift my black face, my black hand":

III.

And thus I thought that I would come
 And kneel where ye [pilgrims] knelt before,
 And feel your souls around me hum
 In undertone to the ocean's roar;
 x / x / / x / /
 And lift my black face, my black hand,⁸
 Here in your names, to curse this land
 Ye blessed in Freedom's, heretofore. ([10], p. 30)

The line in question holds up a reader's progress with spondaic stresses at "black face" and "black hand", highlighting the fugitive woman's distinct bodily agency from white readers of the *Liberty Bell* who nonetheless, in the act of reading the lines, call her body their own. She raises her black hand to call upon the Pilgrims—who are often celebrated in the *Liberty Bell*'s mythology of white martyrdom ([12], pp. 51–52)—"to curse this land/Ye [pilgrims] blessed in Freedom's heretofore". "This land" includes all of America but is most immediately New England, and specifically Massachusetts, the home of *The Liberty Bell*. The slave undercuts the geographical superiority often assumed throughout *The Liberty Bell*: far from being a sanctified haven of liberty in opposition to the slave-owning South, the North, precisely because of its legendary association with liberty sought by Pilgrim exiles, provides the most appropriate site for this slave to curse the collective failure of white Americans to recognize the freedom and equality of black people forcibly exiled to their shores. The Pilgrims in this context are a symbol of freedom's failure in America—the runaway slave later describes the Pilgrims' spirits sliding away, afraid to meet her eyes: "My face is black, but it glares with a scorn/Which they dare not meet by day" ([10], p. 41). Insofar as they embrace *The Liberty Bell*'s often uncomplicated portrayal of white abolitionists as heirs of the Pilgrims' glorious pursuit of liberty, readers of EBB's poem are placed in the uneasy situation of implicating themselves in the curse of the black woman to whom they lend their voice. The woman's later sarcastic greeting of the "hunter-sons" of the Pilgrims who have come to recapture her ([10], p. 41) is perhaps meant to be overheard by *Liberty Bell* readers who pronounce the lines as partly directed at themselves: "I know you staring, shrinking back,—/Ye are born of the Washington race!/And this land is the Free America" ([10], p. 42).

Few scholars have commented on the poem's other refrain, "I look on the sky and the sea" ([10], p. 29). This refrain punctuates key moments in the fugitive slave's narrative—from her arrival at Pilgrim's Point and invocation of the Pilgrims' spirits in her curse ([10], p. 29); to her first glance upon the fellow slave with whom she would fall in love ([10], p. 32); to her accusation of the whites' God for failing to listen to the cry for deliverance from her and her now-murdered lover ([10], p. 34); to her remark, after burying the child conceived in her rape, that the pilgrims' spirits have fled away ([10], p. 41); to her dying words as she is surrounded by the pilgrims' descendants in the form of slave hunters ([10], p. 44). Sometimes the refrain "I look on the sky and the sea" occurs in reversed form, "I look on the sea and the sky!" ([10], p. 41). This chiasmic reversal of the phrase recalls haunting lines from one of the best-known literary ballads of the Romantic era, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798):⁹

⁸ Unstressed syllables are marked with "x" and stressed syllables with "/".

⁹ I quote from the revised version that Coleridge published in 1817, when EBB was around 11, as it seems likely this is the one she knew best.

I closed my lids and kept them close
 And the balls like pulses beat;
 For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
 Lay like a load on my weary eye,
 And the dead were at my feet. ([25], p. 721; emphasis mine)

These lines come just after the mariner witnesses the deaths of his comrades—the dead mentioned at his feet—and finds himself unable to pray as a “wicked whisper”, apparently of doubt and disbelief, enters his ear ([25], p. 721). Turned into a refrain in EBB’s ballad, the mariner’s words highlight unexpected connections to the mariner’s story. Like the mariner, the fugitive slave woman feels she can no longer pray to a God who allows—or even sanctions—unspeakable suffering and death (in this case, the death of her lover and her subsequent rape). Like the mariner, who bears on his neck the (innocent) dead albatross as a sign of his guilt and the related curse that kills his companions and propels him on his dreadful journey, the slave endures a harrowing escape from her masters to pilgrim’s point, bearing on her neck and chest the form of her (innocent) dead child, which she at first regards as a sign of her “curse” ([10], p. 37)—by which she means her position as a black woman deprived of every form of human connection and dignity by white masters (and, she suggests, their God). Like the mariner, she repeats the words about “the sea and the sky!” as she recounts witnessing the dead—her buried child—lying at her feet.

Coleridge was among the most regularly cited British poets by American and British abolitionists: Lydia Maria Child, a leading figure in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, often included Coleridge in the poetry column that she edited in the early 1840s for one of America’s largest anti-slavery newspapers, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* ([15], pp. xlviii, 472). EBB could therefore be sure that her audience would know Coleridge’s poem, which she frequently quoted from memory and discussed in letters in years leading up to and immediately following her composition of “Runaway Slave” ([1], 732, 931, 1060, 2687).¹⁰ The connections suggested by the refrain between the narratives of the slave and mariner are therefore likely deliberate and intended for the poem’s first audience. Taking them into account emphasizes, as noted above, the runaway slave’s existential trial and doubt in the God of her masters. Coleridge’s *Rime* does not seem to have been widely seen in EBB’s time, as it has often been seen by critics in ours ([15], pp. xxiii–xxiv, 204–5; [27], pp. 77–78), as an allegory of the middle passage, the deadly forced journey undergone by African slaves to North America. Yet EBB might here nearly anticipate this later reading by reinterpreting Coleridge’s poem through the runaway slave’s refrain and narrative. For the fugitive slave’s refrain rather obviously reinterprets two regions and elements associated with liberty in the antislavery verse of *The Liberty Bell*: the sea, mythologically linked with the Pilgrims’ foundation of American liberty through their journey in pursuit of freedom of conscience; and the sky, frequently connected to liberty as a sign both of God’s heavenly blessing upon all peoples and, by way of the north star, with northern abolitionists’ messianic struggle for liberation. The fugitive slave’s first use of the “sky and the sea” refrain, in the opening stanza, ironically invokes both connotations:

I.
 I STAND on the mark, beside the shore,
 Of the first white pilgrim’s bended knee;
 Where exile changed to ancestor,
 And God was thanked for liberty.
 I have run through the night—my skin is as dark—
 I bend my knee down on this mark—
 I look on the sky and the sea ([10], p. 29).

¹⁰ Concentrating on poems of the 1830s, and therefore leaving out “Runaway Slave,” Robin Inboden has also argued for EBB’s prolonged engagement with Coleridge’s writings, theories, and life in the 1830s and 1840s ([26], p. 131).

If after their sea passage the pilgrims passed from exiles to ancestors, after their sea passage, the slave's forebearers passed from prisoners to progenitors of slaves forced to labor under descendants of the pilgrims who quite literally bred them for service. This darkly reworks the imagery and meanings of many passages in the *Liberty Bell*, such as these lines in a piece in the 1844 issue by EBB's friend and correspondent James Russell Lowell:

That little Mayflower, convoyed by winds
And the rude waters to our rocky shore,
Shall scatter Freedom's seed throughout the world,
And all the nations of the earth shall come
Singing to share the harvest-home of Truth. ([17], p. 29)

Instead of Lowell's land charged to be "Freedom's Messiah to a trampled world" ([17], p. 26), the runaway slave experiences the land reached by the white pilgrims as one cursed by a system of servitude that reaps harvests off her back for whites. The ships that brought her ancestors resemble the ghastly vessel bearing "Death" and the "nightmare Life-in-Death" in Coleridge's poem ([25], p. 720). Her body has been the site of a violently literal effort to "scatter Freedom's seed," or the conception of new laborers to sustain the freedom of the "white pilgrim's" descendants. Coleridge's mariner sees a foreshadowing of his own life as a prison, an experience of life-in-death, in the planks of the ghost ship bearing Death and Life-in-Death, which trace prison bars over the face of the sun: "the sun was flecked with bars/(Heaven's Mother send us grace!),/As if through a dungeon-grate he peered" ([25], p. 719). The sun in Coleridge's poem (eerily) stands in for the presence of a God who seems absent: "Nor dim nor red, like God's own head/The glorious sun uprist" ([25], p. 719). If the mariner is at least at one point barred from God by his despair, the slave has learned to experience her own black body as a prison that confines her for the use of the pilgrims' sons and seems to shut her out from their God and all heavenly light:

VI.
But we who are dark, we are dark!
O God, we have no stars!
About our souls, in care and cark,
Our blackness shuts like prison-bars!
And crouch our souls so far behind,
That never a comfort can they find,
By reaching through the prison-bars. ([10], p. 31)

Here "stars" carries—even as it calls into question—the symbolic weight it does in Lowell's poem, cited above, where Lowell laments that by possessing "three million slaves" his country has abandoned its divinely intended role as a beacon of freedom:

... Even now I see thy [America] star drop down,
Waning and pale, its faint disc flecked with blood,
That had been set in heaven gloriously,
To beacon Man to Freedom and Home! ([17], p. 27)

If Lowell anticipates the runaway slave's ironic allusion to the sky, and to stars in particular, he does not call the symbolic network at stake into question; rather, Lowell invokes as the foundation of his lament the still-cherished image of the United States (and the North in particular) as a star, "set in heaven" by God as a guide to a new home of freedom for all. Other *Liberty Bell* authors were frequently less self-critical than Lowell. George Burleigh, in the 1844 poem quoted earlier, develops his portrayal of northern abolitionists as messianic martyrs by likening them to the north star and Abdiel, a light set in the heavens to guide the enslaved to freedom in God's promised land: "Up from the prison-house our God hath cast/A glorious highway for his redeemed,/And set his burning sentinel in

the North,/A starry Abdiel mid unstable hosts" ([17], p. 43). In a poem about fugitive slaves escaped to Boston in the same 1844 volume, Susan Wilson employs this symbolic field even more forcefully, representing the North as if it were the star over Christ's nativity guiding slaves on their journey to redemption—they trusted that "He, who gave a star/To guide their way, would give them strength/To gain a home and freedom" ([17], p. 201). To keep this star bright, the predominantly white and female readers of the *Liberty Bell* must trust that "however lowly/The pathway of the slave may be,/No clouds of earth can shut out wholly/The light of love and liberty" and "raise your beacon fires,/His northward way to guide and cheer" ([17], p. 208).

EBB's runaway slave and those for whom she speaks "have no stars", and for her the "sky" is, at least for most of the poem, like the "load" on the mariner's "weary eye" ([25], p. 721). Like the mariner in the passage to which the refrain alludes—but unlike the Pilgrims and their descendants, including the messianic martyrs of the *Liberty Bell*—she is unable to lift her eyes to the white God in faith: she kneels at pilgrim's point and looks at the sky not to pray, but to curse. For her, stars are not symbols of abolitionists set by God in the firmament to beckon northward to freedom in a new home, but angelic sentinels for the white man's angry God who has witnessed her destruction of the white man's seed in the form of her child. When she has buried the child, she feels that "Through the forest-tops the angels far,/With a white fine finger in every star/Did point and mock at what was done" ([10], p. 40). When she first confirms that the child is dead, she supposes that its "white...spirit" ([10], p. 38) has been "sucked" free by "Your fine white angels,—who have seen/God's secret nearest to His power" ([10], p. 38). Although "Your" is directed to the Pilgrim souls invoked by the runaway slave at the poem's opening, it would have been hard for white *Liberty Bell* readers not to feel the address was meant for them. EBB suggests that the symbolic system used by *Liberty Bell* authors to defend their righteous cause and portray themselves as messianic martyrs with God on their side might, to those they labor to liberate, seem perversely and inextricably bound up in slavery and the color binary used to justify it.

Like the mariner, this fugitive slave does not wander toward a home in the north but wanders the earth without a home. This is not only because she happens to be caught by slave hunters before she can reach a haven in a city such as Boston, but also because she has been deprived of every human dignity and the human love she managed briefly to discover with another slave—and because she has been made to regard her own body as a prison. She understandably, perhaps in a fit of madness mixed with anger,¹¹ sees in her white child's face

XX.
[...] a look that made me mad,—
The master's look, that used to fall
On my soul like his lash,—or worse,—
Therefore, to save it from my curse,
I twisted it round in my shawl. ([10], p. 37)

She suffocates the child in part to deny white masters the continued appropriation of her body for their and their sons' uses, an enslavement embodied in her rape. She also hopes to free the child from her "curse" in two senses: the curse of living with her "black" blood and therefore facing slavery, and the "curse" she has uttered in the pilgrim's name on "this land" inherited by their white offspring, of whom her own son could be considered a member ([10], p. 30). The refrain that unites the crucial moments in her narrative and ties it to the mariner's story thereby indicates the runaway slave's alienation from God, others, and her own body as a result of the cruel color binary that marks her life

¹¹ EBB first titled the poem "Black and Mad at Pilgrim's Point" in MS D0800. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." First part of a draft fair copy, including stanzas 1–13, without stanza 7. Contains revisions by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and annotations by Robert Browning. Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University (Waco, Texas); for more information on this manuscript, see caption to Figure 3 below.

as powerfully as Pilgrim's Point marks the consciousness of her would-be white liberators. It also calls into question the symbols—the sea traversed by the Pilgrims and the northern abolitionist stars set by God in his firmament—fundamental to the white messianic martyrdom prevalent in the *Liberty Bell*. As a result, this refrain works with EBB's other refrain—"I am black, I am black"—to urge white readers of the *Liberty Bell* imaginatively to encounter and inhabit the black bodies and perspectives too often displaced by their rhetoric and imagery.

Yet this analysis of the poem's refrains has also suggested the most unsettling impression of the runaway slave's narrative: that the opposition imprinted into her consciousness between white and black bodies is both the result and potential source of seemingly interminable violence. She feels compelled to strike back at her masters—and, it would seem, their God and his angels—by murdering the white child they implant in her body. Partly this is because she has experienced her own black body as a prison and instrument for white people's uses, to the point that she feels compelled to murder the child who carries her blood to spare it from the same curse. Pointedly, she can only begin to feel "reconciled" ([10], p. 40) to her child after she has buried it beneath "black earth,—nothing white,—/ A dark child in the dark" ([10], p. 40). This difficulty—of the intractable opposition of black to white bodies and the violence it perpetuates—the ballad works to overcome through the other suffering body prominent in the runaway slave's narrative: Christ's body.

4. Slaves as Members of Christ's Body: "He Sees Gaping Everywhere/Our Wounds"

In sympathy with *The Liberty Bell's* Garrisonian abolitionism, EBB's poem brooks no compromise with slavery, and her fugitive slave even calls for rebellion: "lift up your hands/O Slaves, and end what I begun" ([10], p. 43). Perhaps what this woman has done indirectly in killing her white-faced child to strike back at masters other slaves must do directly. Hence in the 1848 *Liberty Bell* Chapman placed EBB's poem after an article about a slave insurrection and before another about the necessary violence of abolitionist's language. Yet EBB's speaker does not close with a call for revolt. Instead, as she faces the slave hunters who have now surrounded her, she dwells on Christ's sacrifice, implicitly rejecting every other attempt—including insurrection—to pay a debt with another's body and blood.

XXXIII.

[...] For in this Union, ye have set
Two kinds of men in adverse rows,
Each loathing each! and all forget
The seven wounds in Christ's body fair;
While He sees gaping everywhere
Our countless wounds that pay no debt. ([10], p. 43)

Here the speaker replaces her earlier image of an indifferent, inaccessible, and possibly nonexistent God who favors whites and might sanction or support slavery with the vision of a human God who, like her, has been inhumanly tortured. She counts "The seven wounds in Christ's body fair". This expands familiar tallies of Christ's five wounds on the cross by also recalling his flogging and crowning with thorns. Just before these lines, the speaker confronts the slave-hunters with her own flogging and hanging: "Ropes tied me up here," at the wrist, "to the flogging place" ([10], p. 42). The escaped slave recognizes the similarity of Christ's whipped and hanging body to her own. The lines suggest that she envisions the post-crucifixion and resurrection Christ as still in a position of suffering, or at least as still bearing the wounds he received—the "seven wounds" are still "in" the "body".

Identification with Christ's body appears to be vital to the fugitive's emergence from the cycle of racist violence that has defined her life. "Fair" in "Christ's body fair" could recall the whiteness of masters, which might indicate the woman's lingering difficulty in overcoming the exclusive association of the divine with white bodies against which she has struggled earlier in the poem. This is the color binary that leads her to suggest that if the white's God made her, he "must have cast his work away,/Under the feet of His white creatures" ([10], p. 30); she murders her child both compelled by,

and in defiance of, the inferiority complex to which she has been subjected: “a child and mother/Do wrong to look at one another,/When one is black and one is fair” ([10], p. 37). Yet “fair” also points to the beauty of love expressed in the “seven wounds,” suggesting that in a God who refuses to side with masters and himself becomes a victim the woman is able to recognize a divine love that defies the opposition of enslaving white bodies to enslaved black bodies. Seven is appropriately the biblical number of divine perfection, and perhaps EBB’s choice of seven wounds and a seven-line stanza is meant to affirm the perfecting love of the suffering God. All this appears to authorize for the speaker Christ’s divine gaze as the proper witness to slaves’ suffering bodies, not just to the moral vigilance of white activists: “He sees gaping everywhere/Our wounds.”

Detecting the runaway slave’s rejection of the white God figure whom she identifies with her masters, Warwick Slinn has claimed that by the poem’s conclusion she has furthermore “displace[d] the image and role of Christ, the sacrificed son” ([28], p. 88). This interpretation overlooks the degree to which the fugitive slave identifies—rather than contends—with Christ’s wounded body, and it also ignores her distinction in this stanza between Christ’s gaze and that of the “Two kinds of men” set in “adverse rows” in a Union divided by slavery. Masters wielding “whips” and slaves returning their affliction with “curses” both “forget” Christ’s wounds of self-sacrifice ([10], p. 43), perpetuating a cycle of violent oppression and potentially violent hatred—a fact to which the slave is sensitive after murdering her child. Christ himself, however, looks with regret and pain upon wounds afflicted on black bodies in the meantime. The capitalized “He” in “He sees” sets apart Christ’s divine gaze from those of masters and slaves, including the speaker. This highlights Christ’s assumption of the divine pronoun, authority, and gaze that the fugitive woman earlier identified with the cruel white God who cast black people “Under the feet of His white creatures,/With a look of scorn” ([10], p. 30). When reprinted for EBB’s 1850 *Poems*, the “He” of “He sees gaping” was uniquely placed in small caps (“HE”), possibly at EBB’s request,¹² underscoring the divine agency of Christ’s witness ([29], p. 140). For the slave, Christ’s divine station seems to imply not distance but authoritative recognition on the part of a human God who has entered into the suffering he beholds. This is signaled by the swift transition at the stanza’s end from Christ’s forgotten “seven wounds” to “Our countless wounds” that He “sees gaping everywhere”, momentarily suggesting a further level of identification between slaves and Christ even as it stresses differences. Could Christ be gazing at “Our countless wounds” as if he shared them, as if slaves’ wounds were “gaping everywhere” in his own body that still bears its own wounds? Implicitly, the speaker sees herself and other slaves as members of Christ’s body, with her suffering received by him as his own—with the difference that this augmented suffering “pay[s] no” redemptive “debt”.

5. (Post-)Secular Liturgies of Love: “I Sang His Name Instead of a Song”

The runaway slave is rejected from the only northern church service she mentions attending after her escape and the murder of her child. Perhaps with some of the potential audience of *The Liberty Bell* in mind, EBB has the fugitive say that “white...ladies...scorned to pray/Beside me at church but yesterday” ([10], pp. 35–36). This is one of the few direct indications in the poem that the speaker has worshipped in Christian churches before, since she seems to be familiar with institutional prayer. If this points to sources for the woman’s ideas about God and Christianity, it also, in agreement with *Liberty Bell* anti-clericalism, suggests her inability to discover authentic visions of either within the white church. Despite her rejection of and by the institutional church, as well as her afflicted denial of twisted theologies of a white-preferring God, the slave has continued to seek consolation in Christian practices. Although shunned by white women in the pews, she seems to have genuinely sought relief

¹² As headnotes and variants in *WEBB* ([2], vol. 1) indicate, EBB took keen interest in revisions for her 1850 *Poems*, including “Runaway Slave” ([2], pp. 409–30). Andrew Stauffer documents the many changes between the text printed in *The Liberty Bell* of 1848 and the 1850 *Poems* ([11], p. 33). For this reason, I suspect the capitalization of “HE” was at her request.

when kneeling in prayer: “my tears...washed a place for my knee” ([10], p. 36). Perhaps her (still conflicted) perception of herself as a member of Christ’s body near the poem’s end has less to do with doctrines refuted or adopted than with practices by which she has tried to nurture hope.

If so, the view of membership in Christ’s body suggested by the poem would be in agreement with EBB’s own in letters shortly before, during, and immediately after her composition of “Runaway Slave”. In these letters, EBB declares herself committed to “escap[ing] from sectarianism in any sort or sense”, and indicates that the true church is not defined by creedal statements, institutional leadership, or prescribed forms of worship, but is instead embodied in individuals who respond to the truth and love of God embodied in Christ, even if this response is always imperfect and very often outside the walls of church buildings: “Truth (as far as each thinker can apprehend it) apprehended,—& Love, comprehending—make my idea...my hope of a church. But the Christianity of the world is apt to wander from Christ & the hope of Him” ([1], 1453). As a result, and in agreement with many other Nonconformists at this time ([7], pp. 132–33), EBB argues that the body of Christ can be found in, but never confined to, “every body of men who call on Christ”; in sympathy with many *Liberty Bell* authors, but without their triumphantly exclusive identification of Christ’s true body with their messianic cause, she further contends that “the purest Christianity may probably be on the outside of all” such organizations ([1], 2650). Participation in Christ’s body therefore has less to do with doctrines than with cultivation of dispositions, attitudes, and postures of the heart:

To ‘walk together as far as we are agree’...that is, a practical & affectionate toleration of intellectual differences, . . . is the apostle’s own definition of ecclesiastical unity—To wrench into oneness the various members of Christ, can only be done violently, by the screws & wheels of Inquisitional torture. Difference of opinion is the natural consequence of partial knowledge & human individuality. The unity we pray for, is rather of the heart than of the intellect. ([1], 2726)

Eluding doctrinal and institutional containment, the body of Christ does not depend for unity on prescribed ecclesiastical rituals, much less formal sacraments such as the Eucharist. Rather, Christ’s self-giving love is communicated almost sacramentally through individual human acts of love—through the body ([4], p.153), and especially through the passionate spoken word ([9], pp. 45, 60–61). In *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, written in the same period as “Runaway Slave”, EBB says her beloved’s kiss contains “saving” power and likens his presence to that of God: “I who looked for only God, found *thee*” ([25], p. 465). Later, in *Aurora Leigh*, the passionate and poetic word attains to something like the role accorded to the Eucharist in those theologies of the Real Presence that EBB explicitly rejected ([1], 1305). Romney is redeemed as if by a sacramental meal when he reads the poetry of his beloved Aurora, who has earlier said all true words come from “God” and should be passed to others “like bread at sacrament” ([30], VII, p. 240): “[Your] book,” says Romney, “is in my heart,/Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me:/My daily bread tastes of it,—and my wine/Which has no smack of it, I pour it out” ([30], VIII, p. 261).¹³

This view of the communication of Christ’s redeeming love through human bodies and words is suggested at the start of “Runaway Slave” when the speaker begins to challenge the status assigned to her by her white masters as she falls in love with a fellow slave:

IX.
And from that hour our spirits grew
As free as if unsold, unbought;
We were strong enough, since we were two,
To conquer the world, we thought.

¹³ *Aurora Leigh* is divided into twelve sections or books in resemblance of previous epics such as *The Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*. I use roman numerals to designate book numbers.

The drivers drove us day by day:
 We did not mind; we went one way,
 And no better a liberty sought. ([10], pp. 32–33)

Through romantic love the speaker experiences a community of “spirits” that cannot be “sold” and “bought.” This bond erodes her sense of bondage, constituting for the moment a “liberty” that is undetected and uncontrolled by the slave owners, and which she and her beloved seek to materialize. He carves her “a bowl of the cocoa-nut” as a symbol of his love ([10], p. 33), and she turns his name into a song to express her devotion without being detected, using the rhythm and notes of her voice to turn the name into poetry and, arguably, a non-ecclesiastical liturgy:

XI.
 I sang his name instead of a song;
 Over and over I sang his name:
 Backward and forward I sang it along,
 With my sweetest notes, it was still the same!
 But I sang it low, that the slave-girls near
 Might never guess, from what they could hear,
 That all the song was a name. ([10], p. 33)

This moment in the poem interestingly anticipates the closing of *Aurora Leigh*, when Romney and Aurora declare their love and shared sense of vocation in Christ’s body through a dialogue that praises the model of social reform provided by “God in Nazareth”, when he humbly embodied divine love in “tenderest human hands” ([30], IX, p. 309). Aurora compares their exchange, which lasts for over one-hundred lines, to a psalm sung by different parts of a congregation “Amid the old Jewish temple” ([30], IX, p. 309). Since their collaborative chant forms the lines of the poem *Aurora Leigh*, their words are represented as a spontaneous work of art that is also a private liturgy. They enact on an intimate scale a Christian community unconstrained by church walls yet shaped by what Karen Deileman has helped us recognize as EBB’s Congregationalist religious imaginary, a way of imagining “the world and our place in it” which was deeply shaped by her early exposure to Congregationalist worship practices and her lifelong involvement in worshipping communities, such as the Free Church of Scotland, whose practices and beliefs resembled that early formation([9], pp. 6, 23–29). In this case, Aurora and Romney recall the Congregationalist practice of extempore prayer through their spontaneous performance; they resemble preachers through their exhortations to each other; they imitate hymn singing through their measured and shared song ([9], pp. 29–61).

In other words, EBB displays in this later passage of her magnum opus a principle already glimpsed in “Runaway Slave”: that bonds and acts of love between individuals serve as conduits of divine love, by which these individuals might be drawn into Christ’s body, or the true church; and that membership in this church extends beyond denominational and doctrinal walls, being formed not only by hymnbooks, sermons, and formal rites, but also and perhaps even more profoundly by liturgies of word and action that individuals spontaneously create to express their love. The runaway slave, of course, does not conceive of her relationship with her beloved, or the song she makes of his name explicitly in these terms. Yet her beloved’s carving of his love into a bowl, and her transformation of his name into a chant, do seem to fulfill the role of a liturgy for Christ’s body, or church, as EBB was already describing it by the time of “Runaway Slave,” and as she would do so even more explicitly later: actions or words meant to enact, form, and embody the human desire and love that are ultimately derived from Christ’s divine love, and that could involve one in the body of Christ in ways that do not depend upon the sanction of organized religion. This, one might say, is a post-secular vision of Christ’s body long before “post-secular” became a trendy scholarly term. EBB assumes that so-called “secular” practices and gestures outside of formal “religious” contexts are not inherently opposed to what is usually called religious experience—and may even provide a necessary basis for it.

There is good reason, therefore, to suspect that EBB might herself affirm, or that in any case “Runaway Slave” often assumes or displays, an anthropology similar to that recently proposed by philosopher James K.A. Smith in his post-secular analysis of liturgy. Smith contends that it is nonsensical and deceptive to treat liturgies as strictly “religious” activities set apart from “secular” forms of life. Doing so commits us to a form of rationalism blind to the fact that any secular vision of human flourishing is never simply a bundle of propositions, but is instead constitutively shaped by rituals and liturgies, whether the patriotisms and national mythologies fanned by singing national anthems at sporting events or the convictions about human rights affirmed through organized protests. Smith believes this view of liturgy is grounded in universal patterns of human behavior: “our desires, our loves, our allegiances, our visions of the good life” are fundamentally “shaped” not by “beliefs, values, and propositions”, but “*through...embodied rituals*”; and “liturgies” are rituals of any kind, “not necessarily linked to institutional religion,” that “shape our identity by shaping our desire for what we envision as the ideal of human flourishing”, determining “what we *love* ultimately,” what “we love above all” ([31], p. 167). On these grounds, the runaway slave’s singing and her lover’s bowl carving might count as what Smith calls “secular liturgies” ([31], p. 176), since these practices constitute and protect a sense of loving communion and freedom that defies their enslavement and anticipates a better future—they feel they can “conquer the world” as it now exists ([10], p. 32).

Yet immediately after she recounts singing her lover’s name, the slave, like Coleridge’s mariner, laments God’s absence and her inability to pray with faith, claiming that the God proclaimed by whites is deaf to the theistic prayers that she and her lover had incorporated into their liturgies of love:

XII.

I look on the sky and the sea!
We were two to love, and two to pray,—
Yes, two, O God, who cried on Thee,
Though nothing didst thou say.
Coldly thou sat’st behind the sun,
And now I cry, who am but one,—
Thou wilt not speak to-day! ([10], p. 34)

She is confident that this God, to whom her liturgies of love once seemed to point, will remain as silent today, when she bends her knee on the mark where some of his pilgrim worshippers once landed, as when her lover was discovered, dragged away, and beaten to death—shortly before she was raped by the men who killed him. Since, in her eyes, her child embodied this violation and abandonment, she “dared not sing to the white-faced child/The only song I knew” ([10], p. 36), the liturgy she had made out of the black man’s name who she would have wanted to be her child’s father. Yet after she buried the white-faced child in black earth, she recounts,

I sate down smiling there, and sung
The song I told you of, for good.

XXVII.

And thus we two were reconciled,
The white child and black mother, thus;
For, as I sang it,—soft and wild,
The same song, more melodious,
Rose from the grave whereon I sate!
It was the dead child singing that,
To join the souls of both of us. ([10], p. 40)

This admittedly risks sensationalizing the slave’s narrative, recalling Wordsworth’s ballad “The Thorn”, in which a child, also killed by its maddened mother and buried beneath tree roots, seems to effect changes from beyond the grave ([22], p. 242). As argued earlier, however, it also drives home

with terrible clarity the consequences of the color binary violently imposed upon this slave woman: only by covering with dark earth the master's face that she sees reflected in her child's can she include the child in the liturgy by which she has experienced and imagined community, love, and freedom.

At the same, this liturgy is the only form of burial service that seems legitimate to this woman. Although outside the rubric of any institutional church, this burial liturgy enables her to accept the "white child" as having belonged to her, a "black mother." This signals her emergence from the blinding rage that caused her to murder it: she can lovingly sing over its grave the name of her dead lover. She believes that the child, covered in black earth and blessed by her lover's name, has repeated the "same song,.../To join the souls of both of us". Perhaps she thereby envisions a family bound together by the song, one that could include herself, her dead lover, and her dead child in a community of souls.

The runaway slave is in the process of creating a syncretic religious imaginary of her own, adapting and extending her improvised liturgy to express her sense of belonging in a community of love, hope, and reconciliation that overcomes the—for her deeply related—boundaries of skin color and death. Implicitly, her affirmation through private ritual of community with her lover and child across divisions of race anticipates and prepares her for her later perception of potential interracial community in Christ. She claims in those later stanzas that the abuse of slaves is witnessed and acknowledged by the divine Christ whose suffering, unlike hers, was motivated by love and meant to inspire love that could overcome hatred of the kind now dividing "Two kinds of men"—white masters and black slaves—"in adverse rows" as they "forget/The seven wounds" in his "body" ([10], p. 43). The poem suggests that the practices, rituals, and words by which such a woman glimpses the body of Christ do not need to resemble—and should not be expected to resemble—what is preached to or by white ladies who can afford to "keep live babies on [their] knee[s]" ([10], p. 42). "Truth" partially apprehended "(as far as each thinker can apprehend it)," but "comprehend[ed]" more fully in practices of "Love" ([1], 1453), rather than doctrinal formulations of the "intellect", will form a body of Christ whose unity is "of the heart" ([1], 2726), and whose "purest" form "may probably be on the outside" of the church ([1], 2650).

6. Parodies of the Cross: "[You Cannot] Make Christs Again/Do Good with Bleeding"

If the slave is a member of Christ's body, so, too, is the author who joins herself to the slave's imagined mind and body through her by-line, as well as the readers who accept this act of defamiliarizing identification while lending their minds, voices, and bodies to the slave. This points to mutual and interracial participation of individuals in the body of Christ. It is therefore interesting to note that when writing the stanza in which the slave describes the "seven wounds in Christ's body fair", EBB might have drawn from her own related reflections in letters to her friend Mary Russell Mitford in immediately preceding years. In these letters, EBB encouraged Mitford during times of depression and grieving, portraying Christ's suffering as ongoing and shared with his followers: "by suffering he works out peace & health for His saved" ([1], 1051). Less than two years before December 1845, when she first mentioned her plan to write "Runaway Slave" ([1], 2122), EBB tells Mitford of a painting she was shown of Christ crowned with thorns:

Three days ago, Mr Kenyon brought a picture for me to see—a painting in oils—an *ecce homo*—by a young artist yet unknown [J. Tovey of Bristol]. The crown of thorns is there, & the blood-drop falling from the temple, [...] but the face has a distinct character. The broad brow is knit between the eyes, losing nothing of its majesty in the anguish—& they, with the serene will burning in them, look divinely onward, until your own eyes seem to fall before their look. It is a divine picture to my feeling. We had a candle to throw the right light upon the face—& really that light appeared to startle it into projection & actual life. ([1], 1126)

Several details in these letters—the ongoing suffering of the wounded Christ shared with members of his body, his "divine" gaze encountered as if in the present and in "actual life"—resonate with the runaway slave's description of Christ. The resemblance between the words of the author and those

of her character could indicate that EBB sacrificed her commitment to dramatic truth to her desire to pronounce a message through the mouth of the fugitive slave woman, who prior to the stanza concerned (XXXIII) never mentioned Christ, much less displayed devotion to his “seven wounds” or resentment at the degree to which “all forget” them. Yet this aesthetic incongruity might result from EBB’s effort to suggest, if only for herself, a multiracial vision of Christ’s body, as she brought together responses to the suffering and gaze of the wounded Christ by a suffering black woman with those she had elaborated in correspondence with a suffering white woman. The awkward degree to which EBB’s voice overtakes that of the runaway slave nonetheless risks repeating an ethical lapse to which *Liberty Bell* writers were prone—is this yet another white antislavery writer capitalizing on the suffering of slaves to promote her own message? When read in the context of earlier *Liberty Bell* entries, the fugitive slave’s ensuing meditation on the body of Christ seems to take up this problem as an implicit subject, even as it explicitly addresses the evils of plantation slavery.

As the runaway slave is quick to observe, unlike Christ’s wounds those of slaves “pay no debt” ([10], p. 43). If she identifies slaves’ suffering bodies with Christ’s, this does not mean that their suffering is redemptive or justifiable within a divine economy in which, to use EBB’s words to Mitford above, “by suffering [Christ] works out peace & health for His saved”. Even if her wounds might be likened to Christ’s, the fugitive woman insists that they are different:

XXXIV.

Our wounds are different— your white men
Are, after all, not gods indeed,
Nor able to make Christs again
Do good with bleeding. We who bleed,—
(Stand off!) —we help not in our loss,—[...] ([10], p. 43).

The third line (“Nor able to make Christs again”) could at first glance suggest that white slavers, not being gods, fruitlessly attempt to make new Christs, such as those they invent to justify slavery. After the enjambment, the fourth line clarifies that neither can whites parody Christ’s sacrifice by making slaves into new Christs to bleed and do them economic and ethical good. A third meaning dimly emerges in keeping with the speaker’s earlier identification with Christ’s wounded body: the slaves might indeed be Christs, but these Christs cannot again be made to do whites good through bleeding. The idea that each person can become a member of Christ and representative of his presence runs through EBB’s poetry, where we later find characters such as Aurora Leigh portrayed as bearers of Christ ([6], pp. 59–60). The statement that “We are too heavy for our cross” could then indicate that as intended members of Christ’s body, this woman and other slaves are weightier, more real, than the sadistic crosses fabricated for them by whites in place of the crosses of sacrificial love and obedience that Christ in the gospels says his followers must bear after him.

Whites denounced in this passage might be producers and users of the *Liberty Bell* as well as slave owners. These white abolitionists occasionally—and certainly unintentionally—represented slavery as good for their own spiritual and ethical progress. This latter sentiment characterizes James Russell Lowell’s “The Happy Martyrdom”, first published in the 1845 *Liberty Bell*. Written as a collective prayer, Lowell’s poem tallies the “martyrdom” experienced by abolitionists, from the scorn of bigots to the pain of witnessing churches tolerate slavery. Lowell invites readers to join him in praying for *more* “trials such as these/That we may learn to lean on Thee;/... So shall peace, hope, and patience come/Seven-fold from this our martyrdom” ([18], p. 150). Never directly mentioned, slaves are through this prayer indirectly asked to reap spiritual harvests for their liberators, since slander endured in the abolitionist cause is a refining fire that Lowell—joined by the readers who heed his call to prayer—entreats God to sustain.

This incipient treatment of abolitionism as good for abolitionists arguably increased among Chapman and her circle in later years. After *The Liberty Bell* and antislavery bazaar came to an end in 1858, Chapman and her supporters started an anniversary salon to raise support for the antislavery cause. This high-class and invitation-only Anti-Slavery Subscription Anniversary invited equations

between abolitionism and respectable moral standing—an equation Chapman made explicit in letters: “the Boston abolitionists”, she wrote in 1858, are distinguished “by the more than ordinary moral worth which is the cause of their *being* the abolitionist” ([32], p. 272). Abolitionism here risks becoming a form of salvific cultural capital for northern elites that strangely relies on the inhuman labor of southern plantations. Related language characterizes an article in the *Garrisonian Liberator* of 1859, in which abolitionism is described as “the holiest and the loftiest cause that ever saved and glorified a nation” ([32], p. 271).

EBB’s poem might itself be guilty of putting the suffering of a black body to “good” white uses. As several critics have suggested, EBB risks an act of self-interested interracial puppeteering, using a black speaker to utter righteous condemnation of the African slavery from which her own family had made a fortune in the West Indies ([33], p. 639). EBB might signal her sensitivity to this difficulty in the final stanza of the poem. Surrounded by slave hunters and shortly before swooning to death, EBB’s speaker says she feels “as if I should die/Of Liberty’s exquisite pain!” ([10], p. 44). In one manuscript, MS D0802, (see Figure 3), EBB first wrote “Liberty’s glorious pain” and then “wonderful pain”.

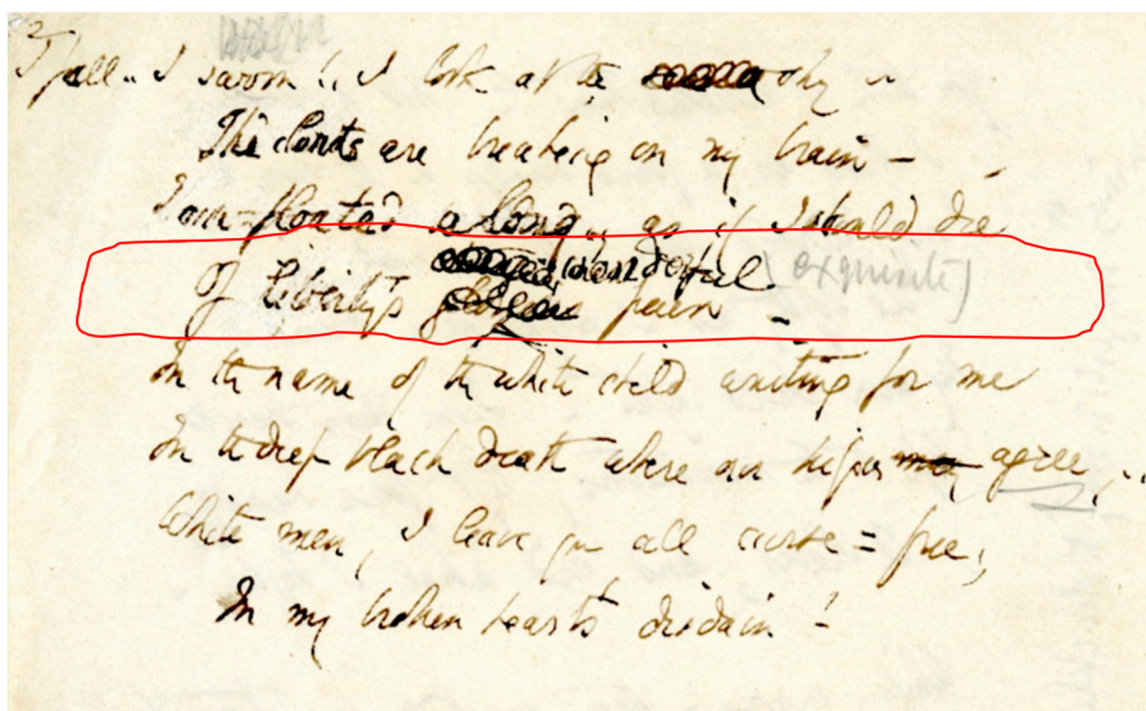


Figure 3. The last stanza in MS D0802 of “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”, one of three portions of the first fair-copy holograph of the poem, with further suggested revisions by Robert Browning in pencil. Two portions, MS D0802 and D0800, are held by the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. The revisions discussed above and below are circled in red. Reproduced by permission of the Armstrong Browning Library.

Perhaps with “Liberty’s glorious” or “wonderful pain” EBB had in view an ironic allusion to the tendency of *Liberty Bell* writers to displace attention from slaves to their own glorious messianic mission—an ethical failure that EBB herself courts by transforming a dying black woman into a mouthpiece for a wonderful cause. That irony was intended seems plausible in light of EBB’s capitalization of “Liberty” in the same manuscript, a decision retained in the 1848 *Liberty Bell*, but abandoned in her 1850 *Poems*, where “liberty” is deprived of its capital ([29], p. 141). In other words, EBB seems to have capitalized “Liberty” specifically for the poem’s *Liberty Bell* printing, tempting readers to connect the capitalized “Liberty” with the title *Liberty Bell*—a common move by *Liberty Bell*

poets.¹⁴ In the same manuscript mentioned above (Figure 3), Robert Browning penciled “exquisite” in the margin as a suggested replacement for “wonderful,” and EBB apparently felt it was better: she changed “wonderful pain” to “exquisite pain” in time for *The Liberty Bell* printing. Since “exquisite” means “beautiful” and “extreme,” the phrase “Liberty’s exquisite pain” might allude to the cause of Liberty praised as gloriously beautiful by white *Liberty Bell* authors, including EBB, even as it stresses that for slaves the cause of liberty is not simply a matter of exquisite euphoria, but also involves exquisite—extreme—pain.

7. Precarious Resolution: “I Leave You All Curse-Free”

The runaway slave ends stanza XXXIV discussed above by threatening that “We” slaves will “fall” from our crosses “and crush you and your seed” ([10], p. 43). This indicates that whites who participate—economically or ethically—in the parody of Christ’s crucifixion through slavery are bringing about their own judgment. As several scholars have noted, the fugitive woman’s words revise Genesis 3:15, where God judges Eve and the serpent, saying the seed of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent ([4], pp. 191–92). Christians have often interpreted this to mean that in the future Jesus as the woman’s divinely provided seed would bruise the head of Satan, represented by the serpent. Here, rather than alluding to Christ the promised seed of Eve, “you and *your* seed” represents white enablers of slavery as participants in demonic activity that will, if unchecked, end in their judgment: slaves “too heavy” for false crosses fashioned by whites will return through insurrection the violence inflicted upon them, completing what this woman began with her child.

Yet rather than sanctioning such violence, in the poem’s final stanza the fugitive slave modifies her initial resolve “to curse this land/Ye [pilgrim-souls] blessed in Freedom’s, heretofore” ([10], p. 30). “In the name of the white child”, whom she had once regarded as the intolerable symbol of her violation, she will “leave you all curse-free/In my broken heart’s disdain!” ([10], p. 44). She is at this point dying, so that her revocation of her curse and her refusal to regard her child as simply a sign of violence dimly recall Christ’s act upon the cross. The slave woman is herself becoming a mini-Christ, a participant in his redemptive act, not by virtue of her persecution, but as a result of her firm refusal to return the violence she has endured. Unlike Christ, she does not pray for the pardon of her tormenters, indicating that such a pardon is not hers to perform. She will not become a substitute Christ whose suffering and death will absolve the actions of white slavers (and perhaps of *Liberty Bell* abolitionists who sometimes rhetorically sacrifice slaves to their cause). Forgiveness, in the terms implied by the poem, ultimately is from Christ alone, whose earlier-mentioned “seven wounds” are assumed to “pay” human “debt” and empower repentant love.

If this conclusion is consistent with the poem’s rejection of the cycle of violence perpetuated by parodies of the cross in attempts to turn the suffering of others to one’s own good, it nonetheless remains vulnerable to charges of vagueness and even evasiveness when it comes to envisioning how slavery and its attendant evils might be redressed. Hope for change seems to depend upon a misty confluence of individual and divine love. America’s divided “UNION” might somehow be healed when all remember, rather than “forget,” the “seven wounds in Christ’s body fair” ([10], p. 43). To some critics, when EBB’s poem closes by referring explicitly to Christ’s body, it has therefore seemed to replace a call for revolt with pious passivity: the slave leaves her tormenters “curse-free” in the name of her white child, who, John Macneill Miller has claimed, is ambiguously likened to the Christ child, since each has an unknown father and seems preordained for murder ([33], p. 643).

¹⁴ I could not consult EBB’s final printer’s copy of the poem, now at the Camellia Collection in London (D0805). There is a very remote chance that EBB decapitalized “Liberty” in that later copy after having capitalized it in the earlier manuscript discussed above (D0802). Yet since the capitalization appears in *The Liberty Bell*, it was probably also in the printer’s copy. In any case, the agreement between the earlier manuscript (D0802) and *The Liberty Bell* indicates that she would have agreed with the typographical decision.

Yet this ignores that in killing her child to achieve independence from white rapists and to redeem it from her curse of servitude, the slave woman has herself, perhaps in a fit of madness, tried to make her child do good through suffering. Her awakening from the cycle of violence and to the evil of parodying Christ's sacrifice has perhaps unavoidably involved just such a parody. Rather than recommending pious sentiments as the antidote to oppression, then, the poem indicates that the violation of this woman and multitudes like her *cannot* be wiped away by a pardon from the victims. There will be consequences—perhaps violent ones, including the revolt the runaway slave earlier endorsed and prefigured through infanticide.

As Marjorie Stone has noted, “In my broken heart’s disdain” is an “extra” eighth “line”, so that it gains special stress by departing from the seven-line pattern otherwise maintained in the poem’s stanzas ([34], p. 192). The slave’s final emphatic disdain for the “White men”, concludes Stone, reveals that she “reiterate[s] her curse” as she “absolve[s] herself” of it ([34], p. 192). Perhaps instead of seeking to pardon herself of a curse she re-utters, by revoking her curse the slave leaves her persecutors to bring greater judgment on themselves. Her refusal to affirm her curse out of her “broken heart’s disdain” recalls the conclusion of “The Cry of the Children”, the poem that EBB “arranged” to follow “Runaway Slave” in her 1850 *Poems* ([1], 2881). First published in 1843 in protest of horrific working conditions of child laborers in British mines and factories, this poem ends with a warning, in the children’s voice, to those who profit from such oppression: “the child’s sob in the silence curses deeper/Than the strong man in his wrath” ([2], p. 429). Perhaps the suffering of a victim in itself places a curse on the perpetrator all the more severe for going unuttered: by withholding her curse, the runaway slave might actually intensify the guilt and condemnation of those who have earned her “heart’s disdain”.¹⁵

In this light, even the passive opening line of the poem’s last stanza contains an ominous undertone: “I fall,—I swoon,—I look at the sky!” ([10], p. 44). The first words, “I fall”, immediately follow the final line of the penultimate stanza, in which the runaway slave warns that slaves will “fall” from the false crosses designed for them by whites and “crush you and your seed” ([10], p. 43). The slave therefore at first seems to be opening the final stanza with the fulfillment of her own prophecy. Her expiring swoon does not easily conform to Miller’s reading of it as a limp surrender: “The previously rebellious slave literally falls back into the passivity of a feminine swoon” ([33], p. 643). Instead, her fall before the slave hunters who have come to reclaim her body for slavery, an economic system that grotesquely parodies Christ’s crucifixion, could foreshadow a cataclysmic fall of slaves from their false crosses of slavery to crush in rebellion the whites who, even as they hunt this slave woman down, are storing up judgment for themselves.

The end of the same line, in which the fugitive slave gazes up “at the sky”, reverses her downward “fall” at the opening. In her dying vision of the heavens, the slave woman does not invoke familiar Christian ideas, but returns to the language of the improvised liturgy and burial service discussed above, through which she has, in her own way, glimpsed, participated in, and reclaimed from parody the body of Christ. Through this framework, she reinterprets the sky and the heaven that it typically signifies in Christian discourse. The sky she sees is cleared of the distant God and attendant accusing angels she has associated with her white masters. She also fails to confirm the expectation established by many entries in *The Liberty Bell* that fugitive slaves scan the heavens for God’s northern messianic stars and sentinels of liberty.

Instead, she feels lifted over the heads of her persecutors and, arguably, her white readers: “The clouds are breaking on my brain/I am floated along” in a transcendent experience of “Liberty” ([10], p. 44). For her, this liberty points to a community that overcomes death and racial violence: she anticipates her reunion with “the white child waiting for me/In the deep black death where our kisses agree” ([10], p. 44). Her dying reconciliation with her white-faced son, and her refusal

¹⁵ I would like to thank Ben Wiebracht, an outstanding independent scholar of Victorian literature, for this insight into the relationship between the concluding lines of these poems.

to curse the white sons of Pilgrims, might not fully overcome the cruel color binary so long forced upon her, as it seems to depend on literally blacking out whiteness. Yet in sublimating the “black earth” ([10], p. 40) strewn over her child’s grave into a black afterlife or sanctuary, the runaway slave also revises on her own and more ambiguous terms the visions of mothers and children reconciled in heaven that abound in nineteenth-century Anglo-American poetry by white Christian women.¹⁶ Although framed by domesticated visions of Christian heavenly community that were available to *Liberty Bell* readers, the speaker’s dying words do not confirm, or conform to, them. EBB resists the opportunity that allusions to Christ in immediately preceding stanzas might have provided to close with a more conventional invocation of the love of Christ or heavenly hope: instead, however awkwardly, she challenges herself and *Liberty Bell* readers to imagine a fugitive black woman’s independent capacity to envision ultimate liberty and reconciliation in a community of the afterlife, and to consider why someone with her story might desire heaven in the form of a “deep black death”.

Liberty Bell readers would have likely felt included in the “you” of the runaway slave’s final line: “White men, I leave you all curse-free,/In my broken heart’s disdain” ([10], p. 44). “White men” could mean “white people” (since the masculine was then often used for both genders collectively), and “all” suggests a wider audience than the “seven” hunters surrounding the speaker ([10], p. 42). The constituency of *The Liberty Bell*, and not merely supporters of slavery, might risk the guilt and condemnation attributed to whites by the runaway slave and increased by her revocation of her curse. For through their messianic rhetoric and willingness to regard their “martyrdom” for abolitionism as a form of redemption they might also attempt to make slaves do them good through suffering.

As suggested earlier, EBB might have acknowledged her own potential participation in this parody of the cross through her willingness to turn the “pain” of a black woman into a celebration of “Liberty’s exquisite” cause. Whether or not EBB intended it, the links between the narratives of her speaker and Coleridge’s mariner suggest a disturbing allegory of her poem’s participation in transatlantic abolitionist print culture. Like the mariner, the runaway slave is, through the *Liberty Bell* (and in later printings), destined to wander “from land to land” with “strange power of speech”, her “agony return[ing]” until her “ghastly tale is told” to each reader, who, like the wedding guest, will be left “sadder” and “wiser” ([25], pp. 730–31). In this admittedly extreme reading, the slave must perform her suffering again and again to reform her primarily white readers and help her white author atone for having benefitted so materially from (and, arguably, having therefore become an author because of) familial slave plantations. Yet even if one were to accept this view, it would deepen, rather than weaken, the poem’s subtle critical response to the white martyr discourse in the *Liberty Bell*. For it would be yet another way in which “Runaway Slave” insists that slavery’s debts will not be paid by putting others on Christ’s cross, whether these parodies are perpetuated by slave owners, by white martyrs for a cause, or by white authors critical of both.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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¹⁶ One example, certainly known to EBB, is found in “The Memorial Pillar” (1828) by Felicia Hemans, whose poetry was influential on both sides of the Atlantic. After recounting the final meeting of a mother and daughter in life, Hemans addresses the deceased pair: “Mother and child!—your tears are past—/Surely your hearts have met at last” ([35], p. 20).

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