

FROM *MYTHOS* TO *LOGOS*: POLITICAL AESTHETICS AND LIMINAL POETICS IN ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S *CASA GUIDI WINDOWS*

By Leigh Coral Harris

CHARLES DICKENS ADAMANTLY DECLARES he will not indulge in “any grave examination into the government or misgovernment of any portion” of Italy, because “that beautiful land” requires only aesthetic reflections that “have ever a fanciful and idle air” (1); and John Ruskin relentlessly insists on turning attention away from the action in the Italian streets and inward toward the motionless stones of buildings, because Venice, “Queen of Marble and of Mud,” has no political dimension (“Stones of Venice” 9: xxix). Elizabeth Barrett Browning, by contrast, masterfully tackles the problem of the emerging nation’s political image in Victorian England. These comments by prominent Victorian men of letters reflect the conventional British formulation of Italy through the nineteenth century “as the locus of the feminine and silent properties of space, painting, nature, and the body — a place outside of history where temporal motion had ceased” (Bailey 94).¹ Indeed, a commonplace implicit in the British definition of pre-national Italy is the idea of *la bella Italia* as apolitical and even ahistorical. But from 1815 onwards, as Italians became increasingly dissatisfied under their new Austrian rulers, the British equation between Italy and art, Italy and beauty, became increasingly out of touch with the Italian republican movement.² Situated on the threshold of Italy’s 1848 uprisings, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) constitutes a shift in the representation of Italy in the British imagination from *mythos* — a concept akin to Metternich’s “*espressione geografica*”³ — to nationalized *logos* as a unified, independent, and political reality. This poem, Barrett Browning’s first full political and poetical response to Italy, represents a sophisticated example of nineteenth-century women’s writing on Risorgimento Italy; it is, moreover, one of the most politically astute Victorian accounts of Italy written by either sex.

Modern Italy: The Images and History of a National Identity, a four-volume Italian project published in 1982, argues that although it is “certainly difficult to establish a chronology and define exactly the moment when the literary theme gave way to the realities of place,” the mid-century revolutions in Italy created a watershed which aroused European public opinion and “brought about a reconsideration of the commonplaces

usually applied to the *bel paese*" (Calabrese 29). Victorian literary engagement with Italy, both as a place and as an idea, charts Britain's ambivalent reconciliation between the traditional concept of Italy as a gendered aesthetic site and the modern image of Italy as an articulate, national space. Although unrecognized by the authors of *Modern Italy*, the content and structure of *Casa Guidi Windows* embodies that change in representation and understanding that enabled the political idea of Italy to break through the aesthetic cliché. Barrett Browning's poem occupies a moment when "the literary theme" blends into "the realities of place."

In dramatic contrast to Dickens, Ruskin, and most of her male contemporaries, Barrett Browning constructs a political image of Italy through a refashioning of its cultural one.⁴ *Casa Guidi Windows* unmask the relationship between politics and aesthetics; it takes the popular, clichéd British images of Italy as a feminine figure and idealized landscape and questions their truthfulness and use. The poem confronts its readers with the startling argument that worshipping Italy is a form of colonial condescension: an idealization of Italy nullifies British recognition of its political identity. In fact, the poem suggests that the country's actual colonization by the Austrian empire and figurative, aesthetic colonization by the British empire effect a similar political subjugation. But Barrett Browning did not simply discard the old myths in favor of a new political understanding. As a resident primarily of Tuscany from 1846 until her death in 1861, as a woman who bore her only child in the Casa Guidi, as a female poet married to a male poet, as an Italian republican in spirit while remaining a citizen of a Britain that was far from being a republic, Barrett Browning inhabited an intellectual and cultural frontier that required this liminal form of poetic expression. As a threshold work itself, poised between *mythos* and *logos*, the poem offers a new aesthetics of liminality as an antidote to any reductive categorization of Italy as a place purely political or purely cultural.

Despite the poem's political acuity, criticism has not concentrated on that issue. Both modern and Victorian British and Italian critics, as we will see, have overlooked the way in which the national politics of Britain function in and motivate Barrett Browning's poetic work. Present-day critics have focused on the relationship between Barrett Browning's political response to Italy and her biography, understanding her interest in Italian nationalism as a metaphor for her feminist rebellion, a revolt against her father and British patriarchy in general. To varying degrees, Helen Cooper, Margaret Forster, Sandra Gilbert, and Dorothy Mermin view Barrett Browning's championing the Italian cause as being as much a personal gesture as a political one. Of course, Barrett Browning's autobiographical texts support this reading of her relationship to Italy. She "delighted," for example, in repeating Mrs. Jameson's description of her as "not improved, but *transformed*" (qtd. in Alaya 18). But when one examines the local and large-scale significance of the poem's language and images communicating between Italy and Britain, Barrett Browning's progression from metaphorical *patria* in Wimpole Street to symbolic *matria* in the Casa Guidi may be a more circuitous and complicated journey than the straightforward one Gilbert chronicles. Indeed, critical approaches that slide into a discussion of Barrett Browning's personal situation seem to have disabled analysis of how her British identity continues to operate in *Casa Guidi Windows*.⁵ While biographical considerations should be an ingredient in analyses of the poem, to understand Barrett Browning's support of Italy's national rebirth only as a result of her own life's rebirth in Italy is to make the very mistake that Barrett Browning herself recognized as endemic to Victorian

culture. In addition to reading *Casa Guidi Windows* in terms of the often-cited double persona of the speaker as both “I, a woman” and “I, the poet,” I consider especially how Barrett Browning’s British nationality (“My England”) operates coterminously with her embrace of “*Italia*.”

Although not published until 1851, *Casa Guidi Windows* poetically commemorates the revolution that flashed across Italy beginning in 1847. With the election of the supposedly progressive Pius IX (Pio Nono), Italians’ political excitement and expectation for reform reached a high pitch by the late 1840s. Since the failed revolts in the 1820s and early 1830s, the revolutionary ferment that had been building under the influence of Giuseppe Mazzini culminated with rebellion throughout Italy in 1848. But the year before, joyful Florentine crowds flowed under the windows at Casa Guidi on their way to the Palazzo Pitti, celebrating the gestures Grand Duke Leopold II of Tuscany had made towards liberation by offering some civic liberties. Written in 1847, Part 1 of the poem describes the events in Florence and voices Barrett Browning’s somewhat doubtful enthusiasm for the promises of the grand duke and those implicitly pledged by Pius IX. Part 2, written three years later, after the Italian defeat at Novara in 1849, reacts to the betrayal of these hopes when the revolts had been quelled by Austrian and Papal authority.

Politicizing the Poetry of Place

SUMMARIZING THE GENERAL BRITISH assessment of Italy as “No nation, but the poet’s pensioner, / With alms from every land of song and dream” (1: 207–08). Barrett Browning insists that her readers renew their thoughts about Italy and

. . . never say “no more”
 To Italy’s life! Her memories undismayed
 Still argue “evermore,” — her graves implore
 Her future to be strong and not afraid;
 Her very statues send their looks before. (1: 212–16)

In order to represent the free future that Italy’s statues of the past survey before them, the poem creates for its readers the initial contours of a national landscape. At the end of Part 1 Barrett Browning capitalizes on the allure of the Italian landscape to change her British readers’ view of Italy from a purely aesthetic space and playground of ancient statuary to a politically-charged place with legitimate claims to nationhood and independence. In so doing, she lays bare the problematic political implications of conventional British idealizing and throws into relief the politics of aesthetics.

In a descriptive gesture that appears to magnify rather than diminish the mythic aspect of Italy, Part 1 of *Casa Guidi Windows* seems to present no less a land “of song and dream” than that Italy which Barrett Browning argues “has too long swept / Heroic ashes up for hour-glass sand; / Of her own past, impassioned nympholept!” (1: 188–90). Whether directly or indirectly described, the Italian landscapes in *Casa Guidi Windows* do indeed carry a rapturous, nympholeptic charge, transporting the reader on a mental journey to and through Italy. Through the figure of John Milton, however, Barrett Browning uses Italy’s charm to direct our thoughts to its political predicament.

Barrett Browning figuratively maps out this landscape as a treasured dreamscape, intellectually and erotically charged with “coins of scholars’ fancy” (1: 1168) and with “reveries of gentle ladies, flung / Aside, like ravelled silk, from life’s worn stuff” (1: 1165–66). As if describing a Marc Chagall painting where flying figures seem to escape their earthly environments, the poem recalls

... How oft, indeed,
 We’ve sent our souls out from the rigid north,
 On bare white feet which would not print nor bleed,
 To climb the Alpine passes and look forth,
 Where booming low the Lombard rivers lead
 To gardens, vineyards, all a dream is worth, — (1: 1172–77)

But Barrett Browning insists this idealized vision of Italy is not simply dream-induced. In fact, it corresponds to an authentic experience of place, as she and her “beloved companion” (1: 1130) have actually seen these same sights from “Tuscan Bellosguardo, wide awake” (1: 1179). (Barrett Browning explains in her own note to *Casa Guidi Windows* that “Galileo’s villa, close to Florence, is built on an eminence called Bellosguardo” [96].) The poet’s inclination to gaze heavenward is countered by the seductive visual pull of the Italian earth below, even when she is standing nostalgically on Galileo’s hilltop in Fiesole:

When, standing on the actual blessed sward
 Where Galileo stood at nights to take
 The vision of the stars, we have found it hard,
 Gazing upon the earth and heaven, to make
 A choice of beauty. (1: 1180–84)

That the view from Bellosguardo makes it difficult for one to decide between the allure of “earth and heaven” points to the romantic idea of Italy as a heaven-on-earth for the British. Unveiling the depth of Britain’s cultural debt to Italy, Barrett Browning’s account suggests the hallucinated satisfactions of travel in the *bel paese*, even — perhaps especially — if the voyager never leaves the armchair.

But rather than merely indulging in it herself, the poet underscores this mythic understanding as a way of subscribing to a political image of *Italia*. Indeed, her poem makes the radical assertion that Britain’s cultural appropriation of an idealized, mythic Italian experience has been a means of preventing its representation as an emerging political entity. As a way of making clear the intimate association of aestheticizing gestures with political ones, Barrett Browning proposes that sentimental engagement with Italy should prompt the British to support the idea of Italian liberty. The penultimate stanza in Part 1 continues Italy’s seduction and rouses to action those seduced:

Therefore let us all
 Refreshed in England or in other land,
 By visions, with their fountain — rise and fall,
 Of this earth’s darling, — we, who understand
 A little how the Tuscan musical
 Vowels do round themselves as if they planned

Eternities of separate sweetness, — we,
 Who loved Sorrento vines in picture-book,
 Or ere in wine-cup we pledged faith or glee, —
 Who loved Rome's wolf, with demi-gods at suck,
 Or ere we loved truth's own divinity, —
 Who loved, in brief, the classic hill and brook,
 And Ovid's dreaming tales, and Petrarch's song,
 Or ere we loved Love's self even! — let us give
 The blessing of our souls (and wish them strong
 To bear it to the height where prayers arrive,
 When faithful spirits pray against a wrong.)
 To this great cause of southern men, who strive
 In God's name for man's rights, and shall not fail! (1: 1184–1202)

Barrett Browning makes clear the causal connection between aesthetic refreshment and political action. One is not even required to have traveled in Italy to owe allegiance to this heavenly place. In order to enlist as large as possible a group of supporters, Barrett Browning defines the poem's "we" broadly; the "we" who should now take a stance in favor of Italian independence include all those who have previously shared in these romantic "visions." A reader "sees" the scenes before him or her "rise and fall" as if looking at an iconographic Italian artifact, the fountain. The trope of Italy as "the whole earth's treasury" (1: 1165) is repeated in this stanza as "this earth's darling." The appreciation of Italy evokes the privileges of leisure, as Italy here conjures up associations of refined sensibility, familiarity with Classical and Renaissance texts, an ethical orientation ("ere we loved truth's own divinity"), and the quest for the picturesque (we who "loved, in brief, the classic hill and brook").⁶ The Tuscan dialect (present-day Italian) is accorded value for the British listener as music rather than as a linguistic system conveying meanings that one has to learn to understand.

Barrett Browning asserts that in order to maintain their centuries-old appropriation of Italy as a sacred aesthetic space, the British have had to romanticize Italy at the expense of recognizing its political subjectivity. The poem's implied logic — that free Britain must pay back the refreshment these nostalgic and romantic images have for generations provided — infuses Barrett Browning's wake-up call of support for the nationalist struggle in Italy with urgency and echoes of Miltonic republicanism: "*Therefore*" let us British lend our support "To this great cause of southern men, who strive / In God's name for man's rights" (emphasis added). *Casa Guidi Windows* tacitly argues that the historical British love and (literary) mining of things Italian necessitates a national commitment to Italian *libertà*, thus connecting aesthetics to politics. Too, this connection bears out Milton's theory in *The Second Defense of the People of England* that Britain, "celebrated for endless ages as a soil most genial to the growth of liberty," must spread liberty abroad (818). The point of Barrett Browning's appeal to Milton — England's only great republican poet — at the close of Part 1 is to sweep the aspiring new nation up into Britain's embrace and to include Italy's dream of freedom in those that Milton had most famously articulated.

Part 1 of *Casa Guidi Windows* exhorts "all the far ends of the world," but especially England, to "[b]reathe back the deep breath of their old delight" in order "[t]o swell the Italian banner just unfurled" (1: 1101–03). Barrett Browning ranks literary settings as the primary form of Britain's cultural indebtedness to Italy:

... England claims, by trump of poetry,
 Verona, Venice, the Ravenna-shore,
 And dearer holds John Milton's Fiesole
 Than Langlande's [sic] Malvern with the stars in flower. (1: 1125–28)

As Julia Markus reminds us in her edition of Barrett Browning's poem, the works of Shakespeare, Byron, and Shelley are rather obviously associated with these Italian locales (95). It is Milton's more oblique literary connection to Italy, therefore, that provides the most insight into the nature of how profoundly England "claims" Italy, and thus reciprocally how deeply England owes Italy support of its freedom struggle. Barrett Browning politicizes Italy by filtering British mythology about Italy, through Milton, whose republicanism links him politically to the Risorgimento. Her reference to Milton, and not another British poetic luminary, implicitly charges the sentimental landscape descriptions of Italy with his well-known vision that liberty would spread from Britain to all the corners of the earth, "disseminating the blessings of civilization and freedom among cities, kingdoms, and nations" (819).

Casa Guidi Windows depicts Vallombrosa, the place where Milton found his poetical image of Eden for *Paradise Lost*, as a timeless, originary landscape that overwhelms the onlooker's ability to comprehend its diverse "beauty" and "glory" (1: 1155). Time stands still here, for the quaint monks in the Vallombrosan monastery "are all the same" (1: 1140) since Milton's visit nearly two hundred years before "ere his heart grew sick / And his eyes blind" (1138–39). Barrett Browning makes explicit Vallombrosa's association with Paradise when she tells of God's filling "The cup of Milton's soul so to the brink" with sights of Vallombrosa that Milton "never more was thirsty" (1: 1156–1157). Milton's visual satisfaction enables him to sing "of Adam's paradise" in *Paradise Lost* and smile through his blindness, "[r]emembering Vallombrosa" (1: 1160–61). W. J. T. Mitchell observes that "the account of landscape contemplation that probably had the strongest influence on British painting, gardening, and poetry in the eighteenth century was Milton's description of Paradise" (*Imperial Landscape* 11–12). Even though Barrett Browning writes in the mid-nineteenth century, Paradise in *Paradise Lost* is still an image with cachet for her British audience. In reminding her readers of the original Miltonic landscape at Vallombrosa, Barrett Browning suggests more than the aesthetic appropriation of Italian sights and settings by the British; she insists further that Italy itself constitutes a cornerstone of British culture. Thus the Italian land encompassing Vallombrosa is "divine to English man and child" (1: 1163), not necessarily for its inherent qualities, but because it figures prominently in Milton's text, disguised as Eden. But as Mitchell also indicates, Milton's view of paradise "is framed by the consciousness of Satan, who 'only used for prospect' his vantage point on the Tree of Life" (12). Barrett Browning suggests that the British, too, have used Italy for aesthetic and literary prospect. In fact, the poem implies that there is a dark side to British landscape contemplation: to maintain Vallombrosa's paradisaical atmosphere the British necessarily ignore the blight of Italy's political suppression.

It is perhaps not surprising that Barrett Browning should mention Vallombrosa as the actual garden scenery inspiring the originary garden for *Paradise Lost*. That she should make the curious comparison of "Milton's Fiesole" to "Langlande's Malvern," however, more suggestively makes the poem's case for Italy's vital role in the British cultural — and thus potentially, the poem argues, its political — psyche. At first glance, the comparison

of the Tuscan town of Fiesole with the Malvern Hills in west-central England seems to function simply metonymically. That is, the representation of Italy by the British poet John Milton is “dearer” to British readers than the portrayal of Britain by the British poet William Langland. Looking more closely, however, the importance of the Fiesole-Malvern comparison actually lies in the differing perspectives of place it implies.

Whereas Langland’s fourteenth-century *Piers Plowman* begins and ends its cycle of visions in Britain, *Paradise Lost* surveys human history from a distant vantage-point and involves journeys to other worlds. Barrett Browning’s comparative statement suggests that Britain “dearer holds” its tradition of exploring foreign lands. Seeming to allude to this imperialist mentality, Milton directly refers to Galileo on Fiesole once in *Paradise Lost*:

... the Moon, whose Orb
Through Optic Glass the *Tuscan* Artist views
At Ev’ning from the top of *Fesole* [sic],
Or in *Valdarno*, to descry new Lands,
Rivers or Mountains in her spotty Globe. (1.287–91)

Barrett Browning’s idea of England holding dear “Milton’s Fiesole” makes sense if it is understood as connected to the British imperial desire to map and make known landscapes outside its own domestic territory. Fiesole stands for British aesthetic interest in Italy (that is, through Milton) insofar as it represents a means of surveying the mystery and mystique not only of the planets, but also — and more importantly — of the surrounding Italian landscape. The myth of landscape expressed in *Paradise Lost* is an ambivalent one: Satan finds Paradise both a “fair” place (4.379) and one compelling his desire for “Honor and Empire with revenge enlarg’d / By conquering this new World” (4.390–91). Through invoking Milton’s Italian landscapes — Vallombrosa as the model for Eden and Fiesole as the place from which “to descry new Lands” — Barrett Browning points to the ambivalence in Britain’s relationship with Italy and links the British tradition of aesthetic prospecting to the idea of “Empire.”

Part 2 of *Casa Guidi Windows* does not offer the reader any landscape reveries of *la bella Italia*, but it does concern itself with the point raised by its previous reference to Milton and the idea of British imperial conquest. Barrett Browning implicitly gives the myth of Italy a political impress by critiquing the British empire’s commercial interest in foreign territories. The only glimpses of landscape the poem offers in Part 2 are those of empire, metonymically representing exotic British colonies, on display at the Crystal Palace exhibition:

But now, the world is busy; it has grown
A Fair-going world. Imperial England draws
The flowing ends of the earth, from Fez, Canton,
Delhi and Stockholm, Athens and Madrid,
The Russias and the vast Americas,
As if a queen drew in her robes amid
Her golden cincture, — isles, peninsulas,
Capes, continents, far inland countries hid
By jasper-sands and hills of chrysopras,

All trailing in their splendours through the door
Of the gorgeous Crystal Palace. (2: 577–87)

Deirdre David comments that, in this poetic moment, Barrett Browning “conjoins resistance to mercantile materialism with celebration of Italian idealism” (22). But in light of Part 1, in which Barrett Browning exposes the political price of aesthetic investment, this passage’s critique of what David calls “mercantile colonialism” further suggests that cultural acts of “Imperial England” — those constituting an aesthetic colonization of Italy — are not politically inert. Indeed, using the image of Queen Victoria to represent the way in which Britain adorns its body politic with an exotic, far-reaching empire, Barrett Browning underscores her earlier point: that Britain decorates its national culture with the image of Italy as a place of intoxicating pleasure and picturesque landscape. Moreover, she insists that such exotic and romantic images are not the natural expression or pure embodiment of any place. Rather they are cultural constructions that disguise political (or economic) meaning. Despite listing some specific cities in the east, such as Fez and New Delhi, the passage’s geographic descriptions merely generalize and exaggerate clichéd eastern sights: “jasparsands and hills of chrysopras” hide generic “inland countries.” Just as Barrett Browning implies that an imperial commercial economy glares behind the popular British idea of what is essentially eastern, she makes a similar point that “poor Italia, baffled by mischance” (2: 651) lies politically subjugated not only by the Austrian empire but also by those British dreams of mythic Italy.

The Window-Framed Space of the “Advertisement”

OF COURSE, THE IDEA OF ITALY as a political entity is not completely foreign in Victorian England. During and after the 1848 revolution in Italy, there was a surge of English newspaper articles and historical narratives about Italian political events. Histories with titles such as *A Glance at Revolutionized Italy* (1848) by Charles MacFarlane, and *The Italian War 1848–49* (1849) by Henry Lushington, appeared almost immediately. While British journalistic and historical accounts of the 1848 revolutions might have been welcome to Barrett Browning, she herself advocated a mediatory position between historicizing and poeticizing revolutionary Italy.⁷ Her “Advertisement” to *Casa Guidi Windows* presents an aesthetics of liminality that avoids reducing Italy to either cultural or political cliché.⁸ Literally and figuratively, windows in the “Advertisement” operate as the liminal space creating a new paradigm through which a politically potent and culturally re-imagined Italy can emerge. Dorothy Mermin observes that Barrett Browning’s “Advertisement” to her poem appeared to contain a “denial of serious purpose, artistic unity, or intelligent political analysis, which until very recently has been taken by most critics at face value” (166). Far from being an unfortunate editorial decision, however, Barrett Browning’s statement of intention delineates an alternative way of understanding the events of the revolt:

This poem contains the impressions of the writer upon events in Tuscany of which she was a witness. “From a window,” the critic may demur. She bows to the objection in the very title of her work. No continuous narrative nor exposition of political philosophy is attempted by her. It is a simple story of personal impressions, whose only value is in the intensity with which they were received, as proving her warm affection for a beautiful and unfortunate country,

and the sincerity with which they are related, as indicating her own good faith and freedom from partisanship. (xli)

Superficially, Barrett Browning owns up to her relatively distanced and protected position as witness when she names the poem after the site of her most personal experience, the windows of her home away from home, Casa Guidi.⁹ Through this permeable framed space presented in the title and at the beginning of the “Advertisement,” Barrett Browning carries the reader from inside the Anglicized quarters of the Casa Guidi to the outside world of the Palazzo Pitti in particular, and to Italy in general. While the windows separate the exterior social space from the poet’s interior space, they also serve to link the spectacle with the spectator. The boundary between spectacle and spectator fades on the actual day Barrett Browning witnesses the popular Tuscan processions from her windows in Casa Guidi. The poet describes the day to her sister Henrietta in a letter she illustrates with a sketch of her view from Casa Guidi’s windows: “The windows dropping down their glittering draperies seemed to grow larger with the multitude of pretty heads, & of hands which threw out flowers & waved white handkerchiefs — There was not an inch of wall, not alive, if the eye might judge —” (Markus 66).¹⁰ Indeed, the window frame does not restrict her involvement to the purely visual as she tells Henrietta that “Robert & I waved our handkerchiefs till my wrist ached” (Markus 66).

The window also blurs the line between subjective and objective accounts. Presumably, the demurring critic would take issue with the poet’s impressions because Barrett Browning merely observes events above the crowd in an apparently passive and abstracted way. But in spite of the distanced vantage point, the framed space from which Barrett Browning views the scene allows her to produce a more vivid and extreme representation, since her real and imaginary purview is greater than if her discussion were bound by actual involvement: the sight of real events prompts the poet to contemplate the past. Her account is neither totally subjective nor objective; it occupies representational space between the two. Indeed, Barrett Browning carefully distinguishes looking through windows at another country as “a witness” from knowing it as a native or taking control of it as the subject of rational analysis by writing its political history or by placing it in a theoretical matrix of political thought. Her contributions are only “impressions.” According to the “Advertisement,” the poem offers the idea that history writing is a composite of “impressions” taken over time that are not subject to analysis and self-correction. Asserting her work’s “freedom from partisanship,” Barrett Browning recognizes objectivity as an important historiographic value that she attempts to maintain. Nonetheless, the poetic recording of events in *Casa Guidi Windows* privileges art’s telling of history over journalism’s. Indeed, by rewriting the category of objectivity, the poem implicitly critiques the reports, analyses, observations, and notes, written primarily by men, inundating Britain from Italy throughout the late 1840s and early 1850s that claimed to communicate history in the making. The metaphorical possibilities of the window, as well as the poem’s insistence on her literal position there, help a reader to imagine a national identity for Italy impossible from other perspectives. It also undermines conventional gendered notions of what it means to witness and write “From a window.”

Through its form and subject matter and its manipulation of time and space, the “Advertisement” not only sets up a paradigm through which to read the poem that follows but also acts out the transitional process from metaphorical to modern ways of writing

Italy. Continuing now from the passage above in which Barrett Browning admits her window-framed perspective, the rest of the “Advertisement” reads:

Of the two parts of this poem, the first was written nearly three years ago, while the second resumes the actual situation of 1851. The discrepancy between the two parts is a sufficient guarantee to the public of the truthfulness of the writer, who, though she certainly escaped the epidemic “falling sickness” of enthusiasm for Pio Nono, takes shame upon herself that she believed, like a woman, some royal oaths, and lost sight of the probable consequences of some obvious popular defects. If the discrepancy should be painful to the reader, let him understand that to the writer it has been more so. But such discrepancies we are called upon to accept at every hour by the conditions of our nature, implying the interval between aspiration and performance, between faith and dis-illusion, between hope and fact.

“O trusted broken prophecy,
 O richest fortune sourly crost,
 Born for the future, to the future lost!”
 Nay, not lost to the future in this case. The future of
 Italy shall not be disinherited. (xli)

From the first paragraph in which Barrett Browning presents the cliché of Italy as “a beautiful and unfortunate country,” the reader moves in this second paragraph to “the actual situation” of Italy in the midst of nation making. The reader is then brought back to the poetic realm at the end, as the prose of the “Advertisement” breaks into verse, seemingly shouted from the window, and closes proclaiming Italy’s independent future.

Barrett Browning inscribes the process of Italy’s transition from geographic expression to nation through the poem’s own chronology and datedness. The chronological ordering of Barrett Browning’s experience in Tuscany from 1847 to 1851 does not simply chronicle a sequence of events. Instead, Parts 1 and 2 create a non-linear narrative when read through Barrett Browning’s prefatory remarks in the “Advertisement,” which present them as a constellation of events that the “present” time (1851) has formed with the earlier moment (1847). Thus a purely linear telling of these moments in Italy’s history is subverted by the second part of the “Advertisement,” which makes the reader read the beginning of the story through its prophetic outcome. But it is a conclusion that is not a conclusion, a definite indefinite ending, because Italy’s liberated future has not yet been realized. So temporally and figuratively, Barrett Browning’s “Advertisement” creates a third term for the poem to occupy that is neither *mythos* nor *logos*, neither completely contained by the window frame nor totally containing the scene it frames. The privileged poetic middle space is part history, part literary history, part letter home, part call to arms. It establishes a transitional, threshold moment between “aspiration and performance, between faith and dis-illusion, between hope and fact.”

Refiguring Gendered Images of Italy

CASA GUIDI WINDOWS ENACTS the liminal design of its “Advertisement” when it re-figures gendered images of Italy. Barrett Browning, the female British poet, places herself in the (male) Italian tradition of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio by adopting a

terza rima in epic meter for the poem. Apart from Byron and Shelley, British poets infrequently wrote in *terza rima*. Her use of the rhyme scheme suggests that she is herself doing what she would have revolutionary Italy do: reclaim the past as a motivating, organic continuum for working towards the future in the present moment. Barrett Browning's anecdotal use of Dante illustrates the idea of how Italians can draw on their past to move them into the future.¹¹ Charged with nostalgic meaning, the stone in Florence where Dante "used to bring his quiet chair out" (1: 604) and "pour alone / The lava of his spirit when it burned" (1: 605–06) is no longer "cold" in 1847 (1: 607). Indeed, it is in 1847 the site of a new political contract, or an attempt at one: the "tryst-place for thy Tuscans to foresee / Their earliest chartas from" (1: 618–19). Likewise in the visual arts, the dominant figures Barrett Browning identifies with making Italy a cultural icon include Cimabue, Giotto, Raphael, and especially Michelangelo. The relationship between this past and gender, however, is a vexed one, as the second stanza in Part 1 of *Casa Guidi Windows* makes clear.

In the second stanza, Barrett Browning lists the various images, mostly female ones, that had come to represent Italy for generations of British men and women through at least the mid-nineteenth century. The "personating Image[s]" (1: 30) of Italy, as she calls them, include: "Italy enchained" (1: 21), "childless among mothers" (1: 22), "Window of empires" (1: 23), "Cybele, or Niobe" (1: 32), and the "Juliet of nations" (1: 36). Barrett Browning critiques the Romantic trope of Italy as a woman enchained, "an image of feminine impotency" (Alaya 15); indeed, the image is an Anglo-Italian literary tradition. She invokes the fourth canto of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818) when she notes the popular tendency to curse Italy's "beauty to her face, as brothers / Might a shamed sister's, — 'Had she been less fair / She were less wretched'" (1: 24–26). Later, when Barrett Browning writes this line in Italian, "'*Se tu men bella fossi, Italia!*'" (1: 168), she implicates Italian artists as well. As Flavia Alaya remarks, the portrayal of Italy as victimized by its own beauty was "hypnotically perpetuated from Filicaja ('Had she been less fair, she were less wretched') to Mazzini ('A nation lies trembling under the brutal foot of Austria')" (15).

The allegorical portrait of Italy by the Italian nationalist Francesco Hayez, "La Meditazione" or "L'Italia nel 1848" (1848–51), is also typical in its portrayal of Italian nation-making as a tragic, erotic Italian woman (Figure 6). *Casa Guidi Windows* and "L'Italia nel 1848" present strikingly different visions of the same moment in the Italian political struggle. Hayez's painting offers a visual image that corresponds precisely to the female figures of Italy of British male writers from Byron to Browning. That these artists feature this image in their Italian writings indicates the extent to which the idea of Italy in the Victorian era was sexualized, even as a "political" subject.¹² Determined to see past these prevalent objectifying and debilitating visual and verbal representations, Barrett Browning attempts to focus "on real, live" creatures (1: 48) by breaking with what Dolores Rosenblum calls the "seductive rhetoric" (1: 63) of such melancholic and empty images of *Italia*.

As the poem clearly sets out, Italy is conventionally imagined as a feminine space, but at first the history the poem looks out on appears to be a masculine one. Barrett Browning's use of the Marcus Brutus image implies that the present should be figured by masculinity. The recurring scene in the poem that depicts Michelangelo at his unfinished bust of Brutus taps into an ideological matrix on the subject of republicanism that resonated with Barrett Browning's British readers. In 44 BC Brutus killed Julius Caesar in the naive hope that eliminating the dictator would prevent the fall of the Republic. In the age



Figure 6. Francesco Hayez, *L'Italia nel 1848*, 1848–51. Oil. Courtesy of Comune di Verona, Galleria d'arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Palazzo Forti.

of classical republicanism in Michelangelo's Florence, the figure of Brutus as a symbol of the classical republican hero was, as D. J. Gordon observes, "an image with meanings so fixed and definite that no version of it produced in this milieu could be divorced from these meanings" (288). In Victorian Britain, the evocation of Brutus would have carried similar significance. Michelangelo's *Brutus* sculpture implied that Florentines should rise up to restore the Florentine Republic. Thus *Casa Guidi Windows* asks us to draw comparisons through a lineage of tyranny that links Caesar to the Medici and implicitly connects those figures to contemporary ones: to Metternich, to Grand Duke Leopold II, and even to Pio Nono. In Part 1 Barrett Browning teaches her readers that Michelangelo was unable to finish *Brutus* because he could not find a Brutus figure upon which to model the tyrant-slaying hero; she implies then that modern Florentines should find in themselves the "model-stuff" to act out their republican spirit (1: 595). Drawing on a tradition of male republican imagery, Barrett Browning presents the prototype of nineteenth-century Ital-

ian republicanism as an image of potent masculine violence: “Brutus, with the knife” (1: 845) throbbing beneath Rome’s stones.

Part 2 treats the Brutus scene as an intensified call to arms. The heightened representation communicates Barrett Browning’s own frustration with the (non) state of the Italian republic and Italy’s apparent lapse into the “dust” of its “towns and temples” (2: 58–59). The final appearance of Brutus is surrounded by increasingly energized verses that shout “for Italy!” (1: 568) and “for the republic!” (1: 569):

When Marcus Brutus [Michelangelo] conceived complete,
And strove to hurl him out by blow on blow
Upon the marble, at Art’s thunderheat,
Till haply (some pre-shadow rising slow,
Of what his Italy would fancy meet
To be called BRUTUS) straight his plastic hand
Fell back before his prophet-soul, and left
A fragment, a maimed Brutus, — but more grand
Than this, so named at Rome, was! (2: 557–65)

Unlike in Part 1, the question of finding a worthy model seems here to be of little importance. Rather, the sculptor’s prophetic vision (“some pre-shadow rising slow”) of Italy finding its Brutus seems to determine his inability to complete the piece. While the world that Brutus and Michelangelo hoped to recapture was never realized, Barrett Browning implies that it could be made a reality yet. In a sustained attempt to temper the female “personating Image” of Italy as passive and weak, the poem offers a hypermasculine figure of the aggressive rebel. The upper-case letters — “BRUTUS” — suggest his manly power. Although the unfinished sculpture of Brutus invites “the whole world’s laugh of scorn” (1: 549), the poem prophesies that by imagining nineteenth-century Italy as inspired by Brutus, the dream of Michelangelo’s Italy “Shall yet annuntiate [sic] to the world’s applause” (1: 576).

Barrett Browning’s representation of a rebellious Italy as Brutus is not a wholly unexpected gesture. Her supplementary vision of republican Italy in the image of the female warrior Anita Garibaldi, however, suggests the inadequacy of a nationalistic program that merely replaces the figure of Italy as “L’Italia nel 1848” with the image of Italy as “Brutus.” Indeed, the poem does not want the masculine figure of revolutionary Italy to supersede entirely the feminine figure of romantic Italy; instead, it provides an alternative, liberating vision that occupies a liminal representational ground, one that resists devolving into dangerous and debilitating hyperbolic images of men and women. According to *Casa Guidi Windows*, a free Italy is a muscular one, but that muscularity is represented by the unconventional and fearless femininity of Anita Garibaldi in combination with the violent masculinity of “BRUTUS.”

Laying groundwork for her reworking of the Brutus image through the addition of the Anita Garibaldi figure, Barrett Browning promotes the idea that pregnancy heightens patriotism and idealism when her explicitly pregnant poetic voice introduces Brutus at the beginning of Part 2. She explains how her limited trust in Duke Leopold developed when she related to him as a parent and projected her maternal feelings onto him. Presenting the duke in what seems to be a typical maternal posture, kissing and embracing his young sons, Barrett Browning explains that

... I, because I am a woman, I,
 Who felt my own child's coming life before
 The prescience of my soul, and held faith high,—
 I could not bear to think, whoever bore,
 That lips, so warmed, could shape so cold a lie. (2: 95–99)

As a mother, Barrett Browning asks forgiveness from the patriot-hero prototype — “Brutus, thou, / Who trailest downhill into life again” (2: 82–83) — for her emotional trust in the grand duke. But in a gesture that contextualizes pregnancy in terms of revolution and not sentimentality, Barrett Browning implies that Brutus's heroism trails downhill into life again by manifesting itself in the heroics of pregnant Anita Garibaldi.

The appearance of Anita Garibaldi on the battlefield as a history-making player in the fight for liberation underlines the transition from picturesque landscape in Part 1 to a harsh military landscape in Part 2. Whereas Giuseppe Garibaldi's name was well known in Victorian Britain, Anita Garibaldi's name was not. In order to remain focused on Anita rather than her husband, therefore, Barrett Browning mentions Garibaldi's name only in relation to his Brazilian wife. At the end of Part 2, Barrett Browning despairs that no ground has been won by the revolutions; she exclaims that Italy is “Still Niobe! still fainting in the sun” (2: 726). But if Italy is still a self-victimizing feminine figure while the peninsula remains occupied by a foreign army and fragmented into separate kingdoms, territories, and states, the figure of the forlorn mother is now counterbalanced by that of the aggressive woman fighter: “Italy enchained” gives way to a real revolutionary woman on the battlefield. The pregnant Anita Garibaldi acts out, with severe consequences for herself, the idea Barrett Browning raised earlier in relation to her own patriotic belief in Duke Leopold: that female hyperembodiment enhances patriotism. Anita

... at her husband's side, in scorn,
 Outfaced the whistling shot and hissing waves,
 Until she felt her little babe unborn
 Recoil, within her, from the violent staves
 And bloodhounds of the world, — at which, her life
 Dropt inwards from her eyes and followed it
 Beyond the hunters. Garibaldi's wife
 And child died so. (2: 678–85)

Barrett Browning offers Anita Garibaldi as a desirable female model because of her strength and courage; and yet the haunting description of her experiencing the death of her fetus, recoiling within her from “violent staves” before she herself succumbed, moderates our admiration with a sort of tragic realism because we recognize the maternal price of Italy's freedom.¹³

Rather than merely effacing the established “personating Image” of Italy as a female, therefore, Barrett Browning preserves what was enabling in that female image through the figure of Anita Garibaldi. Demonstrating the false divide between the categories of aesthetics and politics, she critiques those British and Italian views of Italy that have idealized and feminized it, depoliticizing gestures she reveals as themselves political

stratagems. This shift in representation was, however, considerably too subtle for her readers, in Italy as well as in Britain, at least as represented by the poem's male reviewers.

Italian Critical Reception

IN HER INTRODUCTION TO *Casa Guidi Windows*, Markus quotes the Italian critic Giuliana Artom Treves, who called Barrett Browning *the* poetic voice of the Italian revolution. In her own book, Treves views *Casa Guidi Windows* as critical to Barrett Browning's patriotic role:

Il poema in cui descrisse i rivolgimenti di Toscana le merita la perenne gratitudine degli Italiani per la sua franca presa di posizione come poetessa del Risorgimento Italiano. [The poem in which [Barrett Browning] described the upheavals in Tuscany earns her the enduring gratitude of the Italians for her outspoken stance as poet of the Italian Risorgimento.] (110)

This perception — versions of which can be found from the 1850s to the present — of Barrett Browning as poetical spokesperson for the Italian people during the Risorgimento is not, however, based on a clear understanding of the way the poem circulated in Victorian Italy. For all her popularity in Italy, Barrett Browning's poetry seems not to have been a serious topic of discussion. In fact, Italian literary journals mostly published her least political poetry.¹⁴ And certainly the nature of her political feminism was not understood. Among nineteenth-century Italian critics, only the feminist Fanny Zampini-Salazar translated lengthy passages from *Casa Guidi Windows*, but not until 1907. While Barrett Browning was an inspiration for Italians, it was because anecdote and hearsay had turned her into an archetypal liberator figure.¹⁵ Indeed, it was her poetry's vision of Italian freedom and independence, rather than the poetry itself, that was usually appropriated by Italian literary circles as a vehicle for their own discussions of Italy.

One sign that the female poet's reputation as a moral reformer would outshine her poetry was that Barrett Browning's verse appeared in Victorian Italy in a highly modified form. When it was translated, it was often naturalized into Italian by male translators for whom Barrett Browning served as the means for expressing their own patriotism. For instance, in his 1898 review of Tullo Massarani's *Poesie scelte di Elisabetta Barrett Browning*, Pompeo Molmenti praises the skill of Massarani's versifying as he empties Barrett Browning from her own poetry:

La versione che Tullo Massarani fece delle poesie scelte della Browning è così piena di efficacia e di grazia da non sembrar traduzione, ma cosa naturale. Lo scrittore eloquente e abbondevole, con questo prezioso libretto, può disingannare molti i quali credono che il raggio della poesia in Italia illumini soltanto alcuni pochi, stretti quasi a chiesastico convito. Anche fuori di quella piccola chiesa può esservi salute. Il Massarani dimostra che l'ingegno e l'arte di ottimamente poetare vivono tuttora nella patria nostra. [Tullo Massarani's translations of some of Barrett Browning's poems are so full of efficacy and grace that they do not seem like translations, but like something natural. This rich and eloquent writer, with this precious little book, can disabuse many people of the idea that the light of poetry in Italy illuminates only a very few in a tightly cloistered group. For even outside that little church there can be salvation. Massarani demonstrates that skill and art in masterfully writing verse still thrives in our country.] (279–80)

Barrett Browning's verse is valued here only as a means for expressing the patriotic male voice. In fact, Barrett Browning's voice has been completely absorbed by the voice of the male Italian "poet," Massarani. The reviewer sees Massarani's version of Barrett Browning's work as hardly a translation at all because his lines are "*cosa naturale*." The patriotic element that Molmenti celebrates is not the content of Barrett Browning's poetry, but the nationalistic literary vitality in Italy that the translation of the poem makes possible ("*l'ingegno e l'arte di ottimamente poetare vivono tuttora nella patria nostra*").

Enrico Nencioni, one of the first Italian critics to write about Victorian literature, demonstrates the way in which Barrett Browning's inspirational reputation on the Italian literary-political scene precluded earnest consideration of her poetry. When Nencioni first discusses *Casa Guidi Windows* in 1884, he uses Barrett Browning's personal life as a way of highlighting the ethical and patriotic qualities of her verse, rather than examining the verse itself. The message for his Italian readers is that *Casa Guidi Windows* is important for its thematic content and passion but not for its metaphoric complexities and structure:

*Elisabetta Browning amò l'Italia come una seconda patria, passò qua gran parte della sua vita, qua morì, e partecipò con simpatia di poeta e di donna alle nostre patriottiche speranze, ai nostri dolori, ai nostri lutti, ai nostri trionfi. Nel suo poema Le finestre di casa Guidi (Casa Guidi's [sic] Windows) vi è un accento così penetrante di entusiasmo e di sdegno che ci ricorda le più ardenti strofe del Berchet. Dalle finestre di casa Guidi (via Maggio, in Firenze) essa avea visto sfilare la processione del popolo esultante per le riforme liberali, il 12 settembre 1847. Le grida, gl'inni, le bandiere, le coccarde, i fiori, i baci di fratellanza, le lacrime d'entusiasmo, di quella memoranda giornata, durano immortali in quelle pagine. Dalla finestra medesima essa vide poi nel 1849 passare a ranghi serrati, col mirto al cimiero, gli austriaci restauratori . . . e quel funebre giorno rivive nella sua lugubre luce in questo poema. [Elizabeth Barrett Browning loved Italy like a second home; she spent much of her life here, died here, and with the sympathies of a poet and a woman participated in our patriotic hopes, our pains, our mourning, our triumphs. In her poem *Casa Guidi Windows*, there is such a penetrating accent of enthusiasm and disdain that it recalls the most passionate verse of Berchet. From the windows of Casa Guidi, on via Maggio in Florence, she had seen pass by the procession of the people, exultant over liberal reforms, on September 12, 1847. The cries, anthems, flags, patriotic emblems, flowers, kisses of brotherhood, and tears of enthusiasm of that memorable day will endure immortally in those pages. From the same windows in 1849 she then saw pass by the closed ranks, the plumes on the crest of the helmets, the Austrian "restorers" . . . and that dark day lives again in its gloomy light in this poem.] (17)*

That Nencioni's caricature of Barrett Browning leads into a plot summary of the poem implies that *Casa Guidi Windows* is a significant work because Englishwoman Elizabeth Barrett Browning — Italian patriot extraordinaire — was the author, rather than that she was significant because she wrote it. Even though he provides only this prose summary of her poem (he treats *Aurora Leigh* at length but in a similar prose format), Nencioni nevertheless encourages his Italian readers to understand Barrett Browning's poetry. But since his Italian readership would not have had access to Barrett Browning's original work, or even to decent verse translations, Nencioni's guide to understanding her work substitutes for the poetry itself. Here, as elsewhere, Barrett Browning's poetry — and its political intention — lie outside the reader's purview, adulterated by the few Italian critics who consider it. Nencioni even aestheticizes "*La Browning*" herself when he describes her

as the sweet, passionate violin in the grand orchestra of British poetry: “è il *dolcissimo e passionato violino della grande orchestra poetica inglese*” (16). Although Nencioni does consider Barrett Browning inspirational, he does not consider her a political writer. Instead he believes the greatness of her poetry is concentrated in those moments when her gender is most obvious, most intense: “*La Browning non è forse mai così gran poetà, come quando si palesa così intensamente donna*” (10).

The crossbred aspect of Barrett Browning’s poetry (masculine political topic, feminine poetic form) discomfited British critics even more than the Italians, who had no comparable tradition of women’s writing by which to measure her and were thus more happily ensconced in reductive gender binarism. But for both her Italian and her British critics, the subject of political analysis was fundamentally at odds with female poetic authority. Since the idea that a woman might actually be a *gran poetà* was almost inconceivable, Nencioni defused the issue of Barrett Browning’s gender by highlighting her national identity. Confirming the idea that nineteenth-century British and Italian men similarly viewed political authenticity as incompatible with the female gender, male critics in both Britain and Italy subverted Barrett Browning’s political message: while Italians avoided the question of gender by focusing on her British nationality and her sympathy for Italian nationalist politics, the British avoided the question of politics by concentrating on her gender. Moreover, both sets of critics assumed her work’s inspirational quality was its political message.

Victorian Critical Reception

TWO FACTORS DETERMINED THE cool reception of Barrett Browning’s poem in Victorian Britain. First, as a woman poet engaging politics, Barrett Browning challenged the politics of gender; second, by critiquing British views of Italy, views that justified Britain’s lack of commitment to Italian nationalism, Barrett Browning questioned British politics.¹⁶ The telling sets of semantic oppositions in the poem’s 1851 reviews imply that the political-poetical mediatory aspect of *Casa Guidi Windows* flustered its British critics. These oppositions include linking the form of the poem with the feminine realm of experience and connecting its subject matter to masculinity. To varying degrees, the *Athenaeum*, *Fraser’s Magazine*, the *Prospective Review*, and the *Spectator* all produce a split analysis of the poem in terms of its “body” (structure) and “spirit” (content). This bifurcated critical approach to *Casa Guidi Windows* is also a hierarchical one in which the poem’s subject matter is privileged over its form. While Barrett Browning’s Victorian reviewers leveled criticism at the formal qualities in almost all of her work, their concentration on this poem’s structural failures — too fluid, too female, too Italian — carries special resonance. Most obviously this preoccupation serves as a way to dispel the threat of a woman’s engagement with politics; but it also conveniently deflects attention from the politics of Britain’s attitude towards Italian nationalism.¹⁷

The implied logic of her reviewers — that the subject of political analysis is fundamentally at odds with female poetic authority — is exposed in their evaluation of the poem. The political topic of *Casa Guidi Windows* elicits descriptive praises from reviewers such as “wise,” “beautiful” and even “courageous” and “manly,” while consideration of its form prompts the reverse. For example, although the *Spectator* finds the poem “enlightened by a manly power of analyzing events and facing disagreeable truths” (617), it sees

form in *Casa Guidi Windows* as remaining symbolically feminine in its informal and flowing mode of expression. The reviewer considers the poem's colloquial manner as an unacceptably gendered mode of discourse when he reads *Casa Guidi Windows* as "school-girl correspondence" (616). The reviewer in the *Spectator* connects the poem's discursiveness to a feminine subjectivity which mediates the weighty subject matter: the "theme" of *Casa Guidi Windows* has been "fitted to a woman's hand" through its "subjective mode of treatment" (617). Additionally, the structural and linguistic defects that the "manly" Victorian novelist Charles Kingsley, writing for *Fraser's Magazine*, finds in her poem are connected to Barrett Browning's gender, and tacitly to an identification with Italy as a place of feminine emotional thought and action. Although the "abundance of thought" the poem exhibits is "altogether manlike," *Casa Guidi Windows* is "in nowise deficient — as the exquisite allusion to her child, in the conclusion, will prove — in occasional touches of the very sweetest womanly tenderness" (622). This sensitivity leads Kingsley to reason that the poem's "incoherent and fragmentary form" reflects Barrett Browning's indistinct and quivering feminine vision as she witnesses events in Italy "amid the mist of tears" (619). Barrett Browning's using the "very longest and stiffest latin-dictionary words in the very loosest sense" is then understood as "a true and natural expression" of her own bewilderment, unable to see clearly the chaotic revolution in Florence, much less versify it in sharp and stringent lines.

While Kingsley's emphasis on Barrett Browning's femaleness draws attention from the Italian situation her work addresses, the reviewer in the *Athenaeum* more obviously undermines her representation of the Italian struggle for independence, for its review of *Casa Guidi Windows* subverts both women's and Italy's political authority. Assuming and proving an association between Italy and femininity, this reviewer deflates Barrett Browning's argument that Britain's cultural debt to Italy warrants political reimbursement by separating aesthetic from political categories, a division that Barrett Browning exposes as fallacious. The reviewer in the *Athenaeum* employs terms of national identity rather than of gender to describe the poem, allowing, for example, that it exhibits moments of "social and political wisdom" (597). In the context of other reviews that explicitly link the structural qualities of *Casa Guidi Windows* to feminine characteristics, however, this review's adjective- and noun-laden description of the poem's form is certainly coded feminine:

Though fraught with the spirit of English strength and insight, [the pages of *Casa Guidi Windows*] are Italian in their style. Fervid, unrestrained, and imaginative, they might have been delivered by an *improvisatore* in a Florentine thoroughfare to an audience of his countrymen. Nor are they, it must be said, free from those defects which belong to such *impromptu* inspirations. Diffuseness, ruggedness, *concetti*, and at times colloquialisms, impair and disfigure much that is noble in this poem both as regards its conception and its forms. (597)

In identifying the strong and insightful "spirit" of the poem as "English" and its uncontained, uncontrollable form as Italianate, the reviewer delineates some of the perceived gendered differences in British and Italian manners: Britishness is associated with an implicitly masculine content that is reasoned and rational ("strength and insight"), while what is Italian is linked with an implicitly feminine "style" that is impassioned and

irrational (“Fervid, unrestrained, and imaginative”). Neither shaped nor perfected, neither logical nor severe, this poem, the critic implies, reflects the impatience and laziness of its British creator taken over by these stereotypical national Italian traits.

The *Athenaeum* review shows how the politics of national identity are entangled with the politics of gender. For the critic imaginatively recasts the poem in Italian by replacing Barrett Browning’s female British voice with a feminized male Italian one, that of the “*improvisatore*.” Placing Barrett Browning’s words in the mouth of a male speaker once again circumvents the problem of a women’s political participation. At the same time, this rhetorical gesture depends not only on difference between the two scenarios, but also on likeness. Neatly separating the poem’s political exhortation from its female speaker, the split feminizes the Italian male speaker since “he” has been assigned the conventional female role of *improvisatrice*. Not only is the speaker’s “*im-promptu* inspiration” stereotypically feminine in its “[d]iffuseness” and “colloquialisms,” but it also reflects the speaker’s inheritance of the female oratory tradition: after all, the most obvious and famous literary referent for an Italian improvisator is the female *improvisatrice* Corinne, from Madame de Staël’s *Corinne, or Italy* (1807).¹⁸ Thus occupying a role seen by Britain as female, the Italian male improvisator is feminized and, as a feminine figure, supports British thinking about Italy as a place with no need for independence. The very term “*improvisatore*” underscores how intricately Victorian culture connects that which is considered apolitical with that which is understood as feminine. Since an improvisator is fundamentally an artist rather than a revolutionary, this reviewer’s characterization of *Casa Guidi Windows* as an artistic utterance further aestheticizes its earnest political directives and analyses. Moreover, the reviewer inverts the rhetorical address of the poem. No longer addressed to British readers in English, the poem’s ardent message is now spoken in Italian and addressed to an Italian audience: *Casa Guidi Windows* “might have been delivered by an *improvisatore* in a Florentine thoroughfare to an audience of his countrymen.” Divorcing poetic thoughts Italian, and thus implicitly feminine and apolitical, from poetic thoughts British, and thus tacitly masculine and political, the *Athenaeum* reviewer removes the poem’s political message from (female) British discursive practice by placing it in a (male) Italian-language context.

* * * * *

ALTHOUGH FEW MODERN CRITICS treat *Casa Guidi Windows* as recording the Italian events of the late 1840s and early 1850s, much less view it as a poetic treatise that itself participates in the dynamic nation-forming process by shaping Italian identity,¹⁹ *Casa Guidi Windows* shifts the representation of Italy from *mythos* to *logos*, as the poem anticipates, imagines, and thus semantically constructs the British idea of Italian nationalism for Barrett Browning’s readers. If, as Ernest Gellner argues, “[n]ationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness,” but instead “invents nations where they do not exist” (168), and if, as Luciano Mariotti wrote in 1851, the books “written by eye-witnesses and actors in the events have not only an historical but a prophetic interest” (375), then her poem certainly participates in that nationalistic endeavor.

Yale University

NOTES

1. Bailey's phrasing is adapted from W. J. T. Mitchell's discussion about how Italy figures in nineteenth-century Britain (Mitchell, *Iconology* 110).
2. The nineteenth-century Italian political movement, the Risorgimento, achieved its objectives in the decade 1860–1870: to unify the country, free it from foreign rule, and give it a secular, constitutional government. The Florentine perspective of *Casa Guidi Windows* precedes by over 140 years the latest trend in Risorgimento historiography which analyzes the movement as a whole by focusing on local manifestations of the revolution.
3. Prince Clemens Metternich infamously described Italy in 1847 as a “geographic expression,” for he viewed Italian nationalism as one of the Austrian empire's — and therefore, in his view, civilization's — most dangerous enemies (qtd. in Istituto per la storia del risorgimento italiano 31).
4. In addition to Dickens and Ruskin, male Victorians who view Italy as an idealized space include Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Henry James, Edward Lear, and George Meredith.
5. Davie, in a somewhat dated but still provocative essay, observes that the patriot dimension of “woman-ness” is seldom considered in feminist criticism (40).
6. I define the picturesque according to Myers's understanding of the term, “as a self-consciously disinterested mode of pictorial objectification” (59).
7. For an account of the relationship between *Casa Guidi Windows* and the analyses and reports written in the same period, see Dillon and Frank.
8. The reports filed by the Roman correspondents of *The Times* suggest the tendency to reduce even the political idea of Italy to hackneyed expression: these journalistic representations of Italy rapidly shift after unification from picturesque country to a land devoid of redeeming aesthetic features, one of backwardness, workers' revolts, and disorganized and ineffectual government.
9. In an excellent essay on Barrett Browning's prefaces and dedications, Rundle argues that Barrett Browning's figuring of the “self-conscious perceiving subject” in her “Advertisement” to *Casa Guidi Windows* places it “in the forefront of Victorian philosophical and aesthetic tradition” (274).
10. In her edition of *Casa Guidi Windows*, Markus presents a facsimile of the first page of the letter that depicts Barrett Browning's illustration; as well, it features a transcription of her entire letter to Henrietta based on the holograph.
11. Le Goff discusses one of the ways *mythos* and *logos* function in Italians' nationalistic endeavor: “The exceptional importance of the weight of history in the Italian collective consciousness derives from the explosive combination of . . . the awareness of being an ancient people, [and] the feeling of decline from the original glory to the present state” (537).
12. Like most other Victorian men who represented Italy, Robert Browning, for example, considers it a place to conquer erotically, as “woman-country, wooed not wed” (“By the Fire-Side,” line 28).
13. The mother-to-be Anita Garibaldi is not a completely unproblematic heroine for Barrett Browning, for elsewhere she registers skepticism about mothers having to yield their children as political sacrifice. For example, “Mother and Poet” (1861) tells the story of Turin's Laura Savio, both poet and patriot, whose only two sons died fighting for independence at Ancona and Gaeta. Lamenting in first person the death of both her boys, Savio questions the toll of liberty in the closing lines, “You want a great song for your Italy free, / Let none look at *me!*” (100–01).

14. In descending order of the number of translated editions, Barrett Browning is best known in Italy for *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (fully translated five times to date), *Aurora Leigh*, “The Cry of the Children,” and finally, along with other poems, *Casa Guidi Windows*.
15. For example, the commemorative plaque outside the Casa Guidi in Florence bears an inscription by Niccolò Tommaseò: “*Qui scrisse e morì / Elisabetta Barrett Browning / che in cuore di donna conciliava / scienza di dotto e spirito di poeta / e fece del suo verso aureo anello / fra Italia e Inghilterra. / Pone questa lapide / Firenze grata / 1861.*” [Here wrote and died / Elizabeth Barrett Browning / whose womanly heart combined / the wisdom of the scholar and the spirit of the poet / and made of her verse a golden ring / between Italy and England. / A grateful Florence presents this plaque / 1861.]
16. Donaldson observes, “Some British commentators account for the coolness of the reception of her work in her homeland by pointing out that her enthusiasm for the Italian cause also involved denunciations of British politicians” (3). This explanation, however, does not adequately account for the tangle of objections to *Casa Guidi Windows* since Barrett Browning essentially sought to change, rather than denounce, British foreign policy.
17. Even though Italian liberation seems to have been a universally popular cause (the Tory Catholics and Tory Conservatives who opposed Italian independence were in the minority), apparent political uniformity belies the complex cultural fallout that the struggle for Italian liberation generated in Victorian Britain. More than the realm of parliamentary politics, the arena of British cultural practices and feeling registered the new and sometimes troubling kinds of recognition and evaluation required by Italian nationalism. For instance, although Giuseppe Garibaldi was lionized in British newspapers while he was in Italy, he was received with mixed emotions when he visited Britain in 1864. Given his tumultuous reception by the working class, Garibaldi was perceived as being too political in some quarters. *The Times* warned that “we have no grievances of our own for Garibaldi to redress” (qtd. in Rance 155).
Internationally, while the British were the least hostile of the great powers to the idea of Italian nationalism, Queen Victoria’s foreign affairs documents nevertheless reveal a consistent British interest in Italy’s political-military situation through the course of the century (see microfilm files at the Royal Archives, Windsor Castle, *The Papers of Queen Victoria*, vol. 3).
18. In addition, the circulation of Letitia E. Landon’s poem “The Improvisatrice” (1824), as well as Felicia Hemens’s “Corinne at the Capitol” (1830), would have reinforced the idea of a female Italian improvisator in Victorian culture, which was made popular by Mme. de Stael.
19. One of the few histories written by a woman is Wormeley’s *Italy in the Nineteenth Century* (1896). In contrast to most male-authored histories, Wormeley considers *Casa Guidi Windows* a legitimate form of historical record: she cites the poem as a vivid first-hand description of the revolution in Italy.

WORKS CITED

- Alaya, Flavia. “The Ring, the Rescue, and the Risorgimento: Reunifying the Brownings’ Italy.” *Browning Institute Studies* 6 (1978): 1–41.
- Artom Treves, Giuliana. *Anglo-Florentini di cento anni fa*. Firenze: Sansoni, 1953.
- Bailey, Brigitte. “The Protected Witness: Cole, Cooper, and the Tourist’s View of the Italian Landscape.” *American Iconology: New Approaches to 19th Century Art and Literature*. Ed. David C. Miller. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. 92–111.
- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. *Casa Guidi Windows*. Ed. Julia Markus. New York: Browning Institute, 1977.

- . *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Ed. Ruth M. Adams. Cambridge ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.
- Browning, Robert. *Robert Browning*. Ed. Adam Roberts. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Calabrese, Omar, ed., with Renato Giovannoli and Isabella Pezzini. *Modern Italy: The Images and History of a National Identity*. Milan: Electa Editrice, 1982.
- Cooper, Helen. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Artist*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.
- Davie, Donald A. "Poet: Patriot: Interpreter." *The Politics of Interpretation*. Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983. 33–49.
- David, Deirdre. *Rule Britannia: Women, Empire, and Victorian Writing*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995.
- de Staël, Germaine. *Corinne, or Italy*. Ed. and trans. Avriel H. Goldberger. 1807; New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987.
- Dickens, Charles. *Pictures from Italy*. Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1846.
- Dillon, Steve, and Katherine Frank. "Defenestrations of the Eye: Flow, Fire, and Sacrifice in 'Casa Guidi Windows'." *Victorian Poetry* 35.4 (1997): 471–92.
- Donaldson, Sandra. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: An Annotated Bibliography of the Commentary and Criticism, 1826–1900*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1993.
- Forster, Margaret. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Biography*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1988.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Thought and Change*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964.
- Gilbert, Sandra. "From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento." *PMLA* 99. 2 (1984): 194–211.
- Gordon, D. J. "Giannotti, Michelangelo and the Cult of Brutus." *Fritz Saxl 1890–1948: A Volume of Memorial Essays from His Friends in England*. Ed. D. J. Gordon. London: Thomas Nelson, 1957. 281–96.
- Hemens, Felicia. *The Works of Mrs. Hemans; With a memoir of her life, by her sister*. 7 vols. London: Thomas Cadwell, 1839.
- Istituto per la storia del risorgimento italiano. *Risorgimento: mito e realtà*. Milan: Electa Editrice, 1992.
- Kingsley, Charles. "This Year's Song-Crop," rev. of *Casa Guidi Windows*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Fraser's Magazine* Dec. 1851: 618–22.
- Landon, Letitia E. *The improvisatrice; and other poems*. London: Hurst, Robinson, 1824.
- Le Goff, Jacques. "Il peso del passato nella coscienza collettiva degli italiani." *Il caso italiano*. Ed. Fabio Luca Cavezza and Stephen R. Graubard. Vol. 2. Milan: Garzanti, 1974. 534–52.
- Mariotti, Luciano. *Italy in 1848*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1851.
- Mermin, Dorothy. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Milton, John. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Macmillan, 1957.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- . "Imperial Landscape." *Landscape and Power*. Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. 5–34.
- Molmenti, Pompeo. "Elisabetta Barrett Browning." *Nuova antologia di scienze, lettere ed arti* 157 (1898): 276–84.
- Myers, Kenneth John. "On the Cultural Construction of Landscape Experience: Contact to 1830." *American Iconology: New Approaches to 19th Century Art and Literature*. Ed. David C. Miller. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. 58–79.
- Nencioni, Enrico. "Aurora Leigh." *Nuova antologia di scienze, lettere ed arti* 75 (1884): 5–18.
- Papers of Queen Victoria on Foreign Affairs*. Ed. Kenneth Bourne. Vol. 3: Italy, 1847–1900. Windsor Castle: Royal Archives.

- Rance, Nicholas. *The Historical Novel and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975.
- Rev. of *Casa Guidi Windows*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Athenaeum* 7 June 1851: 597–98.
- Rev. of *Casa Guidi Windows*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Charles Wicksteed). *Prospective Review* Aug. 1851: 313–25.
- Rev. of *Casa Guidi Windows*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Spectator* 28 June 1851: 616–17.
- Rosenblum, Dolores. “*Casa Guidi Windows* and *Aurora Leigh*: The Genesis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Visionary Aesthetic.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 4.1 (1985): 61–68.
- Rundle, Vivienne. “‘The Inscription of these Volumes’: The Prefatory Writings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.” *Victorian Poetry* 34.2 (Summer 1996): 247–78.
- Ruskin, John. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. 39 vols. London: George Allen, 1903.
- Wormeley, Elizabeth. *Italy in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1896.
- Zampini-Salazar, Fanny. *La vita e le opere di Roberto Browning e Elisabetta Barrett Browning con prefazione di Antonio Fogazzaro*. Torino, 1907.