The Womanist Christology of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"

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While scholars have applied feminist lenses and have considered a Christian framework in relation to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," critics have yet to apply either a consciously womanist analysis nor an analysis through the lens of a specific branch of Christian theology. A womanist Christological analysis of the poem reveals that the protagonist experiences metaphorical crucifixion in the beginning of the poem, has an afterlife experience, and is "resurrected" in a way that accords with the spirituality of historical black American women in slavery. The analysis demonstrates the importance of considering intersectional interpretive frameworks when evaluating appropriation and empowerment issues in literature.

In 1847, Victorian English writer Elizabeth Barrett Browning published the poem "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." The poem features a black woman slave in the United States who runs away and then narrates the painful events of her life to the slave hunters who are chasing her. She falls in love with a fellow slave, who is inexplicably killed by slave masters. She is then raped by a gang of white men and bears a child, whom she subsequently smothers to death. At the end of the poem, before she is stoned to death by the slave hunters who have followed her, the protagonist dramatically calls for justice for her people. Throughout the poem, she seeks to understand her suffering in light of a supposedly kind Father God and a suffering Christ.

Scholarly criticism of "The Runaway Slave" is in general scant, though patterns across this criticism merit attention. Four contemporary critics of the poem have taken up an expressly feminist (read: white women-dominant) lens (Battles; Brown; Ficke; Stone "Between Ethics and Anguish"). Others have written from a feminist perspective while also addressing the prominent Christian elements of the poem (Brophy; Cooper; Miller; Parry). However, the poem has yet to be analyzed from a consciously womanist perspective, nor has the poem been investigated through the lens of a specific branch of Christian theology. The application of a womanist theological lens to "The Runaway Slave" is woefully long past due, especially given that the protagonist is a black, Christian woman.

With the lens of womanist Christology, this essay will address the issue of when the protagonist's metaphorical crucifixion occurs. Existing published writing on the poem that likens the woman to Jesus in all cases places the time of the woman's crucifixion at the end of the poem, when she is stoned to death by her attackers (Brophy 279-80; Cooper 121; Miller

643). However, I argue that womanist theology must dialogue with the poem before a comprehensive picture of the poem's theological landscape can be drawn. The writings of womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant offer contextually-relevant insight. Grant writes of the nature of slave women's suffering, asserting that "[Jesus'] suffering culminated in the crucifixion. Black women slaves' crucifixion included rape, and babies being sold" (Grant 212). Because of the additional suffering black women experienced by bearing oppression-receiving identities in both gender and race, black women slaves experienced a heightened share of suffering. In other words, if Grant's statement about the nature of slave women's suffering is correct for "The Runaway Slave," then the protagonist's "crucifixion" does not occur when she is killed in the end of the poem, but in the middle of the poem, when she is raped by a gang of slave owners. Another work by Barrett Browning, the epic novel *Aurora Leigh*, also features a woman who is the victim of rape. Linda Lewis likens the character Marian Erle's sexual assault to death (Lewis 65), but a similar application to the rape of "The Runaway Slave" protagonist has yet to be made.

From a womanist theological point of reference using Grant's observation as its basis, this paper will first outline how the protagonist of Barret Browning's poem experiences a metaphorical crucifixion. Secondly, a demonstration of how the infanticide portion of the poem is akin to an afterlife experience in a hellish heaven. Last, I will demonstrate that before the woman is physically killed at the end of the poem, she comes alive again in articulating a vision of justice, resurrecting from the metaphorical crucifixion that occurred through sexual assault in the beginning of the poem.

1. CRUCIFIXION

In his 1973 article "Theodicy: The Controlling Category for Black Theology," influential philosopher and theologian William R. Jones writes that a main theological characteristic of "black suffering" is its "maldistribution" (qtd. in Brown Crawford xii). People do not all experience an equal amount of suffering, and black people suffer disproportionately. Barrett Browning seems to account for this maldistribution of suffering in including sexual assault in the poem's plot. A well-read abolitionist, Barrett Browning would have known that black women in slavery experienced such atrocities as frequent rape justified by their legal status as property (Stone "A Heretic Believer" 30). As Helen Cooper writes on the historical background related to "The Runaway Slave," raping slave women was for slave masters a means of magnification, or "dramati[zation] of ownership of the slaves' bodies" (116). By inserting the "excessive" act of rape into the poem's plotline, Barrett Browning accurately writes the protagonist's story within the context of maldistributed suffering. This maldistribution is what undergirds Grant's comparison between rape at the hand of slave masters and crucifixion.

Beyond including a historically-accurate plot item that reflects the excesses experienced by the fictional protagonist's real-life counterparts, further, Barrett Browning accounts for the excess by depicting the protagonist struggling under the weight of this maldistributed suffering. The protagonist considers having been sexually assaulted shortly after her lover is killed. The woman reflects: "Wrong, followed by a deeper wrong!/ Mere grief's too good for such as I" (99-100). Rape was a "deeper wrong" following what was already "wrong." The protagonist's racist, patriarchal society believes that merely experiencing "grief," a mental sort suffering, is "too good" for her. Precisely because she is a black woman, she deserves to suffer to a degree above and beyond what would otherwise be appropriate. Importantly, the biblical crucifixion narrative owes some of its power to the excessive and disproportionate way in which it appears Jesus is killed. After experiencing her lover killed without explanation, Barrett Browning's protagonist through the sexual assault experiences a further suffering—a suffering that, due to its excessive nature, falls squarely within the historical context that leads Grant to compare the suffering of slave women to crucifixion.

2. HELLISH WHITE SUPREMACIST HEAVEN

Second, after experiencing a "crucifying" sexual assault, in logical order the protagonist's narrative continues into a metaphorical afterlife. Spanning

stanzas XXVI through XXVIII, this middle section of the poem contains the most shock factor: a mother smothers her infant child as he struggles for breath and dies.

In response to Barrett Browning's decision to include such disturbing violence as infanticide in the poem, critics assume a variety of positions. Sarah Brophy criticizes Barrett Browning's decision to 'kill off' the baby from the poem. For eliminating the child which represents the main conflict of the story suggests that Barrett Browning has given up on the possibility that a woman could ever fulfill the role, in this case a motherly role, she wants to (Brophy 277). While it is possible that Barrett Browning's choice to eliminate the child from the story conveniently serves the poem's plot, Grant's theology illumines an alternate view of including the infanticide. Within Grant's theological framework, it is impossible for the infanticide to constitute the protagonist's pursuit of the path of least resistance -- her attempt to live an easier life. For if the rape is a "crucifixion," then by the time she commits the infanticide, the protagonist has no life left; metaphorically, she has been crucified and is dead. Cooper's reading of the poem affirms the infanticide's existence in an ambiguous no-man's land where no amount of resistance can alter the woman protagonist's circumstances. Cooper writes that "Though horrible, this infanticide becomes, within the terms of the poem, tragically grand and inevitable, the logical conclusion to the slave's situation" (119). Similarly, Susan Brown writes, "horrifying as the infanticide may be, it is part of a larger pattern of violence initiated by the white 'hunter sons' of the pilgrims" (130). The nature of the woman's oppression made the infanticide a natural manifestation of her circumstances. Fittingly, this impenetrable, otherworldly space in which the protagonist's life experience must take its due effect appears in the text as an afterlife.

Specifically, this controversial infanticide portion of the poem appears as an experience in a hellish heaven. The text indeed reflects both the anguish of hell and the angelic beings associated with heaven. The description of the process of killing the child spans five stanzas (XVIII-XXII). From the tedious narration of the child's "moan[ing]" and "beat[ing] with his head and feet" in its struggle for breath (124, 127), to the woman's twisting the baby's head around in her shawl afterward (146-47), the five stanzas are graphically painful in a way akin to the prolonged suffering of hell.

Additionally, the infanticide narrative as it continues in stanzas XXIII through XXVIII is sprinkled with references to the heavenly beings "God" and "angels." Throughout the infanticide, the woman believes herself to be victimized by white angels. Addressing God, or perhaps her attackers, she states, "Your fine white angels … plucked my fruit to make them wine,/ And sucked the soul of that child of mine" (157-160). She did not kill her child, she says; the angels of a white supremacist god took him for their own pleasure. The protagonist did not have the power to make her son live. The same white supremacist ideology that shaped the woman's circumstances leading up to the infanticide is the same ideology which would make it impossible for this mother and son to live as they should. In this hellish heaven, the woman can only experience the effects of systematic oppression. Within a Christological framework, crucifixion is necessarily followed by a murky period in which the weight of unadulterated death can sit. The protagonist's afterlife infanticide certainly centralizes death, and appropriately the event is both heavy and alarming.

3. RESURRECTION

According to this womanist Christological reading, the protagonist two-thirds of the way into the poem has experienced both a "crucifixion" through sexual assault and a hellish heaven afterlife marked by infanticide. The ending section of the poem, occurring in stanzas XIX through XXXV after the infanticide but before she is stoned to death in the last stanza, appears as a "resurrection" experience for the woman whom sexual assault has rendered metaphorically crucified.

As mentioned earlier, previous scholarly criticism of "The Runaway Slave" locates the woman's "crucifixion" at the end of the poem. Admittedly, the woman's physical death at the end of the poem and her monologue which precedes it are undeniably crucificial. She addresses her hunters in the forest at exact spot where she had been previously tied to

a flogging post. She is murdered by people with no justification for wanting her life. And just as Jesus refuses to curse his mockers, asking God the Father to forgive them, the woman in the second-to-last line of the poem declares, "White men, I leave you all curse-free" (352-353). Given the protagonist's move to compare the suffering slaves to the suffering Jesus in stanzas XXXIV and XXXV, in addition to the multi-faceted Christian expressions present in Barrett Browning's other work (Mermin 70), these parallels are likely intentional. The author's intentions related to the location of the protagonist's crucifixion need not negate the womanist theological possibilities of the poem, however. This reality is attested by the corpus of feminist and critical race theory analysis of texts written far before the writers of those texts would have recognized either feminism or critical race theory. Notwithstanding Barrett Browning's designs over the Christian narrative of the poem, she follows the protagonist's crucificial sexual assault experience and hellish heaven infanticide with a "resurrection."

The nature of the "resurrection" experience Barrett Browning gives her protagonist accords with historical womanist theology. Specifically, the protagonist's resurrection aligns with what womanist theologian A. Elaine Brown Crawford has demonstrated was a mode of empowerment typical for historical black American women in slavery. Knowledge of these historical patterns is crucial to recognizing the resurrecting quality of the end of the poem. Brown Crawford examines the limited existing evidence of what the spiritual lives of black women slaves looked like. She draws from the accounts of four women: Mary Prince, Old Elizabeth, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Jacobs. Brown Crawford concludes that the hope of black women in slavery was grounded in the possibility of justice in life on earth. For example, after narrating how her master expressed that she owed him complete deference, Harriet Jacobs wrote, "[t]he war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered" (qtd. in Brown Crawford 40). Rather than living a life of passive hope, Jacobs sought to live a life of resistance as best she could. As Brown Crawford articulates of slave women in general: "slave women did not just talk about the possibilities for their lives and communities—they persued [sic] the possibilities" (40). They were most comforted by their belief that their incarnational God would makes wrongs right in the here-and-now. Further, since black women slaves' voices were systematically silenced, simply having an opportunity to articulate this vision empowered them (Brown Crawford 102).

The protagonist of "The Runaway Slave" exercises this same life-giving vision of justice, which Brown Crawford calls "passion for the possible," at the end of the poem. After commanding the slave hunters to abandon their stones and reminding them that it was in their so-called "free America" where she was bound and flogged, the woman dramatically addresses fellow slaves. She proclaims, "From these sands/ Up to the mountains, lift your hands,/ O slaves, and end what I begun!" (229-231). The woman calls other slaves to speak as boldly as she has spoken and to act as she has acted to end slavery. At this point in the narrative, the woman is standing in the middle of the forest and is surrounded by white men, one of whom holds a stone in his hand. She must know that her death is imminent. And yet rather than fixing her gaze on a suffering-free, justice-saturated life after death, the woman crescendoes on her appeal for her fellow slaves to fight for justice now.

As simply expressing "passion for the possible" would have constituted empowerment in the protagonist's historical context, the protagonist in calling for slaves to fight for justice is operating in hope for life—even though she personally will not experience it. No longer in a hellish heaven afterlife, the protagonist is for a short time allowed in dwell once again in the land of the living, hoping for what may take place there. Jesus spent a brief time in his resurrected state before being "taken up" bodily into the sky. Likewise, Barrett Browning's protagonist spends a brief time in a resurrected state before being bodily taken off through physical death in the last stanza. Perhaps unintentionally, Barrett Browning gives her protagonist a life-giving "resurrection" experience that aligns with the spiritual lives of real black women in slavery.

In the last stanza of "The Runaway Slave," the slave hunters kill the protagonist by stoning her. As she is dying, she states:

> I am floated along, as if I should die
> Of liberty's exquisite pain—
> In the name of the white child, waiting for me
> In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,
> White men, I leave you all curse-free
> In my broken heart's disdain! (346-353)

Death for the woman brings "liberty," and its pain is "exquisite," so death brings some good. She leaves her attackers "curse-free"; the woman must feel some peace. However, readers gather that entering the afterlife does not bring the woman full satisfaction. She refers to the afterlife with the ambiguous metaphor "death-dark." Her heart is "broken," and it is full of "disdain." Death is beneficial, and yet all is still not right. In line with the present-rooted "passion for the possible" described by Brown Crawford, the protagonist's ambiguous attitude toward her own death in the last stanza firstly suggests that nullifying what happens on earth and experiencing justice only in the afterlife is not as liberating as it may seem.

A reading of "A Runaway Slave" based on Grant's insights on crucifixion and slavery also bears implications for discussion of appropriation of voice in literature. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was an upper-middle class white woman who spent most of her life in England. Despite being a well-read abolitionist and probably having black heritage two or three generations removed, she naturally would have had limited knowledge of what empowerment looked like in the everyday realities of black American women in slavery. And yet in "The Runaway Slave," Barrett Browning writes what Grant's womanist Christology would identify as the protagonist's "crucifixion," follows the tragic experience with what is strikingly reminiscent of an afterlife, and then empowers the protagonist with the opportunity to articulate a counter-cultural vision of justice in a way that is culturally native to black women in slavery. The protagonist of this poem may be more empowered than what previous criticism acknowledges. While this paper does not address how the author's intentions may or may not affect the potential of the poem to empower real black women, nor does it attempt to evaluate to what degree parallels that may appear between a fictional account and historical accounts can empower real black women, what should be clear is that without respecting the intersectional identities of characters in literature by using interpretive frameworks from those perspectives—in this case from a Christian, black, woman's, and womanist perspective, a conversation about how empowered a character is will be inevitably disinformed.

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