Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Hiram Powers's Greek Slave” (1850)

They say Ideal beauty cannot enter
The house of anguish. On the threshold stands
An alien Image with enshackled hands,
Called the Greek Slave! as if the artist meant her
(That passionless perfection which he lent her,
Shadowed not darkened where the sill expands)
To so confront man’s crimes in different lands
With man's ideal sense. Pierce to the centre,
Art’s fiery finger! and break up ere long
The serfdom of this world. Appeal, fair stone,
From God’s pure heights of beauty against man’s wrong!
Catch up in thy divine face, not alone
East griefs but west, and strike and shame the strong,
By thunders of white silence, overthrown.

This poem reflects Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s intervention in the aesthetic and political debates surrounding American sculptor Hiram Powers’ “The Greek Slave” (1844). The statue was exhibited in London in 1846; in May 1847, the Brownings met Powers in Florence and saw in his studio “The Greek Slave” together with a statue of Eve “yet unworked in the marble” which EBB much admired. When the statue was exhibited in the Crystal Palace in the 1851 Great Exhibition, it inspired a parodic cartoon by John Tenniel in *Punch* of a black slave in the same pose entitled “The Virginian Slave.” (see *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Selected Poems*, eds. Marjorie Stone & Beverly Taylor, Broadview)