Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus”

1. Why does Lazarus begin the poem with the denial of a simile?

   The first lines of “The New Colossus” begin with the denial of a simile: “Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame / With conquering limbs astride from land to land” (lines 1–2). This is strange, given that so much of poetic tradition relies on the simile (“X is like Y”) for its conceits and imagery. Yet Lazarus intentionally denies the similarity between her main image—the New World’s Statue of Liberty—and the Old World’s famous Colossus at Rhodes. To discover why Lazarus begins with this denial would be key to understanding not only her break with poetic tradition, but also her understanding of the nature of “New”-ness both in America and the statue itself.

2. What is the significance of bronze and gold in Lazarus’ poem?

   Precious metals frame the imagery in Lazarus’ famous sonnet. In the first line, the Colossus at Rhodes is described as a “brazen giant,” and in the last line, the personified Statue of Liberty says, “I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (14). It seems counterintuitive of Lazarus to ascribe bronze, a less precious metal, to the old, Grecian world and gold, the king of metals, to the new, American world while at the same time describing the old world as a place of “storied pomp” in contrast to America as the place of “refuse” and the “tempest-tossed” (9; 12–13). To discover the significance of bronze and gold and their correspondence with the two locations
would provide insight into Lazarus’ particular beliefs concerning, among other things, the proper
attitude and mission of a country in relation to the immigrants of other lands.