

**“IMPOSSIBLE SPEECH”: 19TH-CENTURY WOMEN POETS AND
THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE**

by

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Abstract

This study seeks to redress the continued exclusion of women poets from the theorization of the dramatic monologue. I argue that an unacknowledged consensus on the definition of the dramatic monologue exists, in spite of the oft-proclaimed absence of one, and that it is the failure to recognize this consensus which has in part debarred women poets from the theorization of the form. In particular, the failure to acknowledge this consensus has led recent feminist critics attempting to “rethink” the dramatic monologue, such as Cynthia Scheinberg and Glennis Byron, to reinscribe the very model they are attempting to rewrite by admitting into their analysis only those poems which already conform to the existing model. In consequence, these critics inadvertently repeat the exclusion they are attempting to redress by reinscribing a model which is predicated—as both Scheinberg and Byron acknowledge—on the exclusion of women poets. In order to end this cycle of exclusion, my project begins from a different beginning, with Hemans instead of Browning, and traces her innovations and influence across the dramatic monologues of two key dramatic monologists of the 19th-century, Augusta Webster and Amy Levy. In the hands of all three women poets, the dramatic monologue develops into a form which calls into question not only the nature of the self, as is characteristic of Browning’s model, but more crucially, the possibility of the subject. Their poems persistently dramatize what Judith Butler calls “impossible speech”—speech that is not recognized as the speech of a subject—and thereby challenges the model of authoritative speaking which underpins both men’s dramatic monologues and the prevailing theory of women’s as a clutch for linguistic freedom, power and authority. This project therefore has dual aims: to complicate our current conception of the dramatic monologue by placing the women’s dramatic monologues in conversation with the larger tradition of the form; and to complicate our understanding of 19th-century women poets’ conception and constructions of female subjectivity by re-theorizing their poetic strategies in the development of the dramatic monologue.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1993, Isobel Armstrong challenged critics to rethink the traditional narrative of the dramatic monologue, which begins with Robert Browning (1812-1889) and Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892), by provocatively asserting: “it was the women poets who ‘invented’ the dramatic monologue” (326). The response was astonishing. In the ensuing fifteen years, only two critics take up the challenge: Cynthia Scheinberg, in her essay, “Recasting ‘Sympathy and Judgment’: Amy Levy, Women Poets, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue” (1997), and Glennis Byron, in “Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique” (2003). Rather than rethinking the traditional narrative of the dramatic monologue, however, both critics reinscribe it, either by skirting the question or by denying the claim. While Scheinberg refuses “to claim generic ‘invention’ for either sex” (“Recasting” 187), Byron concludes that “women poets did not invent the form,” though “they did play a primary role in establishing and refining that line of development which has proven most enduring: the use of the monologue for the purposes of social critique” (“Rethinking” 84).

This study investigates this critical reluctance to re-theorize fully the dramatic monologue through women poets, asking: what is at stake in maintaining the traditional narrative of the dramatic monologue’s development? More precisely: what is at risk for women poets when we do so? In chapter two, I examine the history of women poets in the dramatic monologue’s theorization in order to uncover the barriers enforcing their continued exclusion. While the dramatic monologue’s seeming openness suggests the absence of any such barriers, and the continuing recovery of women’s poems would seem to facilitate, even impel, its re-theorization, the history of women poets in the critical and

theoretical discourse reveals that it is precisely these two conditions which continue to debar women poets from the theorization of the form.

In order to bypass this dilemma of gender and genre, I begin in chapter three with the work of Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) instead of Browning's for a model of genre that will recognize both the innovations and influence of women poets. Whereas Byron disqualifies Hemans from the dramatic monologue on the grounds of essentialism, evidenced by the universalizing similarity (Byron argues) of all Hemans's female speakers—in her monologues, lyric and narrative poems alike—I reopen the question of invention by raising the question of innovation. Examining the structural differences between Hemans's monologues and the rest of her poetry, rather than the similarities between Hemans's speakers, I ask: what is the effect and what is at stake in this presentation of women as speaking for themselves, unmediated by a narrator but mediated by a mask? The effect, I suggest, is a complex interrogation of the relationship between speech and subjectivity, while at stake is the fantasy of femininity, the illusion of gender. Rather than essentializing the self, then, Hemans's dramatic monologues, I argue, initiate the destabilization of the subject that is now characteristic of the form.

Continuing the re-theorization of the dramatic monologue, I turn in the next two chapters to explore the form's development in the hands of two key women writers of dramatic monologues, Augusta Webster (1837-1894) and Amy Levy (1861-1889). While Webster's achievement in the dramatic monologue has been persistently associated with her indebtedness to Browning, and her achievement in poetry often attributed to her difference from Hemans, I reverse these lines of affiliation in chapter four to recover those innovations by Webster which diverge from Browning's model and those poetic

inheritances which Browning's model represses. By doing so, I uncover in Webster's poetry new reserves of meaning which challenge us to rethink not only Webster's relation to the dramatic monologue, but also her relation to the larger tradition of women's poetry. In particular, I find that Webster's innovations on the auditor convention challenge the model of speech and subjectivity underwriting Browning's dramatic monologue, while developing and extending the model underpinning Hemans's.

Chapter five contests further our assumptions about women's poetry through an analysis of Amy Levy's dramatic monologues. While chapter four explores the limitations of Browning's model for recognizing and theorizing those innovations which diverge from the dominant tradition, that do not "speak like Browning," chapter five examines the limitations of Browning's model for reading and theorizing those poems that do. Despite the conventionality of many of Levy's monologues, none of the current theories of the form founded on Browning's poems register, let alone explain, the persistent preoccupation in Levy's poems with "speakability," the "norms that govern the kind of speech that will be legible as the speech of a subject" (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 133), and therefore the norms that govern who will and who will not be constituted as a subject of speech. By thus foregrounding the conditions of linguistic survival, as Hemans and Webster had done before her, Levy not only extends the dramatic monologue "invented" by Hemans and "developed" by Webster, but also reveals the particular value women poets found in the genre: not the possibility of speaking with authority and power, as is often assumed of women's dramatic monologues, but the means of speaking "impossibility."

“Impossible speech” is Judith Butler’s term for the kind of speech that does not conform to the norms governing “speakability,” and thus the kind of speech that places the speaker’s subject status at risk. As Butler explains, “If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech,” or in ways that cannot be regarded “as the speech of a subject,” then “that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject called into question” (*ES* 136). The current model of dramatic monologue constitutes women’s dramatic monologues as “impossible speech” in two ways: first, by discounting the poems that do not conform to the norms governing generic intelligibility (i.e. the conventions of Browning’s model), which places at risk the subject status of women poets in the genre; secondly, and more subtly, by failing to recognize—and thus rendering illegible, unintelligible, “impossible”—the meanings of women’s conventional dramatic monologues which exceed the genre’s limits of intelligibility. For instance, the current model renders illegible and impossible those meanings which go beyond the conventions of Browning’s model (*viz.* the poet’s ironization of the speaker, the reader’s tension between sympathy and judgment, or the speaker’s unwitting character revelation) which Hemans’s, Webster’s, and Levy’s dramatic monologues all do. By re-theorizing the dramatic monologue through women poets, the purpose of this study is thus not simply to claim poetic invention for women poets, but to render visible, legible, intelligible, *possible*, the innovations, affiliations, influences, strategies, and meanings of women’s poems which are repressed, discounted, excluded or effaced from the current theorization of the form.

Chapter 2

Re/membering Ophelia: The Dilemma of Gender and Genre

In the opening of Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience* (1957; rptd. 1963), arguably still the "single most influential study" (Shires 97) of the dramatic monologue, Ophelia appears briefly, standing only long enough to utter six words taken from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922):

I can connect
Nothing with nothing. (3.301-2)

Spoken by "Eliot's modern equivalent for Ophelia, after she has been seduced," these words epitomize for Langbaum the modern pathos of alienation, of "emancipa[tion] to the point of forlornness," out of which the dramatic monologue is born (1). As Langbaum explains:

Ophelia is pathetic because her inability to make connections is a sign of madness. But the inability of Eliot's ruined lady to make connections is a sign of the times. It expresses perfectly the meaning of *The Waste Land*, as of all those poems and novels which ring most poignantly of the new age. (1-2)

Speaking for the age, however, Ophelia no longer speaks for herself. By displacing her words from her specific dramatic situation in the poem ("after she has been seduced") to the general modern condition, Langbaum disconnects Ophelia from her own history, her own story—indeed, from her own inability to make connections which leads to her madness and her death. Moreover, by disconnecting Ophelia from her story, Langbaum disconnects her from her body: from the sexed body that was "seduced" and the gendered body ("Eliot's ruined lady") that speaks. Ophelia thus "expresses perfectly" for me the dilemma of gender and genre for women poets writing the dramatic monologue. Written by a male poet, "spoken" by a male critic, Ophelia speaks in Langbaum's study for a

male tradition of poetry whose theorization begins only once she has left the stage. As other critics have noted, Langbaum's theory of the "poetry of experience" in general and of the dramatic monologue in particular is derived entirely from men's poems. And though women's dramatized voices may appear in theories of the genre, since they proliferate in men's monologues, women's actual poetic voices remain conspicuously absent (Scheinberg, "Recasting" 174).

While this absence of women poets from Langbaum's study of 1957 and from the early theories of the dramatic monologue is unsurprising, since the active recovery of women poets would not begin for another decade and would not begin to alter the canon of Victorian poetry for another three, the continued neglect of women poets by critics who should have benefited from those three decades of recovery has seemed inexplicable to some.¹ Elizabeth Howe's *The Dramatic Monologue* (1996) and W. David Shaw's *Origins of the Monologue* (1999) have both been censured by more recent critics for acknowledging only two Victorian women poets between them, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, neither of whom wrote many monologues at all. Glennis Byron, for example, criticizes Howe for granting space, and then only a page, to only one pre-twentieth-century woman poet, Rossetti, and criticizes Shaw for "remaining strangely silent on that key Victorian woman writer of monologues, Augusta Webster" ("Rethinking" 79). However, when we review the history of women poets in the theorization of the form, their continued exclusion seems less inexplicable, since it seems sanctioned by the same critics who seek to recover them.

¹ If *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* can be taken as indicative if not representative of the canon, then it is not until its eighth edition in 2000 that any Victorian woman poet other than Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), or Emily Brontë (1818-1848) appears under its auspices, those being Michael Field (the composite poetic identity of Katherine Bradley [1846-1914] and Edith Cooper [1862-1913]) and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge (1861-1907).

The first study to examine women's dramatic monologues, Dorothy Mermin's "The Damsel, the Knight and the Victorian Woman Poet" (1986), concludes from its analysis of the few dramatic monologues written by Barrett Browning and Rossetti that "the women's dramatic monologues are different from the men's" (75):

The women seem usually to sympathize with their protagonists, and neither frame them with irony as Browning does nor distance and at least partly objectify them like Tennyson by using characters with an independent literary existence. The women did not find figures in literature or mythology or history through whom they could express in an apparently dramatic and impersonal manner feelings that they did not wish directly to avow. Nor do they show off their own virtuosity the way Browning does in "My Last Duchess," for instance: we are not made aware of the poet signalling to us from behind the speaker's back. Once again, that is, we find that where men's poems have two sharply differentiated figures—in dramatic monologues, the poet and the dramatized speaker—in women's poems the two blur together. (75-76)

Mermin thus defines women's dramatic monologues not simply as "different" from men's, but in opposition to and as the negation of the male standard set by Browning and Tennyson. "The women's dramatic monologues" are defined not in terms of what they do, but in terms of what they do not do: they do not "frame [their speakers] with irony as Browning does nor distance and at least partly objectify them like Tennyson"; they "did not find figures in literature or mythology or history"; "[n]or do they show off their own virtuosity the way Browning does" (75).

To be sure, Mermin's larger argument makes clear that her analysis of women's dramatic monologues is not for the purpose of theorizing genre, but of theorizing gender; the purpose of Mermin's essay is not to theorize the dramatic monologue but to examine the difficulty women poets had in finding a "place where a woman could situate herself without self-contradiction" and from which she could speak (64). As indicated by the phrase "once again" in the above passage, women's dramatic monologues furnish but one

instance of this among others examined in the essay. As Mermin argues, “For a man, writing poetry meant an apparent withdrawal from the public sphere” which was often symbolized by projecting his artistic self onto a female figure. In contrast, the woman poet could not “simply reverse the roles in her poetry and create a comparable male self-projection, since the male in this set of opposites is defined as experienced, complexly self-conscious, and part of the public world and therefore could not serve as a figure for the poet” (68). On the other hand, for the woman poet to create a female self-projection, as male poets do, would be to risk collapsing her poetic and personal voices into one, returning her to the very sphere she is attempting to escape. The Victorian woman poet thus found herself caught, argues Mermin, between “two mutually exclusive and equally unsuitable literary roles”: the role of damsel, which is “precluded by the need for activity and self-assertion,” and the role of knight, which is “precluded by gender” (64). Hence it is that “a man’s poem which contains a female self-projection shows two distinctly different figures, poet and projection,” while “in a woman’s poem on the same model, the two would blur into one” (68). And hence it is “once again” (75) that we find in women’s dramatic monologues the blurring of poet and speaker which Mermin finds throughout women’s poetry in general.

Yet this focus on gender at the expense of genre, rather than absolving Mermin from the exclusion of women poets, leads her directly to it. By setting women poets apart from and in opposition to the dominant tradition of the dramatic monologue, described as the legacy of Browning and Tennyson, Mermin implicitly sanctions the exclusion of women poets from subsequent theorizations of the form. Similarly, in another important study, Isobel Armstrong’s *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (1993),

Armstrong reinforces this separation of men and women's dramatic monologues both implicitly, by isolating women poets in a chapter of their own, and explicitly, by isolating them in a "tradition of their own," as indicated by the title of that chapter: "'A Music of Thine Own': Women's Poetry—an Expressive Tradition?" Whereas men's dramatic monologues are linked in her study to dramatic theories of poetry, which comprise the "analytical, detached, dramatic rendering of feeling" (145), women's are aligned with an expressive tradition that is associated, in contrast, with "complete psychological identification with feeling" (145). As these descriptions of the two traditions reveal, the dramatic poem is not necessarily opposed to the expressive poem, since both assume "the projection of feeling and emotion onto or into an object" (326); indeed, according to Armstrong, Victorian dramatic theories of poetry evolved directly out of expressive theories. Rather, it is the relation of men's and women's dramatic monologues to the expressive tradition which marks the difference between them. While women's use of the mask emerges for Armstrong as an extension of the expressive tradition, just one of the strategies by which women poets both explored and exploited "the poem of the affective moment" (332), be it as "the vehicle of hidden emotion" (337) or as the vehicle of cultural critique (332), men's dramatic monologues evolve as a reaction against the expressive tradition, marking the moment at which "the expressive poem becomes the anti-expressive poem" (145).

Once again, however, Armstrong's aim, like Mermin's, is not to theorize genre but to theorize gender—not the dramatic monologue but women's poetic tradition. Consequently, beyond her generalizations about women poets' use of the mask, her classification of certain poems by Letitia Landon (1802-1838) and Felicia Hemans as

dramatic monologues, and her assertion that “it was the women poets who ‘invented’ the dramatic monologue” (326), Armstrong neither explores the generic relationship between women’s use of the mask and the dramatic monologue nor explains her classification of their poems within the genre. Perhaps most significantly, Armstrong leaves undefended her bold assertion about the dramatic monologue’s new origins in women’s dramatic poetry, while her isolation of women’s poetry in a “tradition of their own” endorses once again their continued exclusion from the dominant tradition of the form.

This isolation of women poets into a separate tradition of their own by two influential critics of women’s poetry explains (in part) the subsequent exclusion of women poets by critics whose aim is not to theorize gender in genre, but genre alone (such as Shaw and Howe). However, it does not explain the continued exclusion of women poets by critics whose express aim is to re-theorize the dramatic monologue through women poets. Both Cynthia Scheinberg and Glennis Byron set out to “recast” and “rethink” the dramatic monologue, respectively, yet both reinscribe the traditional narrative which begins with Browning and which, both acknowledge, is predicated on women’s exclusion. The answer, I suggest, lies in the genealogy of the dramatic monologue in the Foucauldian sense: not the history of the genre presented as an objective account of its origins and development, but a history of the discursive constitution of the genre’s origins and development, an account of the conditions which enabled this particular narrative of the genre’s history to prevail.

I. The Dilemma of Genre

For most critics, Tennyson was the first to write, and Browning the first to publish, a dramatic monologue. As the story goes, Tennyson composed “St. Simeon Stylites” in 1833, when he read it to a group of friends, but did not publish it until 1842, in *Poems*. In the meantime, Browning had written “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” in 1834, and published the pair in the *Monthly Repository* for 1836 under the title “Madhouse Cells.” The determination of these three poems as the first dramatic monologues is based on the presence in all three of the features deemed essential to “full-fledged” dramatic monologues. In turn, the features deemed essential to the form have been derived in every case—“derived empirically,” in Benjamin Fuson’s words (10)—from a study of Browning’s poems. Thus, on the basis of the features derived from Browning’s poems, the prevailing account of the dramatic monologue’s origins holds that Browning and Tennyson invented the genre “simultaneously but independently” in the 1830s. However, due to the presence in Tennyson’s “St. Simeon Stylites” of the essential features derived from Browning’s poems, Tennyson is regarded as having technically invented the genre first.

Contesting this creationist narrative of spontaneous invention is the evolutionist account of the genre’s origins: Browning and Tennyson did not “invent” the genre, but “developed” and “perfected” it from earlier literary precedents. Suspicious of the proposed “coincidence” that Browning and Tennyson both “arrived at the same form and produced at first try dramatic monologues so perfect that they were never themselves to surpass them,” Langbaum reasons: “We must look for precedents; we must suspect that they inherited a form which required only one more step in its development to achieve

the objectivity they desired” (73-74). As with the first narrative, however, the search for origins begins with the feature deemed essential to the form. Each search therefore yields a different result, a different literary precedent, depending on the feature privileged by each critic. For Langbaum, for example, the “key to the poem’s form” (80) is the reader’s “willingness” to suspend moral judgment in order to understand, even sympathize with the reprehensible speakers of the dramatic monologue. Accordingly, the form originates for him in the romantic lyric’s process of self-objectification by which the poet imaginatively projects himself into an external object, often nature, in order to understand it and thereby himself. As Langbaum puts it, “to understand an object, the romanticist needs to *be* it” (18). For Alan Sinfield, in contrast, for whom the split between poet and speaker is the *sine qua non* of the dramatic monologue, there is “no essential difference of form” (42) between the dramatic monologue, the ancient rhetorical exercise of prosopopoeia, the eighteenth-century monodrama, the Greek or Renaissance pastoral complaint, the dramatic epistle, or the humorous colloquial monologue, each of which therefore becomes a possible literary precedent. Indeed, erasing these generic boundaries, Sinfield “prefer[s] to consider all first-person poems where the speaker is indicated not to be the poet as dramatic monologue” (43).² Still yet, Shaw’s emphasis on the genre’s “status as ventriloquized lyric” finds a much later literary precedent in the novelistic convention of free indirect discourse, on the one hand (70), while on the other, his induction of the apostrophe as a new criterion of the dramatic monologue leads him to

² Sinfield’s argument closely follows Fuson’s in this respect. In *Browning and His English Predecessors in the Dramatic Monolog* (sic) (1948), Fuson argues that it is the element of “objectivity,” the split between the poet and the speaker, that “is the *sine qua non* of a dramatic monolog” (sic) (15). Accordingly, he locates the genre’s origins in any poetic form that shares this particular trait, from the imaginary verse letter exemplified by Ovid’s *Heroides* (23) to the eclogues of Theocritus and Vergil (25) to the epithalamion of Catullus (29).

locate the form's "genesis" in the "double auditors" of romantic elegies, odes, and conversation poems (63).

Ironically, this protracted debate over the genre's origins leads Herbert F. Tucker, Jr. to reassert the *Victorian* dramatic monologue as "a new kind of poem" altogether ("Monomania" 122), one which is decidedly modern and distinct from older forms. For Tucker, what is distinct about the Victorian dramatic monologue is the "author's fencing with" or "fencing in" the "mode of romantic lyricism that the belated Victorian poet both covets and fears" ("Monomania" 123). And yet, undercutting this assertion of the genre's distinctiveness is Tucker's earlier admission that one would be "hard pressed to prove" that poems as diverse as Wordsworth's "The Thorn," Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," Milton's "L'Allegro," and Chaucer's prologue to *The Wife of Bath's Tale* are "less dramatic monologues than are scores of poems by Browning, a double handful by Tennyson, and memorable essays in poetic impersonation by Arnold, Meredith, Swinburne, and others" ("Monomania" 122).

As this brief overview reveals, the performative nature of genre makes impossible any consensus on the dramatic monologue's origins where no consensus on its form exists.³ Contesting the appearance of consensus presented by literary dictionaries like M.H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, whose definition of the dramatic monologue has not changed significantly in its most recent edition of 2005 from its first edition of 1957, nor changed substantively from H. Buxton Forman's first description of

³ By proposing the performative nature of genre (not just the dramatic monologue, but genre itself), I am extending Adena Rosmarin's argument, put forward in *The Power of Genre* (1985), for a "pragmatic" rather than representational theory of genre. Whereas a representational theory assumes that genres pre-exist the literary text, and the critic's task is to fit the text to the correct genre, a pragmatic theory holds that genres are devised by the critic for a particular interpretive purpose: to explain texts that are different as if they were similar in order to make classification possible; for it is classification that, for Rosmarin, "enables criticism to begin" (22).

the genre in 1869, each of the dramatic monologue's key features has been repudiated, reprioritized or replaced in the century-long course of the genre's multiple theorizations. According to Abrams, the key features of the form are as follows: (1) a speaker who is, in Abrams's words, "patently *not* the poet," and who "utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment" (Abrams thus collapses three features—dramatic persona, utterance, and dramatic situation—into one); (2) an implied auditor who is present but silent; and (3) the unwitting self-revelation of the speaker's temperament and character (70). Yet promptly destabilizing this definition is Abrams's immediate dismissal of the second feature, the presence of a silent auditor, on the grounds that Browning omits this convention in some of his monologues. By Abrams's account, then, only the first and third features are "necessary conditions" of the dramatic monologue, while the third feature of self-revelation constitutes the genre's "organizing principle" (70).

Many critics agree with Abrams on the auditor's superfluity (Langbaum; Culler; Martin; Howe), though equally as many disagree (Knoepfmacher; Mermin; Maynard; Shaw). For Langbaum, for instance, it makes "little difference, as long as the speaker's attention is directed outward, whether the dramatic monologue has or has not an ostensible auditor" (187), just as, for Loy D. Martin, the auditor's physical presence in the poem is unnecessary since "all dramatic monologues at least fantasize a listener" (133). For Mermin, on the other hand, auditors are essential for pointing up the status of the monologue as a representation of speech (*Audience* 2), for making manifest the speaker's power and freedom (*Audience* 48), and for acting as an analogue of the reader that the poet desires or fears (*Audience* 8). Accordingly, Mermin challenges the view that

the auditor is insignificant to the form by asking: if auditors “have so little real function, matter so much less than their prominence in the poems seems to indicate, then why are they there at all?” (*Audience* 13-14). Yet even Mermin seems to concede the auditor’s redundancy in the poem when she admits that the presence of auditors only “doubles the emphasis on communication that is already implicit in the form,” or when she concludes that a “dramatic monologue with or without an auditor is a performance: it requires an audience” (*Audience* 11). Similarly, Shaw’s complex theory of hidden auditors seems to double the auditor’s redundancy in replacing the real auditors in the poem with invisible or “ideal” auditors in the speaker’s mind, such as God or the speaker’s ideal self. Furthermore, that neither Mermin nor Shaw would disqualify a poem for absenting the auditor seems to return us to the very position which their theories of auditors contest, that the auditor’s actual presence in a dramatic monologue is superfluous since all dramatic monologues at least fantasize a listener.⁴

Even the two “necessary conditions” named in Abrams’s account eventually go the way of auditors in the dramatic monologue’s various theorizations. The feature of unwitting self-revelation, which is for many critics the “organizing principle” of the dramatic monologue for distinguishing it from its nearest relative, the dramatic lyric, is called into question by postmodern critics for its essentialist assumptions. As Byron explains:

The main problem with readings that emphasise revelation of character is the supposition that it is the reader’s task to identify some essential character which might be revealed, either consciously or unconsciously, through the monologue. Such readings make a number of assumptions

⁴ E. Warwick Slinn offers a useful middle ground: “In a simple sense, a dramatic monologue may be any poem that expresses the views of a speaker who is not the author; but the presence of an auditor in an otherwise lyrical expression—particularly when that auditor is addressed, provoking the social requirements of speech—makes the poem dramatic in nature” (80).

that many would now find questionable about the stability of the 'self' and the priority of this self to language. Language is seen to speak for some authentic character rather than the originating and authentic self being seen as an effect of language. (*Dramatic Monologue* 25)

Replacing the essential self in postmodernist readings is the textual self: the "de- and re-constructed selves strung on the tensions of their texts" (Tucker, "Dramatic" 23). As Tucker puts it, "texts do not come from speakers, speakers come from texts," and to "assume in advance that a poetic text proceeds from a dramatically situated speaker is to risk missing the play of verbal implication whereby character is engendered in the first place through colliding modes of signification; it is to read so belatedly as to arrive only when the party is over" ("Dramatic" 33). It is this textualization of the self that makes for Tucker the modernity of the genre, making the dramatic monologue "preeminently a text of the modern self" ("Monomania" 134). In *speaking* their pieces, he argues, Browning's protagonists "hand the initiative of unmediated subjectivity over to language, to context, and thus to history" ("Monomania" 125), and by "placing the self into context," the dramatic monologue places the self "into question" ("Monomania" 136).

Yet in spite of the postmodernist refashioning of the self, the essential self continues to haunt theories of the genre, as exemplified by Shaw's recent study. In an attempt to evade the threat of essentialism, Shaw turns from the conscious motivations of deliberate liars like Browning's Mr. Sludge and Fra Lippo Lippi to the unconscious motivations of self-deceivers like Browning's Andrea del Sarto and Tennyson's St. Simeon Stylites. Though all wear masks of deception, argues Shaw, the deliberate liars assume that "the mask's removal will reveal a fully achieved identity," while the masks of "bad faith" or unconscious lying worn by the self-deceivers "hide dark truths and hidden powers of which the speakers themselves are never fully conscious" (8). Thus,

Shaw argues, it is only in the course of an unconscious liar's monologue that a "repressed self" may "begin to swim into focus for the speaker" (8). However, such a turn from conscious liars to unconscious ones seems only to replace the "masked self" of the former with the "repressed self" of the latter—less knowing but no less essential selves for all that. In other words, to repeat Byron's criticism, the task of the reader is still "to identify some essential character which might be revealed, either consciously or unconsciously, through the monologue" (*DM* 25).

Finally, the one seemingly irreducible feature of the dramatic monologue, the opposition between poet and persona, has been similarly challenged by critics proposing a more complex relationship between the two. Notwithstanding the first law of New Criticism, which holds that all speakers are, to borrow Abrams's phrase, "patently not the poet," the prestige of this feature in theories of the dramatic monologue stems from its status as sole guarantor of the genre's "dramatic principle" (to borrow Browning's)—for transforming, in other words, the personal "I" of the dramatic lyric into the dramatic "I" of the dramatic monologue.⁵ Even so, Sinfield destabilizes the opposition between poet and persona in the dramatic monologue by positioning its "I" at any point along a continuum between the personal "I" of first-person lyric and the impersonal voice of third-person narrative (25). In other words, the poet may fully identify with or endorse the speaker's position in Sinfield's account of the genre. This continuum thus makes possible varying proportions of sympathy and judgment which remain unrecognized or undervalued by earlier theories that focus on reprehensible speakers, most notably Langbaum's.

⁵ Browning had famously insisted of his dramatic monologues that "[s]uch poems" were always "[d]ramatic in principle"—"so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine."

Loy D. Martin goes even further in denying the dramatic claim of not-I by asserting that the “inferred division between poet and speaker is not in itself essential to the dramatic monologue” (110). Rather, Martin suggests, the poet and speaker are at once “both different and the same”:

The division between the voice of the poet and the voice of the imaginary speaker is based on a reader’s willingness to construe them both equally as ‘persons.’ If these persons are imagined to be corporeal, then they must be discrete, mutually excluding entities. But if they are voices and merely voices, can they not in some sense be both different and the same? (110)

Glennis Byron therefore concludes in her own review of the debate that “the form is now considered to allow for various positionings of the speaking subject with respect to the writing poet” (*DM* 19).

And yet, once again, this position is challenged by the same critics who made it possible. Martin’s bold assertion that the separation between poet and persona is not “in itself essential” to the form is qualified by his disclaimer that such an argument “is not a refutation but rather a complication of the traditional assumption” (110). Similarly, Sinfield’s continuum must enforce at least one degree of difference between the poet and the speaker to prevent a dramatic monologue from slipping into the “I” of a full-blown lyric. In other words, the speaker’s voice must be ultimately distinguishable from—“patently not”—the poet’s voice if the dramatic monologue is to maintain its status as a *feint*, as a masquerade of the poet’s voice and not the poet’s own. Indeed, one recalls that it is this formal split between poet and speaker, however “complicated,” in Martin’s words, which constitutes for Sinfield the single essential criterion of the form by which he unites all first-person poems under the banner “dramatic monologue” (Sinfield 43).

II. Unmasking the Dramatic Monologue

This conflicted history of the genre has led one critic to observe wryly that “dramatic monologue” is “a generic term whose practical usefulness does not seem to have been impaired by the failure of literary historians and taxonomists to achieve consensus in its definition” (Tucker, “Monomania” 122-23); another, to anticipate—with optimism—its ultimate dissolution, portending a time when “it may even be useful to treat each monologue *sui generis*” (Shaw 13). Such a history and such a projected future may well lead us to question not only the value but the nature of the value of a generic term that is emptied of generic conventions, that problematizes rather than facilitates classification, that contracts rather than expands a genre’s explanatory power *and yet* continues to be found “practically useful.” We may ask further: if the dramatic monologue is such a “frisky and elusive genre” (Shaw 14), why then do women poets have such difficulty entering its tradition and its theorization? Why, in other words, if no consensus exists on the form’s definition, are women poets often set in opposition to and disqualified from the genre? Moreover, if no consensus exists on the form’s origins, then why do critics continue to oppose the possibility that it began, as Armstrong suggested, with women poets? In short, what persistently debars women poets from a genre that is defined by its openness and indeterminacy?⁶

⁶ Glennis Byron asks a slightly different question to opposite effect: “If the critics have failed to achieve any consensus in discussing the traditional canon of monologues, dominated by Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson, what happens when we begin to include such ‘minor’ writers as Kingsley or such women poets as Augusta Webster?” (2). While my questions explore the implications of the debate for women poets’ admission into the discourse, Byron’s explores the impact which their entry into the discourse would have on the debate. As I argue below, however, if we attempt to answer the latter question without first answering the former, then we risk reinscribing the model we are attempting to “rethink”—which, I argue, Byron inadvertently does.

Part of the answer, I suggest, is that the dramatic monologue is a more stable genre than its history suggests. Contrary to the image of indeterminacy and instability presented by the perennial debates over its origins and essential features, contrary to the conclusion from the most recent study of the form that “[w]hat we now know as the dramatic monologue is a category that embraces a wide and diverse variety of forms” (Byron, *DM 2*), and contrary to the general consensus in the discourse that there fails to be a consensus in its definition, I argue that there is a single model of the dramatic monologue which underpins all the competing theories of the form. In each of these theories, the dramatic monologue is defined by three essential features: it is (1) a first-person poem whose speaker stands in at least one degree of separation from the poet; (2) this external split produces an internal one, a discursive split within the poem; (3) and this discursive split effects an ideological critique, be it of absolute truth (Langbaum), the nature of consciousness (Sinfield), the authentic and authoritative self (Tucker; Armstrong; Bristow), the sovereignty of the Cartesian *cogito* (Martin), cultural institutions and norms (Slinn), or gender ideology and systems (Byron).

The origins of this dramatic monologue can be found in Langbaum’s theory of the “poetry of experience,” in which he turns away from the “exclusive concern with objective criteria” (71) of earlier theories and toward a reader-response model which focuses on the genre’s “effect, its *way of meaning*” (70-72).⁷ According to Langbaum, it is in its effect that the dramatic monologue is “unprecedented” and which “distinguishes it, in spite of mechanical resemblance, from the monologues of traditional poetry” (72).

⁷ Ina Beth Sessions’s taxonomy of four “types” of dramatic monologues, presented in her essay, “The Dramatic Monologue” (1947), epitomizes the early classificatory approach. Other examples include Samuel S. Curry’s *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue* (1908), Robert H. Fletcher’s “Browning’s Dramatic Monologs” (sic) (1908), and Claud Howard’s “The Dramatic Monologue: Its Origin and Development” (1910).

That effect is the one “created by the tension between sympathy and moral judgment” (80) for which Langbaum’s theory is best known, most criticized, and most often mistaken. For this tension between sympathy and judgment is not, as many critics have taken it to be, the purpose of the dramatic monologue for Langbaum; rather, it is for him its “necessary condition” (78) and “primary law” (101)—what “generates the effect characteristic of the dramatic monologue” (101) and not the effect itself. What his larger argument makes clear is that the effect which is “peculiarly the genius of the dramatic monologue” (80) is the “historicizing and psychologizing of judgment” (91), the critique of absolutist notions of truth. As Langbaum explains, “we adopt a man’s point of view and the point of view of his age in order to judge him, which makes the judgment relative, limited in applicability to the particular conditions of the case” (102). The poet’s use of the dramatic monologue, with its dramatization of a speaker *in extremis*, is thus for the purpose of revealing not that “the judgments of the poem are a matter of opinion,” but that our judgments depend on sympathy, on “what we understand of them [the speakers] as people—their motives, sincerity and innate moral quality” (110). In short, through the reader’s suspension of moral judgment for the sake of sympathetic identification and understanding, the reader learns from the dramatic monologue that “no point of view is identifiable with the truth” (130).

Returning Langbaum’s proposed tension between sympathy and judgment to its place within his larger theory of “the poetry of experience” enables us to recognize the schema of every theory to follow his and, consequently, the hitherto unrecognized critical consensus on the form. The schema is as follows: the formal split between poet and speaker produces a discursive split within the poem, which in turn effects an ideological

critique. Hence, for Langbaum, the poet's adoption of a persona enables him to inhabit an extraordinary point of view radically split from his own. This formal split between poet and speaker produces a discursive split within the poem, that between the speaker's meaning and the poem's meaning. As Langbaum explains, "[w]e understand the speaker's point of view not through his description of it but indirectly, through seeing what he sees while judging the limitations and distortions of what he sees. The result is that we understand, if not more, at least something other than the speaker understands" (142). What we understand from this process of experience is that "no point of view is identifiable with the truth" (130), and this critique of truth is for Langbaum the purpose and genius of the form.

The same schema is discernible in Sinfield's theory, which asserts at least one degree of difference between poet and persona. This formal split, however slight for Sinfield, prevents a dramatic monologue from slipping into the personal "I" of a full-blown lyric, in which the speaker is identifiable, while not identical, with the poet. The external split between poet and speaker in turn produces a "divided consciousness" within the poem: "we are obliged to posit simultaneously the speaking 'I' and the poet's 'I'" (32). For Sinfield, this "divided consciousness" in the poem calls into question the subjective-objective dichotomy which structures traditional views of consciousness, a critique which fulfills the third criterion of the schema. The dramatic monologue, in being simultaneously subjective and objective, "lurking" as it does anywhere on Sinfield's continuum between the poet's "I"-figure of first-person lyric and the impersonal voice of third-person narrative, challenges the "integrity and sincerity" (59) of

the subjective “I” of the romantic lyric while denying the fully objective “I” of externalized character (64).

Similarly, for Tucker, the dramatic monologue’s characteristic split between poet and speaker produces a “discursive shift” in the poem between the genre’s two “constitutive modes,” the lyric and narrative history (“Dramatic” 25). While pure lyric “distempers character and robs it of contour” by isolating the self from context, pure history threatens “to unravel character by exposing it as merely a tissue of affiliations” (“Dramatic” 24). By “enfolding” the lyric voice “within narrative history,” the dramatic monologue “safeguard[s] the self’s prerogatives” (“Dramatic” 22-23) by checking the “choral dissolution that lurks in lyric voice” and referring us “to the textual production of character instead” (“Dramatic” 28). In other words, it saves the self by turning it over to history, transforming the authentic and autonomous self into a “speaking subject who is tethered to circumstances” (26). Thus, for Tucker, the dramatic monologue effects a critique not of consciousness, as it had for Sinfield, but of the self—in particular, the “Romantic self,” with its claims of “subjective authenticity and sincere spontaneity” (“Monomania” 124). Armstrong explains it this way: by rooting psychological states in history, the dramatic monologue enacts a

critique of constitutive modern structures, religious, economic and sexual, which create diseased subjectivity and the madness of individualism. The reader is forced from one kind of recognition to the other, from the perception of diseased subjectivity to an analysis of its cultural form, because the poems parody expressive lyric. (146)

The list goes on: for E. Warwick Slinn, the discursive split within the poem is produced by its “referential aberration,” its simultaneous reference to “both inside and outside” the poem (23), both formal text and social context. This “discursive conflict”

makes possible a cultural critique of social practices, norms, institutions and ideologies by fictionalizing the practices which are the object of critique “within a structure that foregrounds their activity” (26). As Slinn explains,

The action by which speakers in poems constitute themselves and their world sets boundaries and reiterates norms, but the means by which poetic language at the same time foregrounds that action has the potential to disrupt those norms, to expose or at least mark their boundary-setting potential. Through fixing cultural process in language, objectifying the moment through circumscribing its verbal form, poetry may enact that confusion of reference or exposure of incoherence that is at once formalist display and cultural critique. (26-27)

So too for Byron does the dramatic monologue’s “dynamic of self and context” serve the “purposes of social critique,” particularly for women poets (“Rethinking” 85). By placing their fictionalized speakers within contemporary society rather than historical and mythological contexts, as men’s monologues do, women poets turn their critique from the nature of the self to the “problems and concerns of their own worlds”; they target “the systems that produce the speakers,” argues Byron, rather than “the speakers themselves” (“Rethinking” 86-97).

Indeed, even Martin, who is the only critic to argue that the formal split between poet and speaker “is not in itself essential to the dramatic monologue” (22), reproduces the Langbaumian schema in his theory of the “the doubleness or bifurcation of the text” (112). Though the division between speaker and poet is for Martin “only one version of the essential doubleness of the monologue” (110-11), it is the only one he mentions in his theory, and thus the only one in his theory to produce the “discursive splitting or textual bifurcation” (112) which he claims is essential to the genre. And though Martin maintains that it is this discursive splitting that alone distinguishes the dramatic monologue, and “not any of its particular effects” (112), it is precisely the effect of this

splitting, the fragmentation of the self, that is the subject of his discussion, as highlighted by his chapter title, “The Divided Subject.” Thus, “what gives the dramatic monologue its form” for Martin is “the struggle between the subjective as homogeneous ‘true person’ and as heterogeneous and ‘disappearing’ moment of speech” (31). And thus, what the dramatic monologue challenges through its textual bifurcation, fulfilling the third criterion of Langbaum’s schema, is “the immense prestige of the Cartesian dualism of the self and the other”; the dramatic monologue effects a critique of, “lays siege to,” the “sovereignty of the *Cogito* as a basis for subjectivity” (28).

III. The Dilemma of Gender

What emerges from this critical history, then, is a decided consensus on the definition of the dramatic monologue: the dramatic monologue consists of three causally related features: (1) an external, formal split between poet and speaker, which effects (2) a discursive split within the poem, which effects (3) an ideological critique that is the purpose of the form. My point here is not to diminish these complex theories of the genre, but to demonstrate firstly that a critical consensus on the genre’s definition indeed exists; secondly, that it is in part the strict adherence to this unacknowledged definition that has debarred women poets from the genre’s theorization—in some cases, from the genre itself. The clearest example of this lies in Byron’s refutation of Armstrong’s suggestion that women poets invented the genre. Taking Hemans’s “Properzia Rossi” (1828) as a “test case” for the theory, since the poem predates the “first” dramatic monologues by Browning and Tennyson by five years, Byron acknowledges the presence of all three of the above features in Hemans’s poem, but disqualifies it from the genre for

the absence of a causal relationship between them. While she concedes that (1) Hemans distances herself from the poem's speaker through time and place; (2) that a discursive split exists between the poem's meaning and the speaker's meaning, since she accepts Anne Mellor's argument that Hemans's poems "contain not only a celebration of a particular notion of female subjectivity but also a critique of its assumptions" (84); and thus (3) that the poem effects an ideological critique of the nature of female subjectivity; she disqualifies "Properzia Rossi" from the genre for failing to use the dramatic speaker *for the purpose* of that critique. Byron argues: "it is not . . . the specific form and conventions of the dramatic monologue that seem to effect this critique; Hemans's use of dramatised speakers instead appears to function in the service of the celebration of the hegemonic inscription of woman" ("Rethinking" 84). More precisely, Byron disqualifies Hemans's monologue for failing to conform to the model of genre invented or developed (depending on the narrative preferred) by Browning and Tennyson—a model, it bears repeating, which was developed well after Hemans's poem. Though Hemans does place the self in context, Byron argues, she "appears more concerned with producing an essential female alternative to the universalised male self than with critiquing, as Browning and Tennyson do, the grounds upon which that self is produced" (*DM* 55). In other words, Hemans's poem may offer ideological critique, but it is not the one prescribed by the current model of genre. Byron therefore "hesitate[s] to endorse completely" (*DM* 55) the theory that women poets invented the genre, and relegates Hemans's poems in particular to the far side of its borders as "early examples" (*DM* 49),

“precursors” (*DM* 52) or “predecessors” (“Rethinking” 84), but not “dramatic monologues” proper.⁸

The dilemma of genre thus becomes a dilemma of gender. Cynthia Scheinberg puts it this way: “Relying on a model of genre history which has established models based on the work of one, or perhaps two male poets, critics of Victorian poetry run the risk of creating a literary history which can never fully claim women as agents of poetic innovation” (“Recasting” 186). On the one hand, as demonstrated by Mermin’s and Armstrong’s studies of women’s poetry, discussed above, one problem posed by gender is the threat of essentialism that arises whenever women poets are isolated in a tradition of their own or when, as Scheinberg observes, generic innovation is attributed solely to either gender (“Recasting” 175). On the other hand, when critics attempt to avert the risk of essentialism by reading women poets alongside “more canonized dramatic monologues by men” (“Recasting” 175), they run the opposite risk of subsuming women poets into a tradition predicated on their exclusion. They therefore risk repeating the exclusion they are attempting to redress by excluding those poets and those poems that do not stand so comfortably in the company of “more canonized dramatic monologues by men.” For instance, Scheinberg’s own sensitive analysis, which “recasts” Langbaum’s theory of sympathy and judgment in the light of women’s dramatic monologues, ultimately returns to and reinscribes the traditional model she is attempting to rewrite. Where Langbaum had argued that the “key” to the dramatic monologue’s form—indeed, “a necessary condition of reading the poem”—is the reader’s “willingness” to “understand,” “even to sympathize” with the speaker of the monologue, however

⁸ Byron’s argument for Hemans’s essentialism is examined in detail in chapter two. My only point here is to provide an example of how the unacknowledged consensus on the definition of the dramatic monologue has debarred women poets from the theorization of the genre and, in Hemans’s case, from the genre itself.

reprehensible (Langbaum 78), Scheinberg exposes through her reading of two monologues by Amy Levy the failure of Langbaum's theory to recognize that sympathy and judgment are contingent on a reader's identity. As Scheinberg argues, "The problem in Langbaum's theory is that he never acknowledges how his own identity affects his ability for sympathetic response" ("Recasting" 176)—how, in other words, readers from other cultural, political and gendered positions (like Scheinberg's) might not find in Browning's misogynist Duke of Ferrara the "immense attractiveness" which Langbaum does. However, in "reclaiming" ("Recasting" 179) Langbaum's theory, even while "complicating" and "rejuvenating" ("Recasting" 180) it, Scheinberg inadvertently reinscribes the model of genre upon which Langbaum's theory is built—*viz.*, the model of dramatic monologue defined primarily by Browning and (to a lesser extent) Tennyson.

The point becomes clearer when we ask how Scheinberg came to select these particular poems by Levy to be included in her study of the dramatic monologue. Which criteria, in other words, have these poems fulfilled to qualify as "dramatic monologues" and for Scheinberg to name them as such? The question aims to highlight the problem of theorizing gender within genre without first theorizing genre—without first examining, in other words, the generic model and criteria determining our selection of women's texts upon which our re-theorization of genre will be built. Such a practice risks reinscribing the existing model of genre by admitting for generic analysis only those poems that conform to that model—in the case of the dramatic monologue, poems that look, act, or speak like Browning's. The question is a crucial one for any study proposing to theorize women's dramatic monologues or to re-theorize the genre through women's texts, for it foregrounds the way in which our selection of texts for generic analysis is determined not

simply by our own critical identities—by our own “ideological, social and literary commitments” (Scheinberg, “Recasting” 178)—but more subtly, by the critical identities and commitments we inherit. For instance, Scheinberg acknowledges that her choice of Levy’s texts reflects her own feminist commitments and assumptions about literary value (179), just as the choice by preceding critics to represent an entire genre by only male writers reflects their own ideological commitments and assumptions (178). However, she fails to recognize how her selection of Levy’s texts is itself influenced by those prior commitments and assumptions which clearly contradict her own.

For critics theorizing women’s dramatic monologues, the “dilemma of gender” thus lies in the contradictory desires to maintain the existing (male) tradition, on the one hand, in order to avoid the essentialism of isolating women poets in a tradition of their own; and, on the other, to rewrite the tradition in order to recognize women’s poetic innovations. In practice, this contradiction leads the critic to re-theorize the genre on the basis of poems by women which already conform to the existing tradition. The dilemma of gender for women poets, in consequence, is that this critical practice effects a second silence, admitting into the discourse on the dramatic monologue only those poems that already answer to its name. Byron’s theory of women’s dramatic monologues—in fact, the only theory of women’s dramatic monologues to date—clearly illustrates this dilemma. Unable to reconcile these contradictory desires to both maintain and rewrite the existing tradition of the dramatic monologue, Byron finds herself caught in a series of contradictions. Disavowing gender difference, Byron objects to “one editor’s unfortunate choice of words” in the phrase “womanly dramatic monologue” (“Rethinking” 85), while Byron’s preferred choice of words, “women’s use of the dramatic monologue,” retains

the difference she disavows. Both phrases clearly point to a particular version of the genre developed and deployed by women poets—a particular use of the form, in other words, that is differentiated by the poet's gender. Indeed, Byron's theory is formulated precisely in terms of gender difference: women poets, she asserts, "offer different models of the self and different strategic approaches to that self," though she is quick to point out that they also "always propose and explore a complex, fragmented, and contextualized representation of the subject" ("Rethinking" 85). This added clause is necessary for Byron's disavowal of gender difference, for it enables her to incorporate women poets into the existing model of genre constructed on the basis of Browning's and Tennyson's poems. In other words, as the context of the passage makes clear, women poets do what Browning and Tennyson have always done, and had done first, though they do it differently: "Once Browning and Tennyson have used the monologue to challenge Romantic representations of the self," Byron argues, "they [women poets] and other poets then go on to exploit the form's central dynamic of self and context in various diverse ways" ("Rethinking" 84).

Byron's theory of women's dramatic monologues is thus born out of the contradictory desires to preserve the traditional model of genre history and to simultaneously remap its trajectory. Women poets' use of the dramatic monologue does not constitute a different tradition, Byron insists, but simply a different direction of the existing one: "that line of development which focuses on social critique" ("Rethinking" 85). Yet Byron's insistence on the origins of this "line" in Browning and Tennyson causes her to reroute, rewrite and repress the very connection between women's dramatic monologues and earlier women poets like Hemans which her own theory implies and

instates. Her theory of women's dramatic monologues is defined by the poetic strategies which Mellor had first identified in Hemans's poetry: women's dramatic monologues, argues Byron, "inhabi[t] the conventional in order to expose it" ("Rethinking" 88). This, however, is precisely what Mellor had argued of Hemans's poetry in a passage which Byron herself quotes:

having accepted her culture's hegemonic inscription of the woman within the domestic sphere, Hemans's poetry subtly and painfully explored the ways in which that construction of gender finally collapses upon itself, bringing nothing but suffering, and the voice of nothingness, to both women and men. (Mellor 142)

In an earlier passage, Mellor describes this "critique from within" even more explicitly: situating herself "wholly within the category of feminine domesticity," Hemans provided "a far more complex analysis of the ways in which her culture's construction of gender finally proved destructive to women. . . . [Her poetry] constantly reminds us of the fragility of the very domestic ideology it endorses" (124). Thus, though Byron disqualifies Hemans as "inventor" and even "practitioner" of the dramatic monologue, she instates Hemans as the model for women's dramatic monologues by adopting Hemans's poetic strategies for her own theory of the form. Furthermore, by preserving the traditional model of genre history that begins with Browning and (rather incidentally) Tennyson, Byron represses the debt to Hemans that women's dramatic monologues and her own theory share. Hemans is thus written out of a genre which she, in Byron's theory, had helped to write.

Conclusion: Rewriting History, Re/membering Ophelia

There are, doubtless, many good reasons to begin a theory of the dramatic monologue with Browning. Among those often given: Browning produced the most, the best, the most distinctive dramatic monologues. In fact, the best reason to begin with Browning has been the most common but the least recognized one in the discourse: theories that begin with Browning do so because their purpose is to explain Browning's poetry and to include in the genre more of Browning's poems. Hence, what motivates Langbaum's remodelling of the genre is his objection to prior definitions for failing to "cover all the dramatic monologues of Browning and Tennyson, let alone those of other poets," and for reducing "the best and most famous of all dramatic monologues"—Tennyson's "St. Simeon Stylites" and Browning's "Childe Roland" and "Caliban Upon Setebos"—to the class of inferior "approximations" (69-70). Similarly, Sinfield's reason for taking the broadest definition of the form possible is to "admit to consideration very many poems which do not satisfy all the criteria in the constricting definition" but which "have a good deal in common with Browning's poems" (9). Likewise, Shaw's theory emerges, in part, out of his dissatisfaction with definitions that exclude "such masterpieces" as Browning's "Andrea del Sarto" and Tennyson's "Ulysses" (12-13). Indeed, the express purpose of the first extended analysis of the dramatic monologue, S.S. Curry's *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue* (1908), is to rescue Browning from the charge of obscurity and unintelligibility by elucidating this "new literary form."⁹

⁹ "A New Literary Form" is the first heading of Curry's first chapter, which opens with (and is thus premised on) the unforgettable story of Douglas Jerrold's first encounter with Browning's *Sordello*: "[W]hen recovering from a serious illness, [Jerrold] opened a copy of 'Sordello,' which was among some new books sent to him by a friend. Sentence after sentence brought no consecutive thought, and at last it dawned upon him that perhaps his sickness had wrecked his mental faculties, and he sank back on the sofa, overwhelmed with dismay. Just then his wife and sister entered and, thrusting the book into their hands, he

Thus, though there are many good reasons to begin a theory of the dramatic monologue with Browning, for the purpose of theorizing women's dramatic monologues, there are better reasons not to. As their history in (and out of) the discourse on the dramatic monologue reveals, the adherence to a model of genre that begins with Browning—be it explicitly, as the “inventor” of the form, or implicitly, as the originator of the form's conventions—risks either misreading women's poems as “speaking like men” or re-silencing those that do not. For instance, by imposing onto women poets a generic model written by men—both male poets and critics—we risk reading women's poems according to the values and assumptions by which men's poems are read and judged: we risk misreading women's poetry as a play for the power, authority and control associated with men's poetic voices and assumed to be the objective of women poets. Kate Flint, for example, argues that the dramatic monologue offers women poets “a range of observational stances” from which “they may do the gazing, and judging, and relish in the hidden power which another's voice can give them” (166); Byron, that “[s]peaking in the voice of a dramatized ‘I’ allows women to assume the position of the authoritative speaking subject” (“Rethinking” 81); and Armstrong, that the use of the mask enables the woman writer to be “in control of her objectification” (326).

By beginning from a different beginning, with Hemans rather than Browning, this study seeks to resolve the dilemma of gender and genre for women poets writing the dramatic monologue: the difficulty, on the one hand, of “incorporating” women poets into the existing tradition without swallowing them whole, as it were—without subsuming them into a tradition established by men by reading them as “speaking like

eagerly demanded what they thought of it. He watched them intently, and when at last Mrs. Jerrold exclaimed, ‘I do not understand what this man means,’ Jerrold uttered a cry of relief, ‘Thank God, I am not an idiot!’” (Curry 1).

men”; and the difficulty, on the other, of recognizing and reinstating gender without disconnecting women poets from the existing tradition or descending into the deadlock of essentialism. The problem, in short, is how to both re-member and remember Ophelia. The answer I propose here is that we do so by granting to women poets what has been granted to male poets, particularly Browning, all along: the possibility of poetic innovation, influence, even invention, which comes only when we read women’s poems as though unencumbered by the generic model established after them and in their absence. This is not to suggest that we must erase the existing tradition (even if that were possible) or continue to read women poets in isolation of that tradition; rather, that we must begin with women poets in order to follow whither they lead, and watch how the existing terrain is transformed by their crossings.

Chapter 3

Fantasies of Woman: Subjectivity, Speaking and Survival in Felicia Hemans's Dramatic Monologues

Felicia Hemans offers a unique vantage for re-theorizing the dramatic monologue. Eight years before the appearance of the putative “first” dramatic monologues, Browning’s 1836 pair, “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” and “Porphyria’s Lover,” Hemans published two monologues that look, act and sound a lot like the “full-fledged” dramatic monologues of current critical consensus.¹ “Properzia Rossi” and “Arabella Stuart” both feature a dramatic speaker who is distanced from the poet by time, place, and name; both feature a discursive split within the poem between the speaker’s meaning and the poem’s meaning; and both offer ideological critique in their critique of the nature of femininity. It is perhaps for this reason that so many critics have accepted unquestioningly their status in the genre, first suggested by Isobel Armstrong in support of her provocative claim that “it was the women poets who ‘invented’ the dramatic monologue” (*Victorian Poetry* 326). And yet, in the most recent study of the form, Glennis Byron’s *Dramatic Monologue* (2003), Byron disqualifies Hemans from the genre on the grounds of essentialism, which contradicts for her the form’s “habit,” as Herbert F. Tucker, Jr. puts it, of “placing the self into context and thus into question” (“Monomania” 136). Though Byron acknowledges that Hemans does place the self into context by crossing “boundaries of time, culture, race and class in presenting her speakers” (*DM* 52), she insists that Hemans’s poems “exploit the dynamic of the self in context in a manner

¹ Chapter one has argued that, in spite of continuing debates about the form’s definition, an unacknowledged consensus exists; the dramatic monologue consists of three causally related features: (1) a formal split between poet and speaker, which effects (2) a discursive split within the poem, which effects (3) an ideological critique which is the purpose of the form.

diametrically opposite to the way now considered characteristic of the form”: not to reveal “the fixed and essential self to be in fact fragmented, composite, and the product of a particular set of socio-cultural conditions,” but to reinforce “the idea that, in all times and all places, the essential nature of woman is fixed” (“Rethinking” 84; *DM* 52).

Byron’s argument for Hemans’s essentialism is predicated on the repetition of sentiments, imagery, and even entire sections of verse which occurs across Hemans’s entire *oeuvre*—monologues, lyrics, and narrative poems alike. For example, “Properzia Rossi,” the monologue which serves as Byron’s “test case” (*DM* 4) for Hemans’s status in the genre, repeats Hemans’s recurring theme of the incommensurability of the woman artist’s desire for love and fame as well as the conventional images of femininity which are reproduced throughout her poetry. What is more, “Properzia Rossi” is itself a source of these images in later poems. For instance, Rossi’s denunciation of fame,

Oh, mockery! give the reed
From storms a shelter,—give the drooping vine
Something round which its tendrils may entwine,—
Give the parch’d flower a rain-drop, and the meed
Of love’s kind words to woman! Worthless fame! (81-85)

is closely repeated in “Woman and Fame” (1830):

Fame, Fame! thou canst not be the stay
Unto the drooping reed,
The cool fresh fountain in the day
Of the soul’s feverish need:
Where must the lone one turn or flee?—
Not unto thee—oh! not to thee! (25-30)

Meanwhile, “Woman and Fame” adopts for its opening lines the entire epigraph of “Joan of Arc, in Rheims” (1828), and takes for its own epigraph the final four lines of “Corinna

at the Capitol” (1827).² According to Byron, these “linguistic connections” establish “similarity in difference” between Hemans and her speakers, which conflates poet and persona “through their acceptance of a similar ideology” and “their commitment to an identical female subjectivity” (*DM* 49). In spite of their historical, cultural and class differences, argues Byron, all are united “in a vision of universal womanhood” (*DM* 51). Byron thus concludes that “if” Hemans’s poems “produce types of essential selves, then they are not, ultimately, initiating the more complex exploration of the fragmented and contextualized self that is now seen to be characteristic of the form” (*DM* 55). “That” Hemans’s poems do produce types of essential selves, however, is the sum of Byron’s argument: Hemans “appropriate[s]” women’s voices “only to dissolve difference, eradicate individuality and create the illusion of an essential gendered identity, and, complicit with her culture, identify the essentially feminine as domestic, disinterested and self-sacrificing” (*DM* 52). Hence Byron’s “hesitation” to “endorse completely” Armstrong’s “alternative theory” that women poets “invented” the dramatic monologue (*DM* 55). Hence also her refusal to grant Hemans’s poems the full status of dramatic monologue; while they may be considered “early dramatic monologues, or at least precursors” (*DM* 52) and even “crucial predecessors” (“Rethinking” 84), they are, in fine, not “dramatic monologues” proper.

I argue, in contrast, that the charge of essentialism against Hemans dissolves when we return “Properzia Rossi” to the volume in which it was published and against which it was ostensibly expected to be read, her 1828 collection, *Records of Woman*. Read in context, the two monologues of the volume, “Properzia Rossi” and “Arabella

² Reprinted as “Corinne at the Capitol” in *Songs of the Affections* (1830).

Stuart,” are striking not for their similarity to poems outside of *Records*, the “similarities in difference” which premise Byron’s argument for Hemans’s essentialism and, consequently, her disqualification of Hemans from the genre, but for their dramatic difference from the poems within it: both absent the spectacle of woman compulsively repeated throughout the volume, and both present the women’s speech as unmediated utterance. By investigating these differences, I seek to answer the question of innovation unasked by Byron’s focus on the question of invention, but upon which “invention” necessarily depends: if these poems merely repeat the gesture of Hemans’s lyric and narrative poetry, as Byron suggests, why then does Hemans adopt in “Properzia Rossi” and “Arabella Stuart”—for the first time in her career—both the mask and the monologue form? Why does she offer in these poems the women’s speech as though spoken by the women themselves if it is only to repeat the way in which women have always been spoken in her poetry? What is the effect and what is at stake in this presentation of women as speaking for themselves? I will argue that in these monologues and their differential relation to the rest of the volume, Hemans not only initiates “the more complex exploration of the fragmented and contextualised self,” but also exposes “the illusion of an essential gendered identity.” By interrogating the relationship between subjectivity, spectacle and speaking, Hemans exposes and explodes both the fantasy of woman and the fantasy of the self.

I. Fantasies of Subjectivity

Records of Woman is Hemans’s best-known, best-selling, and most personal book. In six years, it went through multiple editions in both Britain and America, earning

her more than any other single work, and enough to support her family for several years (Mellor 124; Feldman, *RW* xviii). To her publisher, William Blackwood, Hemans described it as “a series of poetic tales entitled Records of Woman, and illustrative of the female character, affections and fate” (qtd. in Feldman, “Poet” 83). This “series of tales” comprises two monologues, three lyric and fourteen narrative poems, each “celebrat[ing] the lives, events, and imagined thoughts of unremembered women in history” (Feldman, *RW* cover). Among them: Arabella Stuart (1575-1615), niece of Mary, Queen of Scots; the unnamed Frau Stauffacher, wife of legendary Werner Stauffacher; Properzia Rossi, sixteenth-century sculptor, musician and poet; Gertrude Von der Wart, wife of a conspirator against Albert I; Joan of Arc (1412-1431), famed fifteenth-century French martyr; and Juana of Aragon, Queen of Castile (1479-1555); in addition to the number of fictional women whose “characters, affections and fate” Hemans re-imagines and “records.” Accordingly, the volume’s project has been variously cast by modern critics as a “vindication” of “woman’s role in history” (Feldman, *RW* xxi); an “exploration” of “what it means to be a woman” (Feldman, *RW* cover); a “celebration of woman” (Byron, “Rethinking” 82); a “representation of female subjectivity” and “domestic subjectivity” (Kelly, “Death” 203, 204); a “display” of “a woman’s subjectivity” (Edgar 126); and an “opportunity” for Hemans’s female readers “to explore and celebrate female subjectivity, plain and simple” (Edgar 128). Though I leave aside the perplexing ambiguity of these adjectives, “plain and simple” (do they modify “female subjectivity” or the exploration of it?), I do wish to interrogate this prevailing view of the volume as an exploration, representation or display of female, domestic, or woman’s subjectivity and to scrutinize the figure of “Woman” that stands at the center of these terms. For it is precisely this

figure of “Woman”—in the singular—that has disqualified Hemans from the dramatic monologue genre.

For most critics, “Woman” is in Hemans’s poetry “categorical and universal” (Wolfson, *Felicia Hemans* 330), “an essential” (Wolfson, “Domestic Affections” 145), and a “depersonalized type” (Byron, *DM* 48) to which the individual women of the volume are reduced: “wife or lover, mother or daughter, they become not so much individuals as abstract categories: they are women who demonstrate their natures through their capacity to love” (Byron, *DM* 48). As Susan Wolfson argues, “In an age of recoil from polemics for women’s rights, Hemans was summoned to idealize the ‘essentially feminine’ as essentially ‘domestic’ and ‘self-sacrificing’” (“Domestic” 131); her poetry thus played the role of idealizing “female gender roles with the aura, and authority, of ‘natural’ foundation” (“Domestic” 128). Though critics including Wolfson generally recognize a more complex critique operating beneath the poems’ surface celebration of “Woman” as an essential, universal and abstract category, the doubleness of Hemans’s poetry continues to be regarded as inextricable from and even predicated on Hemans’s essentialist views of gender. The critique found in Hemans’s poetry is not of the *nature* of woman as essentially maternal, domestic, devoted and self-sacrificing, but of the *effect* of woman’s essential nature on women’s lives. Thus, for Wolfson, Hemans may expose “the failure of domestic ideals” to “sustain and fulfill women’s lives,” but she does so while celebrating the domestic ideals of “fidelity,” “female heroism,” “maternal devotion” and “mighty affection” (“Domestic” 145-47). Moreover, Wolfson discounts any conscious critique in Hemans’s poetry: “Hemans was more the recorder than the deliberate critic of these divided representations” (“Domestic” 141). Similarly, Anne

Mellor finds in Hemans's poetry a "complex analysis of the ways in which her culture's construction of gender finally proved destructive to women," but it is an analysis that is predicated on Hemans's prior commitment to "the enduring value of the domestic affections, the glory and beauty of maternal love, and the lasting commitment of a woman to her chosen mate" (124). For Mellor, it is only after "having accepted her culture's hegemonic inscription of the woman within the domestic sphere" that "Hemans's poetry subtly and painfully explored the ways in which that construction of gender finally collapses upon itself" (142). While the doubleness of Hemans's poetry is thus everywhere remarked, Hemans's essentialism is nowhere questioned; "Woman" is assumed to be for Hemans essentially maternal, domestic, devoted and self-sacrificing, though unfortunately so.

Underwriting this view of Hemans's essentialism is the "remarkable lyricism" (Feldman, *RW* xi) which critics find in the volume and which Hemans personally affirms. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855) dated 23 March 1828, Hemans writes, "I have put my heart and individual feelings into it more than any thing else I have written," a sentiment which she had earlier expressed to her publisher, William Blackwood: "I have other reasons, besides the hope of profit, for wishing to publish this volume, in parts of which I have expressed more of my own personal feelings, than in anything I have ever before written." For many critics, it is this lyricism which undercuts the dramatic distance formally instated by Hemans's third-person narrator and dramatic speakers; it is thus what undermines the irony necessary for Hemans's monologues to attain the status of dramatic monologue. Hence, what disqualifies Hemans from the genre is not simply her construction of "Woman" as an essential and universal category, since her formal

distancing strategies make possible a critique of that category. Rather, what disqualifies her from the genre is the prevailing view among critics that the vision of woman and female subjectivity explored, celebrated, represented and displayed in the volume is Hemans's own. For Chad Edgar, for example, Hemans explores and interrogates in the volume "her own subjectivity" (130); for Byron, Hemans's dramatic speakers are "variations" of her self (*DM* 49); while for Gary Kelly, Hemans's third-person narrator is a "manifestly sympathizing and even autobiographizing narrator" (Kelly, *FH* 47). For each of these critics, then, these poems are not simply "Records of Woman" but records of Hemans's own self—in Byron's words, "variations" on the self which Hemans promoted in her poetry, *viz.* as "the icon of female domesticity" (*DM* 49); in Hemans's own words, records of her own "heart" and "personal feelings."

However, undercutting the volume's manifest essentialism and lyricism is Hemans's construction of a narrator who is frequently debarred from the characters' subjectivities precisely at the moment at which the reader most desires its access: at the height of the characters' emotional and psychological distress. When Pauline rushes into a burning building to rescue her daughter from a fiery death, the narrator teases the reader with questions she is expected to but cannot answer: "Was one brief meeting theirs, one wild farewell? / And died they heart to heart?—Oh! who can tell?" ("Pauline" 71-72). When the "fair-hair'd youth" in "The American Forest Girl" is tied to a stake about to be burned, the narrator stresses her exclusion from the captive's interiority: "but who could tell / Of what within his secret heart befell, / Known but to heaven that hour?" (13-15). Indeed, in the very next poem, the narrator tantalizes the reader with the mystery of Costanza's woe, which "[I]ay like some buried thing, still seen below / The glassy tide"

(“Costanza” 12-13), only to emphasize in nearly identical terms her exclusion from its mystery:

Oh! he that could reveal
What life had taught that chasten'd heart to feel,
Might speak indeed of woman's blighted years,
And wasted love, and vainly bitter tears!
But she had told her griefs to Heaven alone[.] (13-17)

Thus, while Hemans may seem to “explore female subjectivity” in the volume, this surprising and strategic construction of a narrator debarred from that subjectivity in these particular poems calls into question the possibility of accessing—let alone exploring, representing and displaying—another’s subjectivity. Indeed, it calls into further question the nature of the subjectivity seemingly represented and displayed. Excluded from any divine access or knowledge, the narrator can only speculate on “[w]hat life had taught” Costanza; it “might” include “woman’s blighted years,” “wasted love,” and “vainly bitter tears”—“but,” the narrator insists, this is strictly speculation: “she had told her griefs to Heaven alone” (17). Similarly, what images of home and childhood “befell” the captive’s “secret heart” in “The American Forest Girl” are framed by the narrator as pure conjecture:

Perchance a thought
Of his far home then so intensely wrought,
That its full image, pictured to his eye
On the dark ground of mortal agony,
Rose clear as day!—and he might *see* the band
Of his young sisters wand'ring hand in hand,
Where the laburnums droop'd; or haply binding
The jasmine up the door's low pillars winding;
Or, as day closed upon their gentle mirth,
Gathering, with braided hair, around the hearth,
Where sat their mother; and that mother's face
Its grave sweet smile yet wearing in the place
Where so it ever smiled!—Perchance the prayer
Learn'd at her knee came back on his despair;

The blessing from her voice, the very tone
Of her “*Good-night*” might breathe from boyhood gone!
(15-30, original emphasis)

These images, perfect pictures as they seem to be of female subjectivity in “Costanza” and of the domestic ideal in “The American Forest Girl” are not, the poems insist, a “representation” or “display” of the characters’ hearts or minds, for those remain decidedly “secret” in the poems. Rather, as Hemans emphasizes by the narrator’s conjectural language—the repetition of “could,” “might,” “perchance”—these images are the narrator’s *projections* of female subjectivity and the domestic ideal, fantasies of that subjectivity and ideal which are projected out of the narrator’s absence of knowledge onto and *as* the characters’ subjectivities. Indeed, far from “representing” female subjectivity, which implies a correspondence to reality, these fantasies of subjectivity are placed by Hemans in direct opposition to reality. In “Costanza,” the “chasten’d heart,” “blighted years,” “wasted love,” and “vainly bitter tears” imagined by the narrator explicitly exceed the narrator’s bounds of knowledge. The narrator insists, “of the gentle saint no more was known, / Than that she fled the world’s cold breath, and made / A temple of the pine and chestnut shade” (18-20). In “The American Forest Girl,” reality is not “represented” in the narrator’s images of the captive’s childhood, but is rather what breaks into the narrator’s musings; the fantasy of the voice and tone of the imagined mother breaks off with a dash, dispelled by the captive’s movements, which recall the narrator to the scene before him:

He started and look’d up:—thick cypress boughs
Full of strange sound, wav’d o’er him, darkly red
In the broad stormy firelight;—savage brows,
With tall plumes crested and wild hues o’erspread,
Girt him like feverish phantoms; and pale stars

Look'd thro' the branches as thro' dungeon bars,
Shedding no hope. (31-37)

Undeniably, the images of female subjectivity and the domestic ideal projected by the narrator recur throughout Hemans's *oeuvre* and throughout *Records of Woman*. For instance, in "Edith, a Tale of the Woods," Edith imagines, on the brink of death, a scene of reunion similar to the one projected by the unknowing narrator above: "There will my sisters be, / And the dead parents, lisp[ing] at whose knee / My childhood's prayer was learn'd" ("Edith" 180-82). This same scene is repeated, though in reverse, in the opening of "Madeline, a Domestic Tale"; there, it is the mother who imagines the lost voice and tone of her daughter in terms nearly identical to the narrator's fantasy in "The American Forest Girl":

My child, my child, thou leav'st me!—I shall hear
The gentle voice no more that blest mine ear
With its first utterance; I shall miss the sound
Of thy light step amidst the flowers around,
And thy soft-breathing hymn at twilight's close,
And thy "Good-night" at parting for repose. (1-6)

Yet again, the same images of hearth and home recur in "The Bride of the Greek Isle" in Eudora's mournful farewell to "the vine at her father's door" (19), to the memory of young sisters bound in play (52), and to the quintessential mother, whose "breast" is "that holy place of rest," whose "[l]ips" had "lull'd" Eudora with its "strain," and whose "[e]yes" had "watch'd" her sleep (68-73). This final image of maternal devotion in turn concludes both "Madeline" and "The Switzer's Wife": while "Madeline" closes with the image of the daughter resting on "the breast / That rock'd her childhood" (97-98), "The Switzer's Wife" closes with the image of the mother "rock[ing] her child beneath the whispering boughs / Singing its blue, half-curtain'd eyes to sleep" (112-13).

It is not simply the case, however, that this repetition “consolidate[s] the authority of the dominant cultural model of femininity” (*DM* 52), as Byron argues, by “link[ing] women of all times, all cultures, in a vision of universal womanhood” (*DM* 51). Nor is it simply the case that Hemans authorizes the unknowing narrator’s fantasy of female subjectivity by having the narrator reproduce the images of the hegemonic model, for such a conclusion would fail to explain why Hemans insists on the narrator’s exclusion in the above poems and why she strictly opposes the narrator’s fantasy to reality. I suggest that the very repetition of these images of domestic femininity undercuts rather than consolidates the authority of the hegemonic model. By returning the reader again and again to the same images of femininity and domesticity—indeed, to the same figure in the same posture in the same setting—Hemans disrupts the temporality of the volume, making possible a reversal of the relation between origin and copy, origin and repetition. Nearly every poem of the volume features nearly identical women in nearly identical postures in nearly identical scenes: the women are all of fair form, all have dark hair triumphantly waving around a pale but proud forehead, all have a mournful voice and flashing eyes, and all clasp a dying or dead male to their breast against the backdrop of forest gloom. Thus, Eudora, Imelda, Edith, Maimuna, and Costanza each finds the dying body of her beloved in or near the woods, be it Eudora’s “Grecian wood” (“Bride” 97), Edith’s American (“Edith”), Maimuna’s Indian (“Indian City”), or Costanza’s (“Costanza”) and Imelda’s Italian woods (“Imelda”). Each wood is characterized by a variation of “tree, and fount, and flower” (“Imelda” 26) and described in nearly identical terms. Each of the dying men lies bleeding in (and all over) the laps of each of the women: Eudora’s Ianthis lies “[w]ith the blood from his breast in a gushing flow”

(“Bride” 142); Imelda’s Azzo, with a “stain” of “blood” on his “breast” (“Imelda” 80-81); Maimuna’s son, with “a gash on his bosom” (“Indian City” 74) and “his graceful hair all soil’d and torn” (72); Costanza’s Cesario, with similar “clustering raven-locks” similarly “steep’d in bloody showers” (“Costanza” 66 and 69); while Edith “heavily. . . felt” her husband’s “life-blood well / Fast o’er her garments forth” (“Edith” 28-29). Each of the women sits, stands, or kneels in a posture of “fidelity till death,” often dramatized as a fidelity *to* death—be it her beloved’s or her own, and often both.³ Eudora immolates herself in a dual act of vengeance and self-sacrifice: after a “pirate-horde” invades her wedding banquet, murders her groom and holds her captive on its ship, Eudora sets the ship on fire and so “kindle[s] her funeral pile” (“Bride” 213). Imelda similarly sacrifices herself for love: unable to save Azzo from the poison of her brother’s sword, Imelda sucks the poison from his wound in order to join him in death (“Imelda”). Indeed, “love in death” (“Peasant” 99) is the very picture which closes “The Peasant Girl of the Rhone”: long after all had forgotten the death of her beloved, the unnamed but eponymous peasant girl continues to mourn him silently, “adoring / In lone devotedness” unto her own death (81-82). So too do the eponymous Costanza and Juana keep watch by their dying and their dead, similarly “unknown” and “alone” (“Costanza” 82-83), just as Gertrude represses “[h]er own sufferings” to attend “with the most heroic devotedness” to her husband “throughout his last agonizing hours” of torture (“Gertrude” headnote).

In consequence of this repetition, the reader cannot easily conclude which is the original and which the copy. She cannot assume therefore that the fantasy projected by

³ The phrase, “fidelity till death,” is taken from the title of the poem, “Gertrude, or Fidelity till Death.”

the unknowing narrator is simply the copy of an “original” model of femininity authorized by a more knowing narrator elsewhere in the volume. For if it is possible for the unknowing narrator of these particular poems to invoke the authority of a more knowing narrator elsewhere in the volume, then the repetition makes it equally possible for the seemingly authorized portraits of female subjectivity to be themselves copies of this “original” fantasy. In opposition to Byron’s argument, then, that the repetition in the poems essentializes and universalizes woman, I argue that the repetition reveals not that “in all times and all places, the essential nature of woman is fixed” (“Rethinking” 84), but that what has been taken to be the essential nature of woman has been a cultural fantasy all along.

II. Spectacles of Woman

Hemans’s construction of an unknowing narrator, coupled with the volume’s repetition, thus makes possible a counter-reading that destabilizes both the essentialist category of “Woman” and Hemans’s commitment to it. If “he that could reveal” is “Heaven alone”; if to the question, “Who can tell?” the narrator answers insistently, “Not I”; and if, as several critics have suggested, the narrator, Hemans and her culture are equally conflated in her poetry; then the logical implication of the volume is that all are equally debarred from any access to female subjectivity. Rather than an “exploration” of a pre-given female subjectivity (plain or simple), I suggest that *Records of Woman* dramatizes a struggle for subjectivity which is staged as a struggle for the gaze: a struggle between the woman’s gaze and the narrator’s gaze, between seeing and being seen, between subjectivity and spectacle. In fact, it is Hemans’s construction of an

unknowing—or, rather, inconsistently knowing—narrator which consistently undercuts representations of female subjectivity with female spectacle. When debarred from the women’s interiority, the narrator’s turn to exterior signs of that interiority shifts the narrative from speculation to specularization, from subjectivity to spectacle. In “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” the emotional conflict Eudora experiences in leaving her father’s house for her husband’s is inferred from her actions: that she “look’d on the vine at her father’s door / Like one that is leaving his native shore” (19-20), that she “hung o’er the myrtle” (21), “wept on her mother’s faithful breast” (33) and “yet laid her hand awhile / In *his* that waited her dawning smile” (35-36, original emphasis). In “The Switzer’s Wife,” the emotional impact of the Switzer’s news that they were in imminent danger of losing their home is interpreted from the signs inscribed on the woman’s body:

The bright blood left that youthful mother’s cheek;
Back on the linden stem she lean’d her form,
And her lip trembled as it strove to speak,
Like a frail harp-string shaken by the storm. (61-64)

Similarly, in “Imelda,” when Imelda is caught in a clandestine meeting with Azzo, the son of a rival family, only the effects of her fear, of the “dark thought” that passes through Imelda’s mind, is known, not the thought itself:

a swift dark thought
Struck down her lip’s rich crimson as it pass’d,
And from her eye the sunny sparkle took
One moment with its fearfulness, and shook
Her slight frame fiercely, as a stormy blast
Might rock the rose. (34-39)

Before focusing on Imelda’s body, however—on her “lip’s rich crimson,” her eye, and her “slight frame fiercely” shaking—the narrator does offer partial insight into

Imelda's subjectivity, what Imelda "knew" when she hears a "hurrying tread" and even what Imelda thinks she hears:

But change came o'er the scene. A hurrying tread
Broke on the whispery shades. Imelda knew
The footstep of her brother's wrath, and fled
Up where the cedars make yon avenue
Dim with green twilight: pausing there, she caught—
Was it the clash of swords? (29-34)

Oscillating thus between a knowing narrator and an unknowing one, the poem continually shifts between a narrative focalized by Imelda and one focused on her—specifically, on her body—and often to dizzying effect. When Imelda returns to the scene and discovers the slain body of Azzo, the narrative gaze shifts from her ("there she stood, / A faint, frail trembler") to what she sees ("gazing first on blood"); back to her ("her fair arm around yon cypress thrown"); then lingers on her form awhile before returning once more to her gaze and what she "knew" ("her dimm'd eye caught a gleam . . . Her brother's sword!—she knew it"); resting finally on the "strange, sad sight" that is Imelda herself. Together, the passage reads:

there she stood,
A faint, frail trembler, gazing first on blood,
With her fair arm around yon cypress thrown,
Her form sustain'd by that dark stem alone,
And fading fast, like spell-struck maid of old,
Into white waves dissolving, clear and cold;
When from the grass her dimm'd eye caught a gleam—
'Twas where a sword lay shiver'd by the stream,—
Her brother's sword!—she knew it; and she knew
'Twas with a venom'd point that weapon slew!
Woe for young love! But love is strong. There came
Strength upon woman's fragile heart and frame,
There came swift courage! On the dewy ground
She knelt, with all her dark hair floating round,
Like a long silken stole; she knelt, and press'd
Her lips of glowing life to Azzo's breast,
Drawing the poison forth. A strange, sad sight!

Pale death, and fearless love, and solemn night!—
So the moon saw them last. (85-103)

What is significant about this struggle between Imelda's gaze and the narrator's, as with each struggle enacted in the volume, is that it is the narrator's gaze which ultimately prevails. This triumph of the narrator's gaze not only ensures that female spectacle continually undercuts female subjectivity in the volume, but also that female spectacle supercedes all other spectacles in the scenes. For instance, though the spectacle on which the moon gazes in the above passage ostensibly includes both Imelda and Azzo ("So the moon saw *them* last"), the only spectacle the reader sees is that of Imelda kneeling with all her dark hair floating round, pressing her lips of glowing life to Azzo's breast, drawing the poison forth. And though "[t]wo fair forms laid / Like sculptured sleepers" (108-9) at the close of the poem, only one is visible to the reader, the figure of Imelda eroticized in death:

That radiant girl,
Deck'd as for bridal hours!—long braids of pearl
Amidst her shadowy locks were faintly shining,
As tears might shine, with melancholy light;
And there was gold her slender waist entwining;
And her pale graceful arms—how sadly bright!
And fiery gems upon her breast were lying,
And round her marble brow red roses dying.— [sic]
But she died first!—the violet's hue had spread
O'er her sweet eyelids with repose oppress'd,
She had bow'd heavily her gentle head,
And, on the youth's hush'd bosom, sunk to rest. (112-23)

Similarly, in "The Peasant Girl of the Rhone," which opens with a "warrior's funeral" (1), the narrator all but absents the body of the male corpse at the center of the procession, passing it over with a single adjective, "fair":

Thro' the wood-shadows moved the knightly train,
With youth's fair form upon the bier laid low,
Fair even when found, amidst the bloody slain,
Stretch'd by its broken lance. (16-19)

In contrast, the narrator lingers over the spectacle of the dead female body which closes the poem. Long after all others had forgotten the “fair” “youth” (and the poem suggests it is not long after his death: “so soon . . . [h]e lay forgotten in his early shroud” [48-50]), the peasant girl alone continues to mourn him, “[d]ay by day” (61) and “[f]or years” (77). From this devotion she dies, and from this spectacle the narrator does not shrink; rather, the narrator fetishistically anatomizes the girl’s “still face” into its “clear arch’d brow,” “curv’d lip,” “deep black lashes,” “half-shut eye,” and “cold cheek”:

That still face
Had once been fair; for on the clear arch’d brow,
And the curv’d lip, there lingered yet such grace
As sculpture gives its dreams; and long and low
The deep black lashes, o’er the half-shut eye—
For death was on its lids—fell mournfully.
But the cold cheek was sunk, the raven hair
Dimm’d, the slight form all wasted, as by care. (88-95)

If the narrator speaks in the voice of Hemans, who speaks in the voice of culture, then this conflation of Hemans, her narrator and her culture suggests that it is the cultural imaginary which compels the narrative gaze, not simply Hemans’s personal poetics. As such, the difference between the spectacles included in the narrator’s gaze and those consistently occluded reveals that the spectacle desired by the cultural imaginary of Hemans’s time was unmistakably gendered and sexed. However, Hemans’s repetition of this spectacle of the dead female body does more than simply exploit the cultural fantasy of the “death of a beautiful woman,” which Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) would come to claim as “the most poetical topic in the world” (165). By coupling female spectacle with

the conspicuous absence of male spectacle, Hemans suggests that what endows the spectacle of the female body with such profound cultural purchase is the concomitant erasure of the male body from the cultural imaginary, its occlusion from the cultural gaze. This would explain not only the fixation on and fetishization of the female body that occurs throughout the volume, but also the persistent occlusion of the male body *as a body* in the same poems. In “Edith,” the narrator’s description of Edith clasping the dead body of her husband de-corporealizes the male body as “precious clay” (48) while emphasizing Edith’s own corporeality: “mute she lay, / And cold; yet clasping still the precious clay / To her scarce-heaving breast” (47-49). And thus, a volume which proliferates the spectacle of woman hystericized by grief simultaneously refuses to picture “man’s mute anguish” (“Peasant Girl” 12). In “The Peasant Girl of the Rhone,” the narrator not only passes over the spectacle of the dead male body, but explicitly averts its gaze from the face of the mourning father, exclaiming, “That is no grief to picture!” (15).

This double gesture is dramatized most clearly in “Gertrude, or Fidelity till Death.” In the poem’s headnote, Hemans promises the spectacle of a tortured male body but then substitutes it in the poem with a spectacle of female torture. The headnote begins: “The Baron Von Der Wart, accused, though it is believed unjustly, as an accomplice in the assassination of the Emperor Albert, was bound alive on the wheel, and attended by his wife Gertrude, throughout his last agonizing hours, with the most heroic devotedness” (RW 33). In the poem, however, the body “bound alive on the wheel” never materializes, and the “agonizing hours” belong to Gertrude, not the Baron. Opening with a spectacle of Gertrude in a posture of feminine devotion worthy of

Charcot, the poem directs the reader by way of Gertrude's gaze to the promised spectacle of male torture:⁴

Her hands were clasp'd, her dark eyes rais'd,
The breeze threw back her hair;
Up to the fearful wheel she gaz'd—
All that she lov'd was there. (1-4)

What "was there," however, is never seen, since the narrator refuses to stop at the sight there promised. Instead, the narrative gaze passes over and beyond the male spectacle, to the surrounding "night," the "holy heaven above" and the "pale stars," which in turn direct their gaze back onto Gertrude. *She* is the spectacle "to behold":

The night was round her clear and cold,
The holy heaven above,
Its pale stars watching to behold
The might of earthly love. (5-8)

Instead of the promised spectacle of a tortured male form, then, the spectacle of torture offered in the poem is of the woman herself: the "mortal agony" (31) signalled by Gertrude's "glazing eye" (29) and "curdling cheek" (30) as she "sat striving with despair" (37). Compelled by the narrative gaze, the reader's gaze remains fixed on Gertrude, watching her as she performs her "lofty part" (28) of "heroic devotedness" (headnote) and "fidelity till death" (title):

She wiped the death-damps from his brow,
With her pale hands and soft,
.....
She spread her mantle o'er his breast,
She bath'd his lips with dew,
And on his cheek such kisses press'd
As hope and joy ne'er knew. (41-42, 45-49)

⁴ See Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985) for a discussion of Jean-Martin Charcot's (1825-1893) staging of female hysteria in his three-volume collection of photographs, *Iconographie Photographie de la Salpêtrière*. Gertrude's pose here called to my mind the photograph entitled "Supplication amoureuse," reprinted in Showalter, p. 151.

That this is indeed a spectacle “to behold” (7) is indicated by the number of times it is repeated in the volume. Just as Gertrude “sat striving with despair,” so too had Eudora before her knelt in “wild despair” (“Bride” 150), as Imelda will kneel after her “with all her dark hair floating round” (“Imelda” 98). This posture and pose is repeated in nearly identical terms in “Juana,” where another “woman with long raven hair sat watching by the dead” (4), and again in “Costanza,” where another “she, unknown, / Kept watch beside [another] him, fearless and alone” (82-83). And just as the reader watches as Gertrude laves the brow of the Baron, so does she watch Costanza “binding [Cesario’s] wounds, and oft in silence laving / His brow with tears that mourn’d the strong man’s raving” (82); again, as Edith binds “[w]ith her torn robe and hair the streaming wound” of her dying husband (“Edith” 30); and so again as Maimuna “[b]reathless . . . knelt in her son’s young blood, / Rending her mantle to staunch its flood” (87-88). Indeed, in addition to this repetition, Hemans foregrounds the specularity of the women by multiplying the spectators in the scenes. Just as the moon had cast its gaze on Imelda (103), so do the “night,” “heaven” and “stars” all surround Gertrude with their gaze, just as Maimuna is surrounded by spectators: as she “bow’d down mutely o’er her dead— / They that stood round her watch’d in dread; / They watch’d” (109-11).

Undoubtedly, the repetition of this scene of watching and mourning can be read as Hemans’s attempt “to universalize the values of sacrifice and endurance evidenced in her life” (Curran, “Women” 191). For instance, Paula Feldman attributes its repetition to “Hemans’s own attendance by her mother’s deathbed,” interpreting it as Hemans’s “obsessive re-enactment” of the “traumatic deathbed scene in various imagined times, places, and circumstances” (*RW* xxii). Norma Clarke reads it as Hemans’s “return” to

and “reworking” of “the central event in her life as a woman artist: her husband’s desertion of her” (80), while Tricia Lootens revises this reading into Hemans’s return to and reworking of “the central issues in her life as a female patriot, including ambivalence about the connections between domestic happiness and military glory” (3). However, in light of Hemans’s acute awareness of the demands of the literary market, coupled with the personal necessity of meeting those demands (she alone supported her household after her husband’s desertion, and entirely by her writing), I suggest that this repetition reveals more than merely a personal obsession.⁵ Hemans’s canny repetition, coupled with its unparalleled market success, reveals a profound cultural fixation on and fetishization of this spectacle of woman faithful unto death—a spectacle, more precisely, of the female body hystericized and eroticized, if also at times heroicized, by grief.⁶ That Hemans was conscious of this cultural fantasy and consciously capitalizing on it is perhaps best evidenced by her refusal to deliver it in “The Indian City.” As “[t]hey that stood round her watch’d in dread” (110), Maimuna not only denies her (and so too Hemans’s) audience the performance in demand, but also resists her status as spectacle by “mantl[ing] her head from sight”:

On the silent lip she press’d no kiss,
 Too stern was the grasp of her pangs for this;
 She shed no tear as her face bent low,
 O’er the shining hair of the lifeless brow;
 She look’d but into the half-shut eye,
 With a gaze that found there no reply,

⁵ For a compelling analysis of Hemans’s shrewd market sense, see Paula Feldman, “The Poet and the Profits” (1999). For an alternative reading of these representations of mourning as a “revisionist commentary on the elegiac tradition,” see Michael Williamson’s “Impure Affections: Felicia Hemans’s Elegiac Poetry and Contaminated Grief” (2001).

⁶ Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) offers striking witness to this cultural fantasy. Upon his return home after his brother William’s death, Victor contemplates a painting of his mother: “It was an historical subject, *painted at my father’s desire*, and represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father” (p. 55, emphasis added).

And shrieking, mantled her head from sight,
And fell, struck down by her sorrow's might! (113-20)

And yet, by denying this spectacle of female grief, Hemans paradoxically delivers it, as the poem invokes each of the actions it revokes in the very act of revocation. Having thus tensed the reader for the spectacle of female grief, Hemans delivers it in Maimuna's ensuing transformation from victim to martyr, from a female body hystericized to one heroicized by grief:

And what deep change, what work of power,
Was wrought on her secret soul that hour?
How rose the lonely one?—She rose
Like a prophetess from dark repose!
And proudly flung from her face the veil,
And shook the hair from her forehead pale,
And 'midst her wondering handmaids stood,
With the sudden glance of a dauntless mood.
Ay, lifting up to the midnight sky
A brow in its regal passion high,
With a close and rigid grasp she press'd
The blood-stain'd robe to her heaving breast[.] (121-32)

While this second spectacle can certainly be read as a celebration of “the eruption of female power from cultural norms” and “the rebellion of passion and pride against passivity and meekness” (Wolfson, “Domestic” 150), its repetition throughout the volume points up once again the theatricality of this posture of female power, passion and pride. This figure of woman is no less artificial than the one before, no less posed, no less performance. Just as Maimuna rises from her grief, so did Eudora rise before her, with

a brand
Blazing up high in her lifted hand!
And her veil flung back, and her free dark hair
Sway'd by the flames as they rock and flare,
And her fragile form to its loftiest height

Dilated, as if by the spirit's might,
And her eye with an eagle-gladness fraught[.] (204-10)

So too did the Switzer's wife rise, though "shaken from the storm" (64), to stand "brightly forth, and stedfastly [sic], that hour, / Her clear glance kindling into sudden power" (71-72). So rose Imelda, though similarly "fading fast, like spell-struck maid of old" (89): "[t]here came / Strength upon woman's fragile heart and frame / There came swift courage!" (95-96). And so stood the unnamed woman abandoned by her husband in "Indian Woman's Death Song":

Proudly, and dauntlessly, and all alone,
Save that a babe lay sleeping at her breast,
A woman stood: upon her Indian brow
Sat a strange gladness, and her dark hair wav'd
As if triumphantly. (7-11)

Hemans's repetition of each of these spectacles of woman reveals that "woman" is, in all her various poses, not an essential, universal and abstract category, but a performance—a spectacle "to behold"—a fantasy produced as essence through the repetition of actions, postures and gestures culturally encoded as "femininity" and "female subjectivity." While the narrator and reader are joined by the multiple spectators populating the poems to watch, voyeuristically, these women in these private postures of grief and mourning (the women, like Maimuna, "knew not they were by" [111]), the nature of these postures *as* postures—as artificial and often theatrical poses deliberately directed by Hemans—is unmistakable, underscored by Hemans's close repetition of the women's actions and her proliferation of seeing but unseen spectators.

III. Fantasies of Femininity

Records of Woman thus presciently dramatizes what Judith Butler would theorize a century and half later as gender performativity. This theory postulates that gender does not exist as a pre-given fact or reality bound to or derived from sex—“masculine” does not belong to “male,” and “feminine” does not belong to “female” (“Imitation” 312)—nor does it express an inner gender core or identity. Rather, like linguistic performatives, gender is *constituted* by the very gestures and acts purported to *express* this prior reality or fact. Just as the linguistic performatives “I apologize” or “I promise” neither describe nor express a pre-existing apology or promise, but constitute that apology and promise in the very act of speaking, so too do gender performatives, such as the acts of wearing a dress or, in the case of Hemans’s poetry, the act of sacrificing oneself for love, neither express nor externalize an essential feminine identity or “female subjectivity,” but constitute those identity categories through those very acts. Put simply, gender is not the *cause* of acts, gestures or enactments coded as feminine or masculine—what Butler terms “corporeal stylization” or “corporeal signification”—but the *effect* of such acts. As Butler explains: “Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (*Gender Trouble* 178).

Crucially, however, not just any act will do. One cannot self-designate an action as “feminine” or “masculine” and constitute one’s gender by performing that action. I cannot designate the acts of singing or cycling as “feminine” acts, any more than I can alone designate sewing or swooning as such. To perform gender is, above all, to repeat

and re-enact specific actions, gestures and “stylizations” culturally coded “masculine” or “feminine”—in short, it is to cite, repeat and re-enact gender norms. In Butler’s words, “the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*” (*GT* 178, original emphasis); it requires “a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (*GT* 178). It is this citationality that gives gender its social meaning and its signifying force, for it is its citational nature that produces the illusion of gender as a stable identity or essence. In other words, it is the legibility and intelligibility of these actions as “feminine” or “masculine” which produce the illusion that these actions express an inner gender core rather than constitute the gender they appear to express. As Butler puts it: “gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth” (“Imitation” 317, original emphasis).

Part of that illusion is of a prior volitional subject—more precisely, the illusion of the *priority* of the subject. That is to say, one does not put on gender as one might put on an article of clothing; since gender is constituted by “a set of meanings already socially established,” gender *precedes* the subject and “is part of what decides the subject” (*Bodies x*) rather than what the subject decides. However, that is not to say that the subject does not exist; rather, that the subject does not exist *prior* to its gender constitution. There is no “doer behind the deed”; rather, “the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (*GT* 181). The most common example used to illustrate this concept is the cultural norm of dressing an infant in blue to signify masculinity and in pink to signify femininity. In this way, the subject is constituted

through this basic action of gender rather than the reverse; the subject does not choose its gender, but is constituted in gender by this action which cites a particular gender norm. That is why “gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (“Imitation” 315).

Hence, when I assert that *Records of Woman* presciently dramatizes gender performativity, I am not merely suggesting that the volume reveals gender to be a performance, or simply that it foregrounds the artificiality and theatricality of gender. Rather, I am arguing that the volume dramatizes the citational repetition which not only constitutes gender, but *produces it as essence* and, moreover, produces the illusion of a prior volitional subject. In *Records of Woman*, “woman” is not an essential, universal and abstract category, but a fantasy *produced as essence* through the repetition of actions, postures and gestures culturally encoded as “femininity” and “female subjectivity.” To borrow Butler’s terms, “woman” is “the corporeal stylization of gender, the fantasied and fantastic figuration of the body” (*GT* 172). *Records of Woman* reveals the performativity of gender not simply by exposing the constructed nature of gender, but more significantly, by dramatizing the process by which gendered bodies are produced and maintained—the way in which gender is “incorporated,” in Butler’s terms, inscribed onto the surface of the body (*GT* 173). In other words, the poems dramatize the very process by which gender signs, with their “set of meanings already socially established,” are inscribed onto women’s bodies, producing the illusion of gender essence on the body’s very surface. Speaking as the voice of culture, the narrator of *Records of Woman* interprets the corporeal signs of the women’s bodies as a gender *style*: the Switzer’s

wife's trembling lip is interpreted as "like a frail harp-string, shaken by the storm" ("Switzer's Wife" 63-64); Imelda's "faint" and "frail" form is interpreted as "fading fast, like spell-struck maid of old" ("Imelda" 86-89); and Eudora's weeping "on her mother's faithful breast" is interpreted as "[l]ike a babe that sobs itself to rest" ("Bride" 33-34). In each instance, the very act of interpretation inscribes these social meanings of conventional femininity—no less the faithfulness of the mother's breast than the infantilization of Eudora and the frailty of both the Switzer's wife and Imelda—onto the women's bodies, which are then read as pre-existing corporeal signs. In other words, the narrator presents the act of corporeal inscription as a neutral practice of interpretation; the women's bodies are read as though they are an already gendered text, when it is the very act of interpretation which marks them with gender. In this way, Hemans dramatizes the reversal that is the crux of gender performativity: the production of the effect as the origin, of the effect of gender as a gender essence.

That the repetition of this "corporeal stylization" throughout the volume has been interpreted by critics as evidence of Hemans's essentialism—her repetition of these poses, gestures and actions read as expressions of an essential femininity and a pre-given female subjectivity—urges the question of whether this citational repetition reinforces the hegemonic inscription of woman or whether it subverts and "de-institutes," as Butler puts it, the hegemonic model. Put simply, does Hemans reinforce this illusion of an internal gender essence or does she attempt in this volume to expose it as illusion? Butler phrases the question this way: when is gender performance "pastiche," defined by Frederic Jameson as "a neutral practice of mimicry" or "blank parody, parody that has lost its humor" (qtd. in *GT* 176), and when is it subversive parody, recalling that "parody by

itself is not subversive” (*GT* 176)? More precisely: “What makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. . . . [W]hat kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire?” (*GT* 177).

Though Hemans’s poetry has consistently been read as enacting the kind of repetition that becomes “domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony,” and consequently Hemans herself as “complicit with her culture” (Byron, *DM* 52), I argue that *Records of Woman* offers precisely the kind of gender performance that is—or at least *can be*—“effectively disruptive” and “truly troubling.” Published separately, in different venues, over the course of four years, the individual poems of the volume may seem a “straight” enactment of gender performativity, a “neutral practice of mimicry,” in featuring female subjects whose repetition of actions, words and gestures stylized as feminine consolidates the hegemonic inscription of woman. However, by bringing the poems together in a single volume, Hemans not only foregrounds but also compounds this repetition, producing an excess which disrupts and destabilizes the naturalized category of “woman” and prevents it from ever becoming “fixed.” As each poem confronts the reader with the same woman in the same scene and in the same posture of heroic fidelity, the excess produced by this repetition exposes the artificiality, theatricality and *performativity* of the performance. Rather than reducing the women to a “depersonalized type” by this repetition, as Byron argues (*DM* 48), Hemans multiplies the type to an exorbitant degree to expose it as type, multiplying “woman” to such a degree that her “nature” as artefact rather than essence is unmistakable. It is certainly no

coincidence that the spectacles of woman repeated in the volume ekphrastically reproduce the figure of woman pictured in the same annual gift-books to which Hemans frequently and profitably contributed and in which some of these same poems first appeared.⁷ As Mellor observes:

Designed for women, these best-sellers systematically constructed through word and picture the hegemonic ideal of feminine beauty. As ideological propaganda, they proved more seductive—and perhaps more effective—than the more serious conduct-books. In steel engravings of exceptionally high quality, they promoted an image of the ideal woman as specular, as the object rather than the owner of the gaze. The women in these illustrations typically look down, up or sideways, but rarely straight ahead; they are looked at but they do not see (the viewer, the world before them). They are presented as chaste but nonetheless erotically desirable—with a consistent highlighting of bare white arching necks and broad shoulders and half uncovered breasts. Or they are imaged as the mother, devotedly attending the infant (usually titled) upon her lap. (112)

Multiplying this image of woman throughout her poems, Hemans's deployment of this figure exceeds the limits of ideological propaganda; her repetition exposes the artificiality of the construct and the systematicity of the construction—in Butler's words, the "fantasied and fantastic figuration of the body."

IV. Fantasies of the Self

Hemans does more than simply dramatize Butler's theory of gender performativity, however; she contributes significantly to it by extending Butler's concept of corporeal stylization beyond the limits of the body. More precisely, she extends the limits of the body to recognize the corporeality of the voice. In Butler's theory, the voice never appears among the "array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender

⁷ "The Peasant Girl of the Rhone" appeared in the 1826 edition of the *Literary Souvenir*, and "Madeline, a Domestic Tale" appeared in its 1828 edition.

presentation,” falling neither under nor between the categories of “skin, gesture, move or gait” (“Imitation” 317). Indeed, the bodies which Butler theorizes are strikingly silent.⁸ For Hemans, in contrast, the voice figures no less a part in the array of corporeal theatrics which constitutes gender, and is perhaps the most significant site of corporeal inscription in her poems. For it is precisely the voice which crosses continually and endlessly the border between inner and outer, psyche and body. As Hemans reveals, it is the women’s speech that is most profoundly marked by the cultural inscription of woman, and the women’s speech that most effectively, most persuasively, produces the illusion of an inner gender essence in being so easily and frequently mistaken for the expression of an essential self or essential “female subjectivity.” For instance, when Eudora speaks in “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” the narrator describes her farewell song as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: “The choking swell of her heart was past; / And her lovely thoughts from their cells found way / In the sudden flow of a plaintive lay” (40-42). This song, presented as an expression of Eudora’s own “heart” and “thoughts,” in her own voice, reinscribes the images of domestic femininity pictured throughout the volume:

Why do I weep?—to leave the vine
 Whose clusters o’er me bend,—
 The myrtle—yet, oh! call it mine!—
 The flowers I lov’d to tend.
 A thousand thoughts of all things dear,
 Like shadows o’er me sweep,
 I leave my sunny childhood here,
 Oh, therefore let me weep!

I leave thee, sister! we have play’d
 Thro’ many a joyous hour,
 Where the silvery green of the olive shade

⁸ This lacuna can be explained by the melancholic structure which Butler accords to gender identity. As a melancholic structure, gender identity is produced through the process of “incorporation,” which is by nature anti-metaphorical and thus anti-linguistic (*GT* 86-87). Butler redresses this lacuna somewhat in her later book on the politics of speech, censorship and subjectivization, *Excitable Speech* (see esp. ch. 4).

Hung dim o'er fount and bower.
Yes, thou and I, by stream, by shore,
In song, in prayer, in sleep,
Have been as we may be no more—
Kind sister, let me weep!

I leave thee, father! Eve's bright moon
Must now light other feet,
With the gather'd grapes, and the lyre in tune,
Thy homeward step to greet.
Thou in whose voice, to bless thy child,
Lay tones of love so deep,
Whose eye o'er all my youth hath smiled—
I leave thee! let me weep!

Mother! I leave thee! on thy breast,
Pouring out joy and woe,
I have found that holy place of rest
Still changeless,—yet I go!
Lips, that have lull'd me with your strain,
Eyes, that have watch'd my sleep!
Will earth give love like *yours* again?
Sweet mother! let me weep! (44-75)

Thus we find here the same images of the vine, flowers and fountain found in nearly every poem of the volume; we find the same image of young sisters bound together in play also found in “The American Forest Girl” (20), “Joan of Arc, in Rheims” (75), and “Edith” (180); we find the same mother’s “breast” of “Pauline” (83) or “mother’s bosom” of “Madeline” (19); the same “mother’s eyes” of “Costanza” (62); the same “mother’s face” of “The Switzer’s Wife” (61), “The American Forest Girl” (25), “The Indian City” (73), and “Madeline” (89); even the father’s “homeward step” (2) of “The Switzer’s Wife,” a rarer feature of Hemans’s homes.

While these words and images, placed in the mouth of Eudora, appear to be the authentic effusions of Eudora’s “lovely thoughts,” Hemans undercuts this appearance of authenticity by marking the artificiality of the images, on the one hand, through their

repetition throughout the volume, and by marking the artificiality of her speech, on the other, by styling it as a conventional Greek lay. In a footnote to the song's description as a "sudden flow of a plaintive lay" (42), Hemans explains that a "Greek Bride, on leaving her father's house, takes leave of her friends and relatives frequently in extemporaneous verse," and cites Claude Charles Fauriel's (1772-1844) *Chants populaires de la Grèce moderne* (1824) as an example. Eudora's self-expression is thus not an authentic original, but a cultural copy both in its language and its form; it reproduces the poetic form of Eudora's culture and the language of domestic femininity of Hemans's. And by reproducing the conventions of femininity, Eudora's speech produces *her* as the model of femininity, as the essentially female and quintessentially feminine subject. Hemans's staging of Eudora's speech thus reveals the centrality of speech as an action of gender that produces through the voice, this other site of bodily inscription, the illusion of an inner gender essence. Rather than expressing a prior female subjectivity, Eudora's speech produces the illusion of an essential female subjectivity by the very act of speaking in the style of femininity.

By highlighting the conventionality of Eudora's speech, however, Hemans paradoxically undermines the effect and effectiveness of exposing the illusoriness of the self. By calling attention to the artifice—first, by adopting the style of the Greek lay in the poem; second, by citing the convention in the footnote—Hemans fails to conjure fully the illusion of authenticity which the repetition and footnote would then expose and dissolve. In other words, Hemans gives away the punchline, that the spontaneity and authenticity of Eudora's speech is an illusion, by the very telling of the joke—by the conventionality of the form and the citationality of the language. Hemans's turn to the

monologue form and dramatic speaker in “Arabella Stuart” and “Properzia Rossi” can thus be explained as her solution to this problem. While the monologue form provides Hemans with the missing claim of authenticity by posturing as authentic voice and unmediated speech, the addition of a dramatic speaker to the form provides her with the distance necessary to expose the posture *as* posture. Thus, in “Properzia Rossi” and “Arabella Stuart,” Hemans adopts the voices of two historical women, a sixteenth-century Italian sculptor, musician and poet and an early seventeenth-century heiress to the English throne, respectively, and presents each monologue as a representation of their imagined “thoughts and feelings.” As she writes in the headnote to “Arabella Stuart,” “The following poem [is] meant as some record of her fate, and the imagined fluctuations of her thoughts and feelings” (*RW* 8). However, this headnote already stages the very way in which the poem’s claim of authenticity is immediately undercut by the distance between poet and speaker. Whereas the term “record” invokes the claim of authenticity, the fact that the record is of “the imagined fluctuations” of Arabella’s thoughts and feelings immediately undermines that claim. As imaginary records, these poems emblemize the tension between the lyric and the dramatic, the authentic and the inauthentic which is regarded as the seed of the dramatic monologue.

For many critics, however, the distance between Hemans and her dramatic speakers is insufficient to effect this tension. For such readers, the posture assumed in Hemans’s monologues is not of authenticity, but of dramatic distance; she uses the mask not to pose as the authentic voice of her speakers, but to disguise the lyric authenticity of her poems. As Byron argues, Hemans’s dramatized speakers are not dramatic personae proper, but “variations” on Hemans’s own self (*DM* 49). For example, in “Properzia

Rossi,” Hemans’s best known monologue, Hemans adopts the mask of a persona that closely resembles her own: Rossi is, like Hemans, a female artist; like Hemans, Rossi speaks plaintively and protractedly of the worthlessness of fame without love and the incommensurability of her desires for both—what Susan Wolfson calls the “calculus of heart and art” and the “transparent allegory of the poem” (“Domestic” 157); and like Hemans, Rossi attempts to “throw” (“Properzia” 51) into her frame of art “a voice” (52) that will speak of her “love and grief” (51) and “life’s deep feeling” (56). Due to all these similarities, “Properzia Rossi” has been read as a self-mirroring poem: “[a]s Hemans produces mirror images of her own persona in her dramatised female speakers, so Rossi produces a mirror image of herself through her art; Ariadne becomes to Rossi what Rossi is to Hemans” (Byron, *DM* 51).

That Hemans produces a mirror image of herself is indisputable. Why she does so, however, remains to be explained. If the poem is merely another rendition of Hemans’s favourite song, the worthlessness of fame without love, then why adopt a mask to sing what she has successfully sung without one in her lyric and narrative poetry? What is the function of the mask in this monologue, if it merely mirrors the self? And why does Hemans mirror not only herself in Rossi but her very act of self-reproduction in Rossi’s creation of Ariadne? Indeed, to do so, Hemans transports Rossi from the scene of rejection described in the poem’s headnote—the painting by Louis Ducis (1775-1847) which represents Rossi “showing her last work, a basso-relievo of Ariadne, to a Roman Knight, the object of her affection, who regards it with indifference” (*RW* 29)—to the scene of artistic creation leading up to it. If the purpose of the poem is to “memorialise and celebrate” Rossi not as an artist, but as a “representative example of woman’s nature

as essentially domestic, loving, [and] self-sacrificing” (*DM* 51), as Byron argues, or if its “transparent allegory” is the “calculus of heart and art,” as Wolfson contends (“Domestic” 157), then why stage this moment of mirroring which centers on the process of artistic creation, before the unveiling, before her rejection, when the more obvious and more fitting choice of dramatic situation for such a purpose and allegory would have been the scene of Ducis’s painting? In sum: why a mask that mirrors the self; why a mirror to speak the self; and why this moment of speaking?

To the first two questions, Byron answers that the mask and the mirror function to essentialize woman and consolidate the hegemonic model of femininity: it becomes “not just the poet who defines and interprets women in this way; her opinions are validated by the distinct voices of women from other times and places” (“Rethinking” 82)—*viz.*, the sixteenth-century Italian Rossi and Ariadne of ancient Greece, in addition to the other speakers of Hemans’s poetry who echo their sentiments. Moreover, “by echoing Hemans,” Byron argues, “these dramatized voices speak directly to the validity of the sentiments of early nineteenth-century domestic ideology. They consolidate the authority of the dominant cultural model of femininity” (“Rethinking” 82).

I answer, rather, that Hemans adopts a mask that closely mirrors her self not to essentialize woman, but precisely the opposite: to render undecidable the voice that speaks and thus to render undecidable the very question of identity. In “Properzia Rossi,” this question of undecidability lies at the very heart of the poem, figured by the voice which Rossi desires to throw into Ariadne’s finished frame. Having formed Ariadne in her own image, Rossi speaks her desire to envoice her:

Oh! could I throw
Into thy frame a voice, a sweet, and low,
And thrilling voice of song! when he came nigh,
To send the passion of its melody
Thro' his pierc'd bosom—on its tones to bear
My life's deep feeling. . . . (51-56)

However, by forming Ariadne in her own image, Rossi renders undecidable the voice which speaks, or would speak, from Ariadne's frame. Rossi insists: "I fix my thought, heart soul, to burn, to shine, / Thro' the pale marble's veins" (36-37); and, addressing Ariadne: "I give my own life's history to thy brow . . . thou shalt wear / My form, my lineaments" (38-40). She then exhorts Ariadne to

Speak to him of me,
Thou, the deserted by the lonely sea,
With the soft sadness of thine earnest eye,
Speak to him, lorn one! deeply, mournfully,
Of all my love and grief! (47-51)

Rossi's desire to envoice Ariadne is thus not for the purpose of giving Ariadne a voice with which to speak herself, but for the purpose of giving Ariadne a voice with which she can speak of Rossi—of all her "love and grief" (51) and "life's deep feeling" (56). Thus, at the very heart of the poem and its purpose lies the question: whose voice speaks here? It is not simply Rossi's, since it is distinctly "a" voice not her own; nor is it fully Ariadne's, since Ariadne stands as an effigy of Rossi and her speech is co-opted by Rossi from the start. The third answer, that it is actually Rossi speaking herself in the voice of Ariadne only underscores rather than resolves the undecidability of the voice. Unlike Browning, who firmly and famously insisted that his poems were "so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine," Hemans challenges here the possibility of fully dissevering the self and other in speaking.

And yet, for Byron, it is this undecidability in “Properzia Rossi” that disqualifies the poem as a dramatic monologue. Pointing to the poem’s unattributed epigraph, which reproduces Hemans’s so-called “favourite topic” (*DM* 49) of the worthlessness of fame without love, Byron asks, “Who speaks here?” While the explanatory headnote can be associated with Hemans, and the voice in the subsequent monologue with Rossi, Byron asks of the epigraph:

But who speaks here? It could be one of Rossi’s own poems, because it anticipates both the sentiments and the images she goes on to express. . . . But it may equally be associated with the lyric voice of Hemans, since sentiments and images also match those reproduced in such lyric poems as “Woman and Fame” (1839). . . . And just to complicate things further, not only does Hemans use lines from her “Corinne at the Capitol” (1830) for her epigraph to “Woman and Fame”, but she also uses these lines from “Woman and Fame” as her epigraph to the narrative poem “Joan of Arc, in Rheims” (1828). So with whom do we associate these lines: Rossi the sixteenth-century Italian artist, Joan the fifteenth-century French heroine, Mme de Staël’s fictional Corinne, or the nineteenth-century English poet herself, Felicia Hemans. Or, to expand the possibilities to a ridiculous degree, perhaps they should be associated with the tragic Ariadne of classical myth; after all, this is the woman whom Rossi is sculpting and to whom she gives her “form” and “lineaments.” (“Rethinking” 82-83)

That the identity of the epigraph’s speaker cannot be definitively decided proves for Byron the lyric authenticity of the poem—that it is ultimately Hemans speaking all along—and thus its failure as a dramatic monologue. If the voice of the epigraph can be “equally” associated with Hemans as with Rossi or any number of her speakers, the argument goes, then the distance between poet and speaker is insufficient to fulfill the demands of the form, the destabilization of the essential self.

However, Byron’s answer to the question, “Who speaks here?” overlooks key details about the poem and its cultural context. On the one hand, to attribute the epigraph’s voice to Hemans’s personal “lyric voice” is to ignore the prevalence of this

theme, the incommensurability of the female artist's desires for love and fame, throughout women's writing of the period. Popularized by Madame de Staël's (1766-1817) novel, *Corinne* (1807), this sentiment is a "favourite" not just of Hemans, but of her wider culture. The best known version is perhaps Letitia Landon's (1802-1838) *The Improvisatrice* (1824), though the figure of the abandoned poetess is re-imagined throughout the century in various renditions of the Sappho myth.⁹ Therefore if Hemans speaks in the epigraph of "Properzia Rossi," it is not in her own "lyric voice," but in the voice of a culture that prescribes for women artists the rhetorical posture of abjuring fame without love, a pose which, admittedly, Hemans strikes perfectly.¹⁰ On the other hand, to attribute this voice to Rossi, reading it as simply sounding the keynote to the poem (Byron, *DM* 51; Wolfson, "Domestic" 157), is to miss the way in which Rossi resists the voice of the epigraph line by line. Compare the epigraph's eleven lines,

—*Tell me no more, no more*
Of my soul's lofty gifts! Are they not vain
To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?
Have I not loved, and striven, and fail'd to bind
One true heart unto me, whereon my own
Might find a resting-place, a home for all
Its burden of affections? I depart,
Unknown, though Fame goes with me; I must leave
The earth unknown. Yet it may be that death

⁹ For more on the Sappho tradition, see Yopie Prins's *Victorian Sappho* (1999), Margaret Reynolds's "The Woman Poet Sings Sappho's Last Song" (1996), and Lawrence Lipking's *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition* (1988).

¹⁰ Perhaps not so perfectly: as Paula Feldman observes, one reviewer of Henry F. Chorley's (1808-1872) biography, *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans* (1836), "blasted" Chorley for publishing letters by Hemans "that clearly show her desire for fame" (*RW* xxv). The charge:

Through the whole correspondence, and its accompanying commentaries there is exhibited by her a craving vanity, a restless and feverish anxiety for display, a desire to be always *en representation*, and all this under the studious affectation of very much disliking the eminence, on which she would remind her correspondents that she stands. . . . [W]e find her constantly walking over to [Chorley's] house, with some adulatory letter in her pocket, or some story of the way in which her reputation has discovered her retreat, in order that she may explain to its members how disagreeable a thing is fame. (qtd. in Feldman, *RW* xxv)

*Shall give my name a power to win such tears
As would have made life precious. (RW 29, original emphasis)*

with the opening eleven lines of the monologue:

One dream of passion and of beauty more!
And in its bright fulfilment let me pour
My soul away! Let earth retain a trace
Of that which lit my being, though its race
Might have been loftier far. Yet one more dream!
From my deep spirit one victorious gleam
Ere I depart! For thee alone, for thee!
May this last work, this farewell triumph be—
Thou, loved so vainly! I would leave enshrined
Something immortal of my heart and mind,
That yet may speak to thee when I am gone. . . . (1-11)

The self-effacing plea which opens the epigraph, to hear “*no more, no more / Of my soul’s lofty gifts!*” is thus overthrown by Rossi’s demand, which opens the poem, for “[o]ne dream of passion and of beauty more!” (1), repeated four lines later: “Yet one more dream! / From my deep spirit one victorious gleam / Ere I depart!” (5-7). With this “victorious gleam,” Rossi overrides the epigraph’s language of negation (“*no more, no more*”), frustration (“*haunting thirst*”), futility (“*in vain*”), and failure (“*fail’d to bind*”) with a language of affirmation (“one more” [1, 5]), “fulfilment” (2), victory (6), and “triumph” (8). Indeed, Rossi offers a clear answer to the epigraph’s rhetorical question about her “soul’s lofty gifts”—“*Are they not vain / To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?*”—and in so doing, undermines both the rhetorical effect of the question and the sentiment itself. Her answering “dream of passion and of beauty” is decidedly not “vain” to “quench” her soul’s “*thirst for happiness,*” but offers “bright fulfilment” to her soul instead (1-3). Rossi then reverses the “failure” of the epigraph’s speaker “*to bind / One true heart*” whereon her own “[m]ight find a resting place, a home for all / Its burden of affections.” For Rossi, “earth” becomes the desired home and resting place,

that which “retain[s] a trace” (3) for “that which lit [her] being” (3-4). And with this “trace” on “earth,” Rossi overwrites the epigraph’s attempt at self-erasure; she would not “[d]epart / Unknown,” would not “*leave the earth unknown,*” as the epigraph insists she “*must,*” but rather, “would leave enshrined / Something immortal of [her] heart and mind” (9-10) “[e]re” she departs (7).

If the epigraph’s voice is not simply Hemans’s, neither is it fully Rossi’s; to attribute the voice to either one or the other speaker is to either mistake the cultural voice for Hemans’s personal voice or to miss altogether the poem’s opening drama. And yet, on the third hand, to attribute the voice to both Hemans and Rossi “equally” (Byron, “Rethinking” 83) is to miss the purpose of the question and the point of the poem. This is not to deny the similarities between Hemans’s voice and Rossi’s; rather, it is to recognize that Hemans’s structural innovations resist any claim that “who speaks here”—be it in the epigraph or at any point in the monologue—is at all decidable. I argue that it is precisely the undecidability of the question that is the point of the poem and, indeed, the ultimate purpose of the dramatic monologue: to render undecidable not only the identity of the epigraph’s speaker, but the question of identity itself; to put the self “who speaks” into question. To insist on an answer, to insist that one must be able to determine the identity of the speaker and answer definitively “who speaks here,” is to miss this very function of undecidability. Indeed, it is this function, I argue, that frames the opening contest of voices and directs its outcome. The purpose of the struggle is not to suggest that the two voices are essentially different, but to dramatize their ultimate inextricability. After the tussle and tango of the opening eleven lines, in which Rossi refutes each of the epigraph’s asseverations, the epigraph’s “tone / Of lost affection” (12-13) enters Rossi’s voice and

threatens to overtake it. In the very next line, Rossi identifies the purpose of her art is to “speak” to the knight after she is “gone” (11), to “shake” his “inmost bosom with a tone / Of lost affection” (12-13), and to “prove / What she hath been” (13-14). Moreover, “what she hath been” is defined in the terms of “vain affection” first voiced in the epigraph. Addressing herself to the knight, Rossi describes herself as

She . . . whose melancholy love
On thee was lavish'd; silent pang and tear,
And fervent song, that gush'd when none were near,
And dream by night, and weary thought by day,
Stealing the brightness from her life away,—
While thou—— (14-19)

With the interruption of this extended dash, Hemans renews Rossi's resistance to the epigraph's seductive melancholy, but only to underscore her subsequent submission to it. Re-emerging on the other side of the dash is Rossi's voice, abjuring the sentiments that precede it as “vain tenderness,” and commanding herself to “Awake!” and “Live!” It is not long, however, before her voice succumbs once again to the epigraph's tone of lost affection; it is “for [her] sorrowful affection's sake” (22) that she urges herself to “Live! in thy work breathe out!—that he may yet, / Feeling sad mastery there, perchance regret / Thine unrequited gift” (23-25).

Thus, in spite of the vigor of Rossi's voice at the start of the passage, and its direct defiance of the hypnotic, even soporific, language of woman's conventional “lot”—the “melancholy love,” “silent pang and tear,” “[a]nd fervent song,” “[a]nd dream by night, and weary thought by day” of the preceding passage—Rossi's art remains unmistakably locked in the epigraph's realm of “vain affection”; its ultimate purpose is to inspire in the knight recognition and “regret” for her “unrequited gift.” And as the monologue progresses, Rossi's resistance diminishes. The next section of the poem

opens with a language of “power” (26), pride (29), glory (30) and “joy” (31) to describe Rossi’s creation of Ariadne, but closes with the “deep” and “mournful” tone of “love and grief” (50-51) familiar from the epigraph. In fact, Rossi’s concluding wish of this section, to “throw” (51) into Ariadne’s finished frame “a voice” (52) that will win from the knight “but one, *one* gush of tears” (59, original emphasis), repeats nearly verbatim the epigraph’s final wish “*to win*” from him “*such tears / As would have made life precious.*” Similarly, in the third section of the poem, the epigraph’s lament that the speaker “*fail’d to bind / One true heart . . . whereon my own might find a resting-place*” and “*a home for all / Its burden of affections*” finds a second voice in Rossi’s own extended complaint, which duplicates the “dirge-like echoes” she describes:

Oh! I might have given
 Birth to creations of far nobler thought,
 I might have kindled, with the fire of heaven,
 Things not of such as die! But I have been
 Too much alone; *a heart whereon to lean,*
With all these deep affections, that o’erflow
 My aching soul, and find no shore below;
 An eye to be my star, a voice to bring
 Hope o’er my path, like sounds that breathe of spring,
 These are denied me—dreamt of still in vain,—
 Therefore my brief aspirings from the chain,
 Are ever but as some wild fitful song,
 Rising triumphantly, to die ere long
 In dirge-like echoes. (65-74, emphasis added)

Finally, in the fourth and final section of the poem, all these mounting echoes of the epigraph crest into a full denunciation of “Worthless fame,” clothed in the familiar, even predictable, tropes of femininity:

Oh, mockery! give the reed
 From storms a shelter,—give the drooping vine
 Something round which its tendrils may entwine,—
 Give the parch’d flower a rain-drop, and the meed
 Of love’s kind words to woman! Worthless fame!

That in *his* bosom wins not for my name
Th' abiding place it ask'd! (81-87, original emphasis)

Though the purpose of Rossi's art is to inspire regret in the knight, this failure to resist the epigraph's seduction need not, however, instil regret in the reader or critic. For the point of the struggle is not to privilege Rossi's voice of artistic affirmation over the epigraph's voice of self-abnegation, but to dramatize the process of subject-formation in and through speech: the way in which Rossi both resists and reifies the model of femininity voiced in the epigraph, and the way in which the voice of culture, embodied by the epigraph, crosses Hemans's carefully constructed boundaries of inside and outside, self and other, poem and epigraph, to produce, as the effect of this convergence of voices and transgression of borders, Rossi's self. Where the purpose of the poem is to render undecidable the voice that speaks, the failure of Rossi's resistance to the epigraph's voice is in fact what marks the success of the poem. Hence, more than in the epigraph, it is in this late passage, I suggest, that Hemans urges the question, "Who speaks here?" Or, indeed, here, in the following passage:

But I have been
Too much alone; a heart whereon to lean,
With all these deep affections, that o'erflow
My aching soul, and find no shore below;
An eye to be my star, a voice to bring
Hope o'er my path, like sounds that breathe of spring,
These are denied me—dreamt of still in vain. . . . (68-74)

Or here: "Worthless fame! / That in *his* bosom wins not for my name / Th' abiding place it ask'd!" (85-87, original emphasis). Or here: "Never, oh! never more! Where'er I move, / The shadow of this broken-hearted love / Is on me and around!" (97-99).

At the moment of the epigraph's speaking, regardless of the identity of the speaker, the epigraph's voice is clearly demarcated from the monologue's voice. Indeed,

Hemans insisted on this point. When her publisher had mistakenly printed the epigraph as part of the monologue in the original proof-sheets, Hemans wrote an anxious letter asking him to personally confirm its correction: “I hope care was taken, in the final printing of ‘Properzia Rossi’ to separate the blank verse which formed the motto, from the poem itself; they had been before confused together. Would you be kind enough, Dear Sir, to ascertain this yourself.”¹¹ Beyond the obvious explanation for Hemans’s anxiety, that Hemans would have been equally alarmed if any of her epigraphs were confused for the poems, the drama of “Properzia Rossi”—Rossi’s resistance to and failure to resist the voice of the epigraph—depends on this formal distinction. Without it, the poem’s opening drama would effectively dissolve. In contrast to this clear separation of voices at the poem’s outset, it is ultimately undecidable who speaks in the passages above, even though and especially because the speaker is named as Rossi. Though each of the passages appears in the monologue in Rossi’s voice, each unmistakably reproduces the language and tone of the epigraph. Thus, if the speaker is Rossi, then Rossi emerges from the drama of the poem as a speaker whose repetition of a prior speech act, the epigraph’s inscription of woman, produces her as the self we hear speaking in the poem: a seemingly essential feminine or female self. By dramatizing the production of the self as a process of linguistic stylization, Hemans exposes the illusion at the center of speaking: that speaking is not an externalization or expression of a prior self, but a production of the self through the corporeal stylization of voice. Rossi’s repetition of the epigraph’s speaking etches onto her voice the corporeal “signs” of femininity: for us, the words on the page; for her, the words she speaks—their sounds, echoes, and tone. And

¹¹ Letter to William Blackwood, 16 April 1828. Blackwood Archives ms 4021, f.263. National Lib. of Scotland.

by dramatizing the production of Rossi's speaking self as the incorporation of the epigraph's voice into her body by way of speech—doubled in the poem by the incorporation of the epigraph's voice into the body of the monologue—Hemans suggests that regardless of “who speaks here,” be it “Rossi the sixteenth-century Italian artist, Joan the fifteenth-century French heroine, Mme de Staël's fictional Corinne, or the nineteenth-century English poet herself, Felicia Hemans” (Byron, “Rethinking” 83), the self who speaks is always in part a self already spoken by culture, by a voice that structurally precedes and produces the self.

By thus literalizing the struggle to speak the self as a struggle between two contesting voices, the voice of “culture” and the voice of the “self”—and, crucially, as a struggle lost by the speaking self—Hemans reveals that the self who speaks is not a self that exists prior to the speech act, but a self that is produced in and through the act of speaking: through the corporeal inscription of voice, the repetition and reification of gender meanings that precede the self. Rather than expressing an inner and prior self, Rossi's speech produces, as an effect of speech, the very self it appears to express. Rossi is thus not simply another version of Hemans's essential female selves or essential female artists, whose conflicting desires for love and fame constitute one of Hemans's favourite themes. Unlike such poems as “Woman and Fame,” “Joan of Arc, in Rheims,” and “Corinne, at the Capitol,” each of which presents a variation on this theme, “Properzia Rossi” institutes a dramatic distance that enables Hemans to pose Rossi's voice as different from her own. Whether or not the critic accepts this difference, she must accept the posture. For it is the posture of difference which achieves the poem's effect, not any essential difference between the poet and the speaker's voice. By adopting a dramatized

voice, Hemans opens up a structural space between herself and her speakers across which she can ironize and interrogate the voice that speaks, regardless of what it speaks, perhaps especially when it speaks like Hemans. Indeed, by adopting a mask that mirrors the self, Hemans extends her critique of the essential self to her other enactments of voice, radically suggesting that the Hemans we hear speaking in her lyric and narrative poems is as much a mask of authenticity as her dramatic personae, a mask of Hemans, a mask of the self.¹²

V. Fantasies of Speech

“Properzia Rossi” thus accomplishes what Hemans’s lyric and narrative poems could not: the exposure of the essential self as an illusion. And more: by dramatizing this particular moment of speaking, in which Rossi not only attempts to envoice Ariadne, but fails in that attempt, Hemans exploits the dramatic distance of the mask to investigate the relation between subjectivity and speaking. After an elaborate and powerful description of Rossi’s creation of Ariadne (26-47) and her desire to envoice her (47-60), the poem climaxes in her realization that she cannot: “Yet all the vision that within me wrought, / I cannot make thee!” (64-65). Rossi is thus clearly more than a mirror of Hemans; while Hemans succeeds in throwing into her poetic frame the voice of Rossi, Rossi fails to do the same for Ariadne. This difference and this failure reveal that the mask and the mirror function in the poem not simply as a vehicle for speaking the self, or as a means of conflating poet and persona for the purpose of essentializing woman, but to examine the

¹² Though critics have long since recognized that the mask of Hemans as “holy” and “sweet” was a “calculated self-projection” necessitated by her potentially scandalous position as a separated woman and successful woman poet (Leighton 8-10), this mask has risen to the level of myth in the Barthesian sense: critics now take Hemans’s construction of herself as “the icon of female domesticity” (Byron, *DM* 49) to be Hemans’s natural self.

relation between the formation of the subject and the act of speaking, between “making” Ariadne and “making her speak.” By dramatizing the attempt as a failure, Hemans investigates the conditions of possibility both of subjectivity and of speaking.

Since, at this particular moment of speaking, Ariadne is already fully formed (Rossi declares in the preceding lines, “Now fair thou art / Thy form” [62-63]), Rossi’s pronouncement of failure refers not to her failure to endow Ariadne with form, but to endow her with a self and subjectivity—in Rossi’s words, with “thought, heart, soul” (36) and “life’s history” (38). Hemans therefore presents in the poem three possible relations between subjectivity and speaking based on three possible readings of the relation between Rossi’s desire, on the one hand—“Oh! could I throw / Into thy frame a voice” (51-52)—and her conclusion, on the other: “Yet, all the vision that within me wrought, / I cannot make thee!” (64-65). The first interpretation equates subjectivity with speaking by reading the relation as a material conditional: “If I could throw into thy frame a voice, then I could make thee.” By this reading, Rossi fails to “make” Ariadne, to endow her with a self and subjectivity, *because* she fails to make Ariadne speak. Such a reading equates subjectivity and speaking by suggesting that one becomes a subject simply by speaking; that one becomes an “I” simply by speaking “I”. Significantly, this position accords with the prevailing theory of women’s dramatic monologues: that women poets speak through a mask in order to circumvent the autobiographizing and thus de-authorizing “I” and to assume instead “the position of the authoritative speaking subject” (Byron, *DM* 46) by speaking in another’s voice. However, the second interpretation challenges this equation of subjectivity and speaking by suggesting that Rossi’s failure to “make” Ariadne does not follow *from* her failure to make Ariadne speak, but follows

irrespective of her ability to envoice Ariadne. Instead of the first proposed relation, “I cannot make thee *because* I cannot make thee speak,” the second suggests, “I cannot make thee *even supposing* I could make thee speak.” Or, closer to the original, “*even could I throw / Into thy frame a voice . . . I cannot make thee!*” With this alternative, which disregards whether or not Rossi “could” throw into Ariadne’s frame a voice, Hemans effectively overturns the former equation of subjectivity and speaking: Rossi cannot endow Ariadne with subjectivity merely by endowing her with a voice; by extension, one cannot assume the authoritative subject position merely by speaking.

While the first interpretation equates subjectivity with speaking, and the second problematizes this equation, the third resolves the problematic relation by explaining Rossi’s failure in terms of the necessary conditions of subjectivity and speaking. From the first postulate, that “I cannot make thee *because* I cannot make thee speak,” to the second, that “I cannot make thee *simply* by making thee speak,” the poem suggests a reconciling third: that “I cannot make thee because I cannot make thee speak *in the way that will consummate my status as a speaking subject.*” If, as Butler posits in *Excitable Speech* (1997), one achieves the status of speaking subject only when one’s speech is recognized as the speech of a subject, then, as Hemans suggests, Rossi’s failure to “make” Ariadne lies in her failure to make Ariadne speak in a way that will win such recognition—in Rossi’s words, in a way that will “wi[n] but one, *one* gush of tears, whose flow / Surely my parted spirit yet might know” (59-60, original emphasis). With this third possibility, Hemans reinstates the relation between subjectivity and speaking that was reversed by the second reading, but does so by redefining both terms of the relation. In this formulation, subjectivity still depends on speaking, but speaking is

defined not as mere utterance, but as exchange: as reciprocating acts of recognition. In order for Ariadne or Rossi to be consummated as a speaking subject, two things must happen: her speech must be recognized by the knight, must “win one gush of tears,” and this “flow” must in turn be recognized by Rossi; it must be one that her “parted spirit yet might know” (60). Subjectivity, in consequence, also becomes redefined in the poem: it is no longer simply the “I” of the subject who speaks, but the “I” of the subject whose speaking is recognized, affirmed, and authorized by the other. Without this recognition—and thus, without this other—the speaking “I” cannot “assume,” in either senses of the word, the authoritative subject position; one cannot will oneself into the position of authoritative speaking subject simply by speaking. Hence the all-important final line of the poem, in which Rossi ventriloquizes the voice of the knight in order to effect the recognition upon which her subjectivity depends. After Rossi’s realization that her desire for love and fame are but “Dreams, dreams!” (124), the poem ends with an incantatory invocation of a “spell o’er memory” intended to compel the knight to speak:

Yet I leave my name—
 As a deep thrill may linger on the lyre
 When its full chords are hush’d—awhile to live,
 And one day haply in thy heart revive
 Sad thoughts of me:—I leave it, with a sound,
 A spell o’er memory, mournfully profound,
 I leave it, on my country’s air to dwell,—
 Say proudly yet—“*Twas hers who lov’d me well!*”

(125-32, original emphasis)

Against the reading that Rossi uses her art “to turn herself back to the more passive traditional female role she desires, which is that of an object,” or that the poem’s ultimate moral is that “to desire is of little value; to be desired is all” (Byron, *DM* 51), this final line makes clear that Rossi’s ultimate desire is not for requited love, but for

recognition. Her final dream is not that in hearing her name and viewing her art, the knight will suddenly realize and proclaim his love for her, saying, “’Twas hers *whom* I lov’d well,” but that he will recognize her love, her subjectivity, her subject-status as the one who loved by saying, “’Twas hers *who* lov’d me well.” In short, Rossi’s desire is to be recognized as the subject of her own desire, not the object of his; her complaint against the knight is not that he failed to return her love, but that he failed to recognize—to “value” and to “know”—the love she gave: “thou, oh! thou, on whom my spirit cast / Unvalued wealth,—who know’st not what was given / In that devotedness” (107-9).

And yet Hemans makes equally clear in the poem’s headnote that the knight will never arrive at this moment of recognition; rather than “speaking to him” in the way that Rossi desires, her final work is regarded by the knight “with indifference” (RW 29). Significantly, this scene of failed recognition is not only the source of the poem, but also its outcome; it is the moment toward which the entire poem tends. This is significant because the knight’s indifference is not present in Ducis’s painting, but written into it by Hemans. As Grant Scott notes, Ducis’s original painting depicts a dramatically different response from the knight, one of “wonder and admiration” (43). By thus rewriting Rossi’s moment of success as a moment of failure, Hemans predestines Rossi’s speaking for failure, ensuring that Rossi’s closing fantasy of the knight’s recognition will remain a fantasy. Because it will remain a fantasy, Rossi’s subject-status will remain unconsummated in the poem; she will never assume the position of authoritative speaking subject because her speech is destined by Hemans to remain unheard, her subjectivity unrecognized. Indeed, she remains so not only to the knight, who will regard her art

“with indifference,” but also to the world, who equally fail to recognize her desire for and in her art: “Yet the world will see / Little of this, my parting work, in thee” (79-80).

Rather than a “transparent allegory” (Wolfson, “Domestic” 157) of the great divide between “Woman and Fame,” “Properzia Rossi” thus presents a complex allegory of subjectivity and subject-hood. Just as the failure of “the world” to recognize the designs of Rossi’s art denies her the subject-status she desires, so does the failure of Hemans’s critics to recognize the strategies of this poem deny both the poem and the poet a position in the dramatic monologue genre. And yet, Hemans’s addition of the mask to the monologue form in “Properzia Rossi” enables her to accomplish precisely that which is purported to be the purpose of the dramatic monologue: she dramatizes the self “precisely in order to examine it, and in place of the autonomous self,” she too “propose[s] and explore[s] a more complex, fragmented and contextualised representation of the subject” (Byron, *DM* 45). Indeed, it is difficult to find a statement about the dramatic monologue that does not apply to “Properzia Rossi.” In particular, it is difficult to see how the “common tactic in dramatic monologues” of having the speaker “enact a moment of self-analysis and self-awareness through the positing of a self-image” (Byron, *DM* 63) differs from the self-mirroring and self-analysis of “Properzia Rossi.” Or how Hemans’s strategy of “self-objectification” in this poem differs from the one developed, according to Byron, by later women poets, described as follows: “the self-image that is scrutinized becomes a substitute for the more conventional audience and thereby suggests the fractured female subject produced by Victorian gender ideology” (*DM* 63). By adopting a mask and by projecting a mirror-image of both herself and the act of speaking the self, Hemans not only scrutinizes the self, but subverts it, rendering

undecidable the self who speaks and fissuring that self along multiple lines of voice and speaking.

VI. Fantasies of Survival

In “Arabella Stuart,” Hemans exploits the mask once again to explore the possibilities of dramatic distance for the purposes of interrogating the self and subjectivity. Like “Properzia Rossi,” which rewrites Ducis’s painting, “Arabella Stuart” rewrites another male account of a critical moment in a woman’s “life’s history,” Isaac D’Israeli’s (1766-1848) “The Loves of ‘The Lady Arabella’” (1823). D’Israeli’s account, as Hemans summarizes in the poem’s headnote, tells the life history of Arbella (or Arabella) Stuart (1575-1615), niece of Mary Queen of Scots, who was imprisoned by James I for marrying against the king’s wishes. While in separate confinement, Arabella and her newly wedded husband, William Seymour, manage a plan of escape.¹³ The plan fails, Arabella is recaptured and re-imprisoned, while Seymour escapes. Under the suffering of this second imprisonment, Arabella’s “mind grew impaired,” in D’Israeli’s words, and she “lost her reason.” This is evidenced for D’Israeli by the state of her surviving writings, which he describes as “[s]ome effusions, often begun and never ended, written and erased, incoherent and rational” (qtd. in Hemans, *RW* 8).

At first glance, Hemans’s description of the poem’s purpose seems to confirm the reading of the poem as but another attempt to speak female subjectivity, or to “celebrat[e] the lives, events, and imagined thoughts of unremembered women in history” (Feldman, *RW* cover). Hemans asserts in the headnote:

¹³ By referring to the speaker as “Arabella” rather than “Stuart,” I am following Hemans’s own practice in the poem’s headnote.

The following poem, meant as some record of [Arabella's] fate, and the imagined fluctuations of her thoughts and feelings, is supposed to commence during the time of her first imprisonment, whilst her mind was yet buoyed up by the consciousness of Seymour's affection, and the cherished hope of eventual deliverance. (RW 8)

However, Hemans's very choice of dramatic persona suggests that the principal interest of the poem lies not in the act of speaking, celebrating or essentializing female subjectivity, but in interrogating its conditions of possibility by dramatizing a subjectivity at risk. This is confirmed by her choice of dramatic situation, Arabella's "first imprisonment, whilst her mind was yet buoyed up." By making it clear in the headnote that Arabella's "cherished hope of eventual deliverance" voiced in the poem would never be fulfilled, Hemans endows the reader with a foreknowledge that will ironize Arabella's ensuing speech and de-authorize her subjectivity. Accordingly, the poem stages at every turn the way in which Arabella's speech speaks against her. When Arabella asserts early in the poem, "I know, I know our love / Shall yet call gentle angels from above, / By its undying fervour; and prevail" (34-36), the reader knows with certainty that it will not. Similarly, after Arabella's failed escape and recapture, her assertion that "unto me, I know, thy true love's token / Shall one day be deliverance" (125-26) is undercut by the reader's foreknowledge of her ultimate fate.

"Arabella Stuart" thus stages not simply another attempt to speak female subjectivity—to speak Arabella's "imagined thoughts and feelings"—but another investigation into the necessary conditions of subjectivity and speaking through the dramatic distance afforded by the mask. Like "Properzia Rossi," "Arabella Stuart" suggests that subjectivity is dependent on the recognition of another, and like "Properzia Rossi," "Arabella Stuart" dramatizes this dependence by absenting its necessary

condition, the auditor or other upon whom recognition depends. In “Arabella Stuart,” Hemans underscores the auditor’s absence through Arabella’s repeated address to Seymour in the poem and makes his absence explicit to the reader by her direct question mid-way through the monologue: “My friend, my friend! where art thou?” (128). In the absence of a reply, or any reply to her speech thus far, Arabella’s desperation for recognition moves her from stanza to stanza in search of an auditor, from the flowers of Part VIII to the abstract and equally silent entities of “Love and Freedom” in Part IX, to the still absent Seymour in the next stanza, to Heaven in the next—all of whom fail to reply. Unlike “Properzia Rossi,” then, whose drama ends with the failure of Rossi’s speech to win recognition, “Arabella Stuart” explores the impact of such instances of linguistic failure on the subjectivity of the speaker. In this disjointed movement between disconnected auditors, ideas and stanzas, the monologue dramatizes the deterioration of Arabella’s subjectivity by restaging the disorder of Arabella’s writing—those “effusions, often begun and never ended, written and erased, incoherent and rational” (*RW* 8). However, in contrast to D’Israeli’s account, which presents Arabella’s linguistic disintegration as evidence of her mental disorder (the letters are adduced as witness to her “impaired mind” and “lost reason”), Hemans’s poetic account suggests that Arabella’s disintegrating speech is not merely the sign or symptom of her disintegrating subjectivity, but its very cause.¹⁴ At the height of her desperation, it is the failure of her speech to be heard that places her life and subjectivity at risk:

Aid!—comes there yet no aid?—the voice of blood
 Passes Heaven’s gate, ev’n ere the crimson flood
 Sinks thro’ the greensward!—is there not a cry

¹⁴ Isobel Armstrong offers an alternative explanation for Arabella’s mental disintegration: her struggle and failure to make the past coherent, the collapse of “the meaning of her history” (329).

From the wrung heart, of power, thro' agony,
To pierce the clouds? Hear, Mercy! hear me! None
That bleed and weep beneath the smiling sun,
Have heavier cause!—yet hear!—my soul grows dark—
Who hears the last shriek from the sinking bark,
On the mid seas, and with the storm alone,
And bearing to th' abyss, unseen, unknown,
Its freight of human hearts?—th' o'ermastering wave!
Who shall tell how it rush'd—and none to save? (175-86)

To remain unheard not only places her survival at risk, since there will be “none to save” her, none to “hea[r] the last shriek from the sinking bark”; it also places her subjectivity at risk: there will be “none to save”—no one there to save—since, “unseen, unknown,” she fails to register, fails to exist to any other.

At stake in Arabella's speaking is thus not simply her literal survival, but also her linguistic survival, her survival in and through language, for it is on her linguistic survival that her very subjectivity depends. As D'Israeli's account demonstrates, Arabella's viability as a subject is determined directly by the intelligibility of her language, as it is her speech that constitutes her subjectivity. Read as both “incoherent and rational,” her speech constitutes her subjectivity as “impaired” or mad, placing her status as subject at risk. In this way, “Arabella Stuart” extends the relation between speaking and subjectivity proposed by “Properzia Rossi.” If, as “Properzia Rossi” suggests, one's status as authoritative speaking subject depends on the recognition of an other, “Arabella Stuart” suggests further that recognition depends, in turn, on the recognizability of one's speech—on the extent to which it sounds like authorized speech; the extent to which it embodies the “norms of speakability,” in Judith Butler's terms, those “implicit and explicit norms that govern the kind of speech that will be legible as the speech of a subject” (*ES* 133). In other words, in order to achieve the status of “subject of speech,” in

order to assume the position of authoritative speaking subject, one's speech must first be "legible" or recognizable as the kind of speech that is uttered by such a subject, which requires that it obeys the norms governing what kinds of speech constitute the speech of an authoritative speaking subject. Put simply, to be an authoritative speaking subject, one must speak and sound like one. Thus: "If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech"—for example, incoherently or unintelligibly—or "in ways that cannot be regarded . . . as the speech of a subject, then that speech is discounted and the viability of the subject called into question" (*ES* 136). In sum: "To move outside of the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject. To embody the norms of speakability in one's speech is to consummate one's status as a subject of speech" (*ES* 133).

Arabella's speech places her subject status at risk not only in being both "incoherent and rational," dramatized by her disjointed movement from stanza to stanza in search of an auditor, but also in moving outside of the domain of feminine speakability—in embodying speech that cannot be regarded as the speech of a female subject. Hemans demarcates the borders of this domain for the reader by staging Arabella's transgression of its limits. During her second imprisonment, when her faith begins to falter, Arabella asks tentatively, "Dost thou forget me, Seymour? . . . Dost thou forget me in my hope's decay?" (163, 170). Such doubt and such questions border on the unspeakable, however, as evidenced by Arabella's swift retreat back into the domain of speakability. Hemans punctuates this turn in Arabella's speech by replacing the doubt of the question mark with the certainty of the exclamation point:

Dost thou forget me in my hope's decay?—
Thou canst not!—thro' the silent night, ev'n now,
I, that need prayer so much, awake and pray
Still first for thee. (170-73)

By speaking in the language of devoted self-sacrifice, Arabella embodies in her speech the norms of feminine speakability; she thereby reenters the normativity of language, restores her subject status, and rescues her subjectivity at risk. But only briefly—only long enough for Hemans to mark the borders of speakability, in order to set the stage for the full drama of speaking about to unfold. The passage ends with another turn, punctuated now by the return to the question mark as a sign of doubt: “Oh! gentle, gentle friend! / How shall I bear this anguish to the end?” (173-74). This anguish culminates in the next stanza in Arabella’s desperate cries to be heard, seen and known, discussed above, but the poem’s drama of speaking climaxes in the stanza following, in Arabella’s full denunciation of Seymour:

Thou hast forsaken me! I feel, I know,
There would be rescue if this were not so.
Thou’rt at the chase, thou’rt at the festive board,
Thou’rt where the red wine free and high is pour’d,
Thou’rt where the dancers meet!—a magic glass
Is set within my soul, and proud shapes pass,
Flushing it o’er with pomp from bower and hall;—
I see one shadow, stateliest there of all,—
Thine!—What dost *thou* amidst the bright and fair,
Whispering light words, and mocking my despair?
It is not well of thee!—my love was more
Than fiery song may breathe, deep thought explore,
And there thou smilest, while my heart is dying,
With all its blighted hopes around it lying;
Ev’n thou, on whom they hung their last green leaf—
Yet smile, smile on! too bright are thou for grief!
(187-202, original emphasis)

Arabella’s assertion that her love was more than “fiery song” and “deep thought” embodies an act of self-assertion uncharacteristic of “femininity” in general and of

Hemans's female characters in particular. Arabella thus doubles the impossibility of her speech by coupling her denunciation of Seymour with an act of unfeminine self-assertion, effectively thrusting herself fully and firmly outside of the domain of speakability. Her only recourse for recovering her subject status is to recover her speech, to reenter the normativity of language by speaking and "sounding like" a female subject of speech. To do so, she must not only rewrite her speech to embody the norms of feminine speakability, but must also attempt to erase the speech that first placed her subjectivity at risk. Hence, on the brink of death, she speaks:

Alone, alone,
And sad in youth, but chasten'd, I depart,
Bow'g to heaven. Yet, yet my woman's heart
Shall wake a spirit and a power to bless,
Ev'n in this hour's o'ershadowing fearfulness,
Thee, its first love!—oh! tender still, and true!
Be it forgotten if mine anguish threw
Drops from its bitter fountain on thy name,
Tho' but a moment. (231-39)

Rather than erasing those drops of bitterness, however, Arabella reinvokes them by the very request that they be forgotten. In Butler's words, in the attempt to censor out the unspeakable from her speech, Arabella "reproduces and restages the very speech that [she] seeks to shut down" (*ES* 129). This double gesture is significant, however, for re-enacting the contradictions of Arabella's final writings—those effusions "written and erased"—for it suggests that such gestures are the condition of linguistic survival for the female subject. If to become a subject of speech the female speaker must obey the norms that govern feminine speakability, and if such norms prohibit self-assertion and prescribe self-effacement, then to speak the self (itself a gesture of self-assertion) without jeopardizing one's subject-status requires the female speaker to speak with double and

contradictory intent: to efface the self in speaking the self, to speak both “incoherently” and “rationally”—in short, to speak “impossibly.” Hence the double movement and divided meanings of Arabella’s final speaking, a farewell to Seymour tensed between a blessing and a curse, between self-effacement and self-assertion, between speakability and survival:

Now, with fainting frame,
With soul just lingering on the flight begun,
To bind for thee its last dim thoughts in one,
I bless thee! Peace be on thy noble head,
Years of bright fame, when I am with the dead!
I bid this prayer survive me, and retain
Its might, again to bless thee, and again!
Thou hast been gather’d into my dark fate
Too much; too long, for my sake, desolate
Hath been thine exiled youth; but now take back,
From dying hands, thy freedom, and re-track
(After a few kind tears for her whose days
Went out in dreams of thee) the sunny ways
Of hope, and find thou happiness! Yet send,
Ev’n then, in silent hours a thought, dear friend!
Down to my voiceless chamber; for thy love
Hath been to me all gifts of earth above,
Tho’ bought with burning tears! It is the sting
Of death to leave that vainly-precious thing
In this cold world! (240-59)

Framed by Arabella’s call to forget her earlier aspersions against him, this benediction becomes framed by those very aspersions, and thus, becomes both consecrated and contaminated by those earlier “drops” of bitterness. To bless him “now” (240), on the brink of death, with “soul just lingering on the flight begun” (241), cannot erase and can only remind Seymour that he is the one on whom she blames her death; he, the one on whom she had hung her last hope (201); his abandonment, the reason no rescue comes (187). Indeed, by framing this passage with the earlier images of Seymour “at the chase” (189), the “festive board” (189), and “amidst the bright and fair” (195), Hemans not only

ironizes Arabella's present gesture of releasing Seymour from her "dark fate," but also raises to absurdity Arabella's next injunction for him to "take back" a "freedom" (249-50) he already enjoys. To ask for "a few kind tears" (251) now is thus a thinly disguised indictment of his guilt, a demand for a sign of his remorse. Interjecting it as a parenthetical aside, Arabella attempts to underplay this request which borders on "unspeakable," but by the very same gesture, Hemans underscores it, emphasizing it typographically.¹⁵

To the inherent doubleness of language and the discursive doubleness of the traditional dramatic monologue, Hemans thus adds the doubleness of "impossible speech." Where language is by nature polysemous, irrupting with meanings which a language user can neither contain nor control, the dramatic monologue, as traditionally theorized, exposes and exploits this linguistic vulnerability of its speakers by dramatizing the way in which their speech can speak against them. If the form is used for the purpose of character revelation, then the dramatic monologue stages the double consciousness of the speaker: the way in which unconscious motivations or meanings surface in the course of speaking and subvert conscious speech. On the other hand, if the form is used for the purpose of ideological critique, such as a critique of the nature of the self or subjectivity, or a critique of broader social systems, then the dramatic monologue stages the double consciousness of the poet and speaker: the way in which the poet's consciousness operates through or against the speaker's consciousness, confirming, countering, or complicating speech, in order to effect this critique. In addition to these two layers of

¹⁵ The doubleness of Arabella's speech is crystallized by the figure of the gift. If Seymour's love is to Arabella "all gifts of earth above, / Tho' bought with burning tears!" (256-57), then it is not a "gift," but something for which she paid dearly ("bought with burning tears"). This "gift," therefore, in being both valued above "all gifts of earth" and valued to no avail, a "vainly-precious thing" (258), is doubly overvalued.

doubleness, then, Hemans adds a third: that of “speakability” and “impossibility.” Unlike the tension between conscious and unconscious speaking in monologues of character revelation, whereby the speaker is unaware of the counterforce of unconscious meanings, Arabella must *consciously* speak against herself, must deliberately and simultaneously perform two opposing acts of “writing and erasing,” speaking and counterspeaking whenever her speech transgresses the borders of the speakable. Significantly, it does so often. Not only does Arabella twice jeopardize her subject status by questioning Seymour and asserting herself, but she does so a third time in questioning God and asserting the possibility of her agency. After her realization that Seymour has forsaken her, Arabella challenges the cultural demand on women, often voiced in Hemans’s own poetry, to “suffer and be still” (“Madeline” 62), and claims for herself the agency of action, even if it is an agency in death:

Death!—what, is death a lock’d and treasur’d thing,
 Guarded by swords of fire? a hidden spring,
 A fabled fruit, that I should thus endure,
 As if the world within me held no cure?
 Wherefore not spread free wings[?] (203-207)

Of course, Arabella must revoke this thought, rewrite her speech, and then erase its original inscription if she is to remain a viable subject, which she does immediately. She turns abruptly in the passage from the unspeakable to the speakable: “Heaven, Heaven! controul / These thoughts . . . Give strength to pray” (207-8, 211). Arabella then attempts to expunge her “sin” of speaking with a prayer of repentance, the very embodiment of speakability: “forgive, my Father! if Thy child, / Rock’d on its heaving darkness, hath grown wild, / And sinn’d in her despair . . . Forgive, forgive! / Take me to peace!” (216-224).

Far from essentializing woman, then, Hemans exposes in this monologue the impossible condition of the female subject. If every act of self-assertion places the female subject at risk, then linguistic survival requires women to speak “impossibly”: to simultaneously write and erase themselves, speak and efface themselves, speak against themselves, speak doubly. And if the condition of linguistic survival for women is “impossible speech,” then, Hemans suggests, women are condemned to be “impossible subjects”: always at risk, always speaking from the borders of the speakable, authorized subjects only insofar as they remain de-authorized speakers.

It is the dramatic monologue form—the combination of mask and monologue—which enables Hemans to stage this impossibility. By rewriting Arabella’s surviving writings as speech, Hemans forecloses any possibility of Arabella’s survival. Unlike writing, which offers the indefinite possibility of being recovered and read, speech requires an auditor at the moment of speaking to witness the legibility of the speech and affirm the viability of the subject. As speech, Arabella’s attempt to recover her subject status by restoring her speech to the domain of speakability is thus destined, without an auditor, to be lost to history. Without an other to witness her speech act, to both “hear” (179) and “tell” (186), Arabella will remain, as she feared, “unseen, unknown” (184). Hemans underscores this condition of linguistic survival by having Arabella proffer herself at the close of the poem to the imagined gaze of Seymour, specularizing herself in a fantasy of survival: “What were it then, if thou, / With thy fond eyes, wert gazing on me now?” (259-60). But her answer is clear: “thou hear’st not” (263). Thus, once again, Hemans destines her dramatic speaker for linguistic failure by absencing the auditor necessary to witness and authorize her speech. While in “Properzia Rossi,” she does so

by rewriting Rossi's success as a failure, in "Arabella Stuart," she does so more perversely by rewriting Arabella's failure, her "incoherent writings," as successful speech, as the embodiment of speakability, but only to negate that success by absenting the auditor. Arabella is thus destined by history and predestined by Hemans to remain unknown, unconsummated, "impossible."

Conclusion: Fantasies of Agency

Undoubtedly, Hemans shares her speakers' dream of a future of possibility. Both "Properzia Rossi" and "Arabella Stuart" end with a fantasy of recognition and a fantasy of survival. Rossi leaves her name as "a spell o'er memory" and as a spell *of* memory itself: "As a deep thrill may linger on the lyre / When its full chords are hush'd—awhile to live, / And one day haply in thy heart revive / Sad thoughts of me" (126-29). Arabella similarly ends her speech and life with a gesture toward that "one day" of possibility:

Farewell! and yet once more,
Farewell!—the passion of long years I pour
Into that word: thou hear'st not,—but the woe
And fervour of its tones may one day flow
To thy heart's holy place; there let them dwell—
We shall o'ersweep the grave to meet—Farewell! (261-66)

However, though it may be tempting to read these monologues as Hemans's attempt to rescue her speakers from linguistic failure by inaugurating outside of the poems the witnesses absent within them (*viz.* the readers), I suggest that such a reading not only robs the poems of their dramatic force, the inescapability of "impossibility" for the female subject, but also risks relegating the poems themselves to impossibility. To read the monologues as poems of linguistic survival rather than linguistic failure requires the reader to ignore or discount Hemans's poetic innovations: the way in which she ironizes

and de-authorizes her speakers by way of the mask, the way in which she rewrites her sources to predestine their linguistic failure, and the multiple ways in which she enacts their “impossibility.” In short, it would be to relegate these poems to impossibility for disobeying the norms of a certain feminist domain of speakability, one which insists on the triumph of the female subject and persists in the fantasy of agency, authority and power by the mere act of speaking. When we recall that Hemans need not have rewritten Rossi’s success as a failure, or rewritten Arabella’s writings as speech, we must recognize that Hemans’s monologues attempt not simply to rescue or reinstate their speech and subjectivity, but more importantly, to register their impossibility. It is precisely by so doing that Hemans initiates “the more complex exploration of the fragmented and contextualized self that is now seen to be characteristic” of the dramatic monologue (Byron, *DM* 55)—and, indeed, in a way more complex than many later dramatic monologues will rival.

Chapter 4

Augusta Webster's Ambiguous Auditors: Rewriting Browning, Reprising Hemans

Unlike Felicia Hemans, Augusta Webster has secured a firm place within the dramatic monologue genre. Though she published in a full range of genres, from Greek translations, social and political essays, a novel and a children's fantasy, to short lyrics, long verse narratives, closet dramas and stage plays (both classical tragedy and romantic comedy), in addition to a posthumously published sonnet sequence, it is for her dramatic monologues that Webster is principally known and praised. Angela Leighton asserts that Webster's "best poetry" consists of her dramatic monologues ("Augusta Webster" 418); Florence Boos, that the genre forms Webster's "best mode of expression" (284); Valentine Cunningham, that Webster's "claim to poetic importance is in her development of the womanly dramatic monologue" (768); Christine Sutphin, that her dramatic monologues constitute "her most lasting contribution to English poetry" (*Augusta Webster* 11); and Dorothy Mermin, that Webster's "best poems are long dramatic monologues in the style of Robert Browning" (*Godiva's Ride* 79).

Since, as Patricia Rigg points out, Webster produced "proportionately little in the way of dramatic monologue" ("Lyric Muse" 135), and since few studies offer comparative analysis of Webster's dramatic monologues in relation to her other verse, this critical consensus that her dramatic monologues constitute the best of all her poetry deserves some scrutiny. Mermin's statement above offers a preliminary answer: the success of Webster's monologues in both her own time and in ours owes a significant part to her deployment of a genre that was rising in critical currency—in other words, to her exploitation of Browning's "style" of dramatic monologue precisely when it counted

most. The publication and reception history of Webster's most acclaimed collections support this thesis. Webster's first collection of dramatic monologues, *Dramatic Studies* (1866), appeared just two years after Browning's *Dramatis Personae* (1864), the collection which, along with Browning's *Men and Women* (1855), had established the form firmly enough for three separate critics in three separate periodicals, just three years after the appearance of Webster's *Dramatic Studies*, to delineate what one critic calls "Browning's method" (Forman 118) and another explicitly names the "dramatic monologue" (Buchanan 400). Only one year later, at the height of critical attention to Browning's form, Webster would publish *Portraits* (1870), her second and best known collection of dramatic monologues. By the time Webster published an expanded third edition of *Portraits*, in 1893, her poems had been so persistently compared to Browning's that the *Athenaeum* reviewer of the new collection found it necessary to defend her originality: "both in mood and in method," the reviewer writes, "Mrs. Webster is thoroughly herself. Superficially, of course, her dramatic studies suggest Robert Browning; but it is suggestion only. Her style and mode of treatment are her own. The point of view, the vehicle, the cadence, are unborrowed" (277). Yet the association of Webster's poetry with Browning's was substantial enough to last until the end of her life—and beyond. Browning's name appears in Webster's obituary of the same journal as a sign of her literary achievement; Theodore Watts-Dunton writes there: "Poetic immortality is . . . a relative term. Enough, then, for the memory of the lady we have just lost that during her own life her pathetic picture of the 'Castaway' has touched a heart here and there, and that among these hearts was Robert Browning's" (qtd. in Hickock, "Augusta Webster" 343).

In the twentieth-century, Webster's reemergence in the critical consciousness, after nearly a century's absence, similarly coincides with the revival of critical interest in Browning's dramatic monologue. Once Langbaum's landmark study of 1957 had opened the "floodgates" of theory and criticism on the dramatic monologue (Scheinberg, "Recasting" 173), the wave that rose rapidly in the seventies crested in the eighties into no less than five books on the genre in as many years, at least twice that number in journal articles, and a special issue of the distinguished journal, *Victorian Poetry*, titled "The Dramatic 'I' Poem" (1984).¹ In this issue devoted to the dramatic monologue, at the height of critical attention to the form, the "primary female writer of monologues" (Byron, "Rethinking" 86) is conspicuously absent. When Webster does reappear on the modern critical scene, notably only one year later in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1985), her dramatic monologues are almost invariably compared to Browning's.

Admittedly, the most frequent comparisons between Webster's and Browning's dramatic monologues seem justified by the obvious similarities between a few of their speakers. The speaker of Webster's "A Painter" (1866), for instance, unmistakably recalls Browning's eponymous Andrea del Sarto, both of whom seek out by way of the monologue a reason or rationalization for their artistic failure. Interestingly, both lay a significant part of the blame on the burden of having wives. The religious doubt of Webster's "A Preacher" similarly invites a comparison with Browning's Bishop Blougram, though the honest skepticism of Webster's speaker clearly contrasts the cynicism and casuistry of Browning's Bishop. It is the more tenuous connections,

¹ The five books I have in mind are Dorothy Mermin's *The Audience in the Poem* (1983), Carol T. Christ's *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (1984), Adena Rosmarin's *The Power of Genre* (1985), Loy D. Martin's *Browning's Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject* (1985) and Ekbert Faas's *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* (1988).

however, which reveal the grip of Browning's model of dramatic monologue on the critical imagination. In one recent study, Webster's "Sister Annunciata" (1866) has found unlikely kinship with Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855) by way of Lippi's two lines against sexual repression (R.P. Fletcher 303): that one "should not take a fellow eight years old / And make him swear to never kiss the girls" (224-25). Yet Annunciata's anguished struggle with this renunciation of "Egypt's fleshpots" (30), as Annunciata calls it—both romantic love and sexual desire—bound as it is within the confines of the convent, is surely irreconcilable with Lippi's nightly mockery of sexual self-denial. As Lippi states casually, significantly suggesting through their apposition the logical equivalence of masculinity and sexual freedom: "I'm grown a man no doubt, I've broken bounds" (223). In an even unlikelier connection, another recent study compares Webster's prostitute speaker of "A Castaway" to Browning's Pope of *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69) for the speakers' unique consciousness of their relationship to textual representations (Slinn 162). Critics thus seem unable to resist the comparison of "the primary female" and the "primary male writer of monologues", as these very appellatives by Byron suggest ("Rethinking" 86).

Of course, critics are quick to assert that Webster is no mere imitator of Browning, commonly contrasting the materialist politics of her poems with Browning's metaphysical idealism. At the same time, however, they continue to cite her "indebtedness" to Browning and to name him the "main model" of her dramatic monologues (Leighton, *VWP* 173, 178). For instance, the most recent account of Webster's literary career in the authoritative *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (2001) identifies Browning as Webster's "strongest contemporary influence" (335) for the

dramatic monologue and repeatedly asserts the “resemblance” of Webster’s poems to his. Most notably, Mermin, who absents Webster from her earlier studies of men’s and women’s dramatic monologues—*The Audience in the Poem* (1983) and “The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet” (1986), respectively—includes Webster in her 1993 study of women writers, *Godiva’s Ride*, but only in the company of Browning; it is there that Mermin pronounces Webster’s best poems to be the “long dramatic monologues in the style of Robert Browning” (79). Moreover, Mermin’s emphasis on the “aberrant points of view” and “the mysterious, morally ambiguous or evil figures” (GR 79) of Webster’s dramatic monologues reveals further the extent of Browning’s influence on both the modern conceptualization of the form and the assessment of Webster’s poetry.

On the one hand, then, the insistence of this comparison between Webster and Browning, even in those studies which seek explicitly to sever, or at least loosen, this tie, calls to mind Cynthia Scheinberg’s important caution against the tendency, when comparing women poets to canonical male writers, to “other” women poets as different and lacking in their uses of genre, and the danger of overlooking their generic innovations (“Recasting” 186). On the other hand, it seems equally important to recognize the conditions of literary survival which have necessitated these very comparisons. Since Webster, like Hemans and all writers, is subject to the norms governing generic “speakability”—the literary conventions that govern the kind of poetic acts that will be legible as “dramatic monologue,” to adapt Butler’s explanation of “speakability” (ES 133)—and since the norms for the dramatic monologue continue to be defined on the basis of Browning’s poems, the rise, recovery, and reign of Webster’s

dramatic monologues in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism seem largely attributable to their resemblance to “Browning’s method.” The frequency with which Webster’s dramatic monologues are compared to Browning’s in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism attests to this hypothesis.

By the same token, Webster’s “legibility” to modern critics seems to owe as much to her difference from Hemans as to her similarity to Browning. The frequency with which Webster is contrasted with Hemans likewise attests to this. For many critics, Webster represents the positive and progressive shift away from the poetics of sensibility associated with Hemans. In one of the earliest studies to propound this meliorative trend in women’s poetry, Leighton’s *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992), Leighton asserts that Webster’s “best work” does not “speak out” from the heart as Hemans’s does, “but speaks against the heart, distrusting its conventions of feeling and the beautiful effortlessness of genius it upholds” (183)—what Leighton earlier calls, more stridently, the “singing sincerity,” “facile warm-heartedness” (173), and “fanatical gospels of feeling” which “mar the work of Hemans and L.E.L.” both (183). More recently, in the latest book on the dramatic monologue, Byron upholds Leighton’s judgment, arguing that it is against the “types of the feminine” produced by “such early women poets as Hemans” that women writers like Webster would soon begin to react (*DM* 55).

Those few studies which have offered comparative analysis of Webster’s dramatic monologues with her other verse confirms this thesis that the success of Webster’s dramatic monologues among modern critics owes equally to the resemblance of her poems to Browning’s as to the difference of her poetics from Hemans’s. Sutphin’s

selection of Webster's "most aesthetically and politically compelling work" for her recent collection of Webster's poetry excludes most of Webster's lyrics, deeming them "slight compared with her dramatic work," and omits only one poem from *Portraits*, "The Manuscript of St. Alexius," for failing in those key characteristics of Browning's monologues that have come to define the genre, sympathy and irony (AW 15). Leighton and Hickock are similarly dismissive of Webster's early lyrics and ballads for their "routine pathos" (Leighton, *VWP* 174) and "melancholy" (Hickock, "Augusta Webster" 333)—characteristics commonly attributed to Hemans's poetry—favouring instead the "ironic realism," "restless skepticism," and "demystifying imagination" (Leighton, *VWP* 175-177) of her dramatic monologues. Hickock's concluding statement on Webster for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* perhaps sums it up best: "Augusta Webster is recognized chiefly for the psychological and social accuracy and the persistent feminism of her dramatic monologues" ("Augusta" 343)—in short, for a poetics that aligns her most closely with Browning, and a politics that differentiates her most dramatically from Hemans.

I propose to rethink Webster's relation both to the dramatic monologue tradition, as represented by Browning, and to women's poetic tradition, as represented by Hemans, by reversing the usual lines of affiliation between them. Focusing on Webster's experiments with auditors, I suggest that her innovations not only challenge the model of speech and subjectivity which underpins Browning's dramatic monologue, but also extends the model of speech and subjectivity which underpins Hemans's. By this double gesture, I seek to recover not only Webster's generic innovations through my examination of her divergence from Browning's model, on the one hand, but also to

recover women poets' wider influence on the genre by revealing Webster's indebtedness to Hemans, on the other.

I. Rewriting Browning

One primary difference between Webster's and Browning's dramatic monologues has already received much critical attention: Webster's turn away from Browning's focus on the psychology of his speakers which dramatized a mind at odds with itself, to focus instead on the socio-historical conditions that have produced this self-divided speaker now characteristic of the form. Browning's "Andrea del Sarto" (1855) and Webster's "A Painter" exemplify this key difference. Whereas Browning's eponymous painter scans the depths of his soul and the heights of aesthetic theory to explain his artistic failure, Webster's equally eponymous but pointedly unnamed painter accounts for his own failure in terms of socio-economic survival: "A man with wife and children, and no more / To give them than his hackwork brings him in, / Must be a hack and let his masterpiece / Go to the devil" (56-59). This difference has been interpreted in various ways: Webster's dramatic monologues have been deemed "more benign" but "more determinedly secular and everyday than Browning's" (Leighton, *VWP* 178); their "ultimate target" defined as "more the systems which produce the speakers than the speakers themselves" (Byron, *DM* 59); and her poems described as dramatizing "not so much the self-ignorance and internal contradictions of the speaker as the social contradictions of the Victorian gender system" (Brown, "Determined Heroines" 89).

In contrast, the second significant difference between the two poets has received very little critical commentary: the consistent absence in Webster's dramatic monologues

of a key feature of Browning's, the implied but silent auditor. For Webster's contemporaries, the auditor was a persistent enough presence in Browning's monologues to become an undisputed feature of the form. According to H. Buxton Forman's 1869 account of "Browning's method," "the person addressed" in his monologues is assumed to be present and capable of responding, not merely an idealized self or fantasized other, since "we learn that the person addressed has said or done something" either "by detail on the speaker's part, or by some such artifice as a sudden shift in the tone" (118). In contrast, half of Webster's eighteen dramatic monologues do not contain auditors, and only three feature auditors to whom the entirety of the monologue is addressed. In the remaining poems with auditors—"A Preacher" (1866), "A Painter" (1866), "A Castaway" (1870), "Tired" (1870) and "In an Almshouse" (1870)—the auditor's entrance into the poem interrupts or ends the monologue rather than occasioning and structuring it, as in "Browning's method." In consequence, the person addressed in the poem is not the true auditor of the monologue, since most of what the speaker says in the poem goes unheard by the person addressed. The auditors' presence in these poems thus merely foregrounds their foregoing absence. Perhaps it is for this reason that some reviewers of Webster's poetry preferred to classify her poems as "blank verse introspective idyll," "soliloquy," or simply "monologue," rather than full "dramatic monologue" proper (Sutphin, *AW* 15).

For modern critics, in contrast, the auditor's actual presence in the monologue is less essential to the form than its imaginary presence. As Martin contends, "[a]ll dramatic monologues at least fantasize a listener" (133) else, as T.S. Eliot puts it, "why should a man put on fancy dress and a mask only to talk to himself?" ("Three Voices"

96). For this reason, the few critics to comment on the absence of auditors in Webster's poems maintain the poems' status as dramatic monologue by positing the speaker's self (Pearsall; Byron, *DM*), the reader (Slinn), or the larger reading public (Leighton, *VWP*) as the auditor. As Leighton argues, the polemics of Webster's monologues make them public rather than private speeches, "however silent they may be" (*VWP* 193). There is one exception, however: in her essay, "Augusta Webster: The Social Politics of Monodrama" (2000), Rigg adduces the auditor's absence to defend a genre reassignment of Webster's poems from dramatic monologue to monodrama. Perhaps a similar anxiety about the generic class is at work when critics refer to Webster's poems as "interior monologue" (Sutphin, *AW* 15; Demoor, "Power" 135) or "dramatic lyric" (R.P. Fletcher 296) without further comment. My aim here is not to quibble over classification but to question the purpose that animates these poems which have adopted a highly familiar form only to absent one of its key identifying features. If, as Dorothy Mermin argues, "[p]oems with auditors are about communication, regarding the individual as part of society and speech in terms of its effect on an audience" (*Audience* 8), then Webster's poems urge the question: what are poems without auditors, in a genre known for having them, about?

Webster's little known poem from *Dramatic Studies* (1866), "Jeanne d'Arc," offers a unique lens for examining this question, populated as it is by auditors that are neither fully present nor entirely absent. In contrast to Mermin's definition of "poems with auditors," wherein "the auditor is human, adult, alive, awake, physically present, and able to hear and respond—not God, nor a mythological figure, nor a real or fictional reader of words on paper" (*Audience* 2), "Jeanne d'Arc" features auditors who are not

human or alive but possibly present and certainly able to hear and respond. From the soldiers of her opening dream to the saints of her visions to, finally, God, Jeanne's auditors either appear in invisible realms or do not appear at all. Poised in this liminal space between poems with auditors and poems without, "Jeanne d'Arc" reveals just what is at stake in the auditor convention of the dramatic monologue and, by extension, what is at stake in the act of speaking.

In Browning's model of dramatic monologue, as various critics have argued, what is at stake in the act of speaking is linguistic power. Accordingly, the auditor functions in the genre as a sign of that power, regardless of the gender of the speaker. For instance, in Browning's paradigmatic monologue, "My Last Duchess" (1842), the envoy's silence points up the Duke's "extraordinary freedom to speak": his freedom to tell, "with absolute self-command and impunity, the worst of truths" (Mermin, *AP* 48-49). Similarly, in "Count Gismond" (1842), the companion poem to "My Last Duchess," the power of the female speaker is likewise signaled by the auditor's silence. As Mermin argues, Adela's silence during the Countess's "blatant" and "unnecessary" lie to Gismond at the end of the poem—that she was engaging in idle conversation with Adela when she was in fact recounting the whole of her sordid story—demonstrates, like the envoy's silence, the speaker's freedom and power (*Audience* 51). In fact, what Langbaum adduces as evidence of the auditor's insignificance to the form, that the speaker "never learns anything" from the auditor's remarks, and that "they do not change the meaning of the utterance" (187), is but another sign of the speaker's persistent power in Browning's poems: the power to disregard, deny or de-authorize the other's speech. While the Duke

may care little for what the envoy has to say, for instance, the envoy does not have the power to enact such indifference.

In contrast, Webster's "Jeanne d'Arc" offers a very different model of speaking and a different relation between speaker and auditor. Though the poem opens in perfect Browningsque form, replete with an abrupt beginning, colloquial diction, immediacy of speech and action, and even multiple auditors, and though the speaker is Jeanne d'Arc, an easy emblem of linguistic power and authority, Webster immediately disrupts Browning's model by dramatizing not Jeanne's linguistic power over her auditors, but her linguistic impotence. Her opening dream enacts failed imperatives, failed communication, failed speech:

To me—to me! Dunois! La Hire! Old Daulon,
Thou at the least shouldst stand by me—Oh haste!
The soul of France is in me, rescue me!—
Turn back the flyers—Cowards, have you learned
These English can be conquered, yet you flee?
To me!—Oh! I am wounded! Oh! this time
We shall not sleep in Paris—

What is this?

Is this not Paris but sieged Compiegne?
Back, to the fort! This once we needs must fly.
In, in! They are closing on us—in!—Oh Christ!
The gate drops down! And I without, alone!
Open, the foe is on me. Help! Oh now
I feel I am a woman and 'mong foes!
Oh save me! (1-14)

Like Browning's speakers, Jeanne assumes at the outset the position of authoritative speaking subject: her commands invoke the authority of military position and power. However, unlike Browning's speakers, whose linguistic power is affirmed by the auditor's silence, Jeanne's power and authority is undercut by the soldiers' refusal to respond. Indeed, unlike Browning, who had associated linguistic power equally with his

male and female speakers, Webster pointedly aligns Jeanne's linguistic impotence here with the female subject position: it is only "now," when Jeanne is "without, alone" (11), unheard and unanswered, that she feels "a woman and 'mong foes" (13).

Thus denied linguistic power by the soldiers' silence, Jeanne attempts to defend her claim to authority by invoking its source: the saints Catherine (28) and Margaret (29) "who first sent [her] forth" (19); "who have warned [her], counseled, comforted, / Given [her] persuasion and the gift to awe / And the strong soldier spirit of command" (23-25). The saints' silence, however, like the soldiers', denies Jeanne the linguistic power and authority she seeks. Her first request—"Stay with me for awhile, / And let me feel your mystic influence / Thrill all my being into rapt delight" (54-57)—is answered by their disappearance: "Oh you are dimmer!" (62). Though her second plea is answered—the "Mother of the Blessed" and the "virgin saints" (83) do hear her and come down (79-80)—they come not for the purpose Jeanne desires, not to "comfort [her] with love and show [her] truth" (82), or to "deliver [her] / In this distress" (88-89), but to show her visions which compound her distress into "dull confusion" (121). The first visions remind Jeanne of her domestic loss, the way in which her "higher destiny" transformed her "dreamy" and "pleasant" days into an "oppressive quiet" (91-95); the next visions carry Jeanne through each crowning moment of her "true career" (91)—from the king's public recognition of Jeanne (97-99) to the victory at Orléans (99-101) and the coronation at Rheims—but only to plummet her into a memory of her "first shame," her defeat in Paris (116-18). What follows then is "[c]loud / And dull confusion" (120-21), in which Jeanne cannot decipher the visions or their significance. In consequence, both her speech and her subjectivity disintegrate:

Oh! but my brain whirls—whirls—what is it? Cloud
 And dull confusion. Who is it that stands
 Mouthing and gecking at me? Why now, Pierre,
 Because, forsooth, thou art our neighbour's son,
 Must I be bound to dance with thee at will?
 Why flout me with so stale a grudge, my friend?
 Is the face changed? It was Dame Madelon's Pierre,
 The poor good clumsy youth, whose suits and sulks
 Had so passed from my mind, I thought I saw.
 And now—I know it, the long fiendish sneer,
 The sudden glare! (120-30)

Concluding with a vision of her imminent trial, condemnation, and death, Jeanne's visions suggest that if the saints have indeed answered Jeanne's call to "show her truth" (82), then the truth is that she is forsaken by God. This conclusion is confirmed by the saints' answer to Jeanne's final request, to "[s]tay yet with me ye blessed" (140): "They are gone!" (141).

Rather than reinforcing her power and authority, then, Jeanne's opening invocation to the saints effectively undermines it. If they, her "guardians and consolers, who, beyond / All other saints, have taken part for [her]" (26-27), now refuse to do so, then she is no longer one of God's elect but truly "deserted" by him (174). Thus, unlike the silence of Browning's auditors, which reinforces the speaker's linguistic power and freedom, the silence of Jeanne's auditors renders her powerless and vulnerable, transforming her from a "strong soldier" with the "spirit of command" (25) to "[a] poor weak girl, lone in [her] helplessness, / Crying . . . for that once strength" she had (84-85). Moreover, far from affirming and authorizing her speech, as Adela's silence had done for the Countess and God's silence had done for Porphyria's lover in Browning's poems, the silence of Jeanne's auditors de-authorizes her speech and places both her subject-status and her subjectivity at risk. While the silence of the soldiers and saints together calls into

question Jeanne's subject status as "God's instrument" (112), the saints' silence in particular brings Jeanne to question her senses. After their first disappearance, Jeanne cannot determine "which is dream" (69): whether her opening dream was "[b]ut a confused remembering in sleep" (62-63), and whether what she "seemed" (70) to see, "those Holy / Who lead [her]" (71-72), were not but "moonlight / Falling on prison-walls" (64-65). And while the incongruence of her simile, the comparison of "these men / Who press to carnage" with "a lightsome girl" who "[h]astens her steps to where the dancers wait" (21), clearly suggests a mind in disorder, her conclusion about the saints' disappearance, that "this must be the dream: / These chains, this prison, they must be the dream" (77-78), confirms the uncertainty of her subjectivity.

This uncertainty is central to the poem's drama for placing in doubt the authenticity of Jeanne's auditors—whether the saints truly appear to Jeanne or are merely more "mad dreams" (112). Webster underscores the ambiguity of the saints by framing their initial appearance as a question; Jeanne asks rhetorically what the poem asks in earnest: "Oh you blessed saints of Heaven, / Do you come down to me again?" (14-15). And though the answer to the question will determine Jeanne's subject status, whether she is a saint, heretic, or simply mad, Webster refuses to provide it. On the one hand, the similarity between Jeanne's address to the soldiers and her address to the saints suggests that the saints are, like the soldiers, merely the effect of a mad dream. While her cries to both are interchangeable—"help me" (31), "hear me" (32), "save me" (14), "rescue me" (3), "stay with me" (54)—her reproach to her soldiers, that "*thou* at the least shouldst stand by me" (2), lies implicit in her address to the saints. Jeanne insists to the saints with a repetition that mounts to accusation: since it is "*You* who first sent me forth" (19),

“*You* who have warned me, counseled, comforted, / Given me persuasion” (23-24), and *you*, “My guardians and consolers, who, beyond / All other saints, have taken part for me” (26-27), it follows that it should be *you* who “at the least shouldst stand by me” (emphases added).

On the other hand, the accuracy of Jeanne’s visions of the future, particularly of her imminent trial and death, suggests that her visions of the saints might be equally authentic. Yet Webster problematizes this conclusion by staging Jeanne’s slip from speakability. Confronted with the possibility of God’s desertion and the imminence of an ignominious death, Jeanne attempts to disprove the accusation that she is allied with the “Fiend,” but risks the very heresy she is attempting to deny:

They say
I commune with the Fiend and he has led
My way so high. Yes, if he could do this,
And I, deserted as I am of God,
Might cease to war with him and buy my life,
And greatness—and revenge!—
Oh God! forgive.
I sin. Oh deadliest sin of all my life!
Oh! pardon! pardon! Oh! have I condemned
My soul to everlasting fire by this? (171-79)

Though Jeanne sets out in perfectly logical fashion to prove the fallacy of the accusation by adopting its premise—“if the Fiend could do this, then I might join his ranks”—the expected conclusion fails to come, that “the Fiend cannot, so I did not.” Instead, in this slippage between intent and effect, Jeanne affirms and enacts the unspeakable, the “deadliest sin”: allegiance to the Fiend.

If it is true, therefore, as Jeanne fears, that she has condemned her soul to everlasting fire “by this” (179), then it is not the authenticity of Jeanne’s visions, but the source of their authority, which places in question her status as saint—whether her

visions come from God or from “the Fiend” with whom, the poem suggests, Jeanne indeed “communes.” For by Jeanne’s own admission, the first of her “fearful visions” (32) are sent by the Fiend to torture her (53-54), while in the final visions, she admits to knowing well “the long fiendish sneer” and the “sudden glare” (129) which is pointedly no longer Pierre’s:

Is the face changed? It *was* Dame Madelon’s Pierre,
The poor good clumsy youth, whose suits and sulks
Had so passed from my mind, I thought I saw.
And *now*—I know it, the long fiendish sneer,
The sudden glare! Ah! so the vision grows
Perfect again. (126-31, emphasis added)

The silence of Jeanne’s auditors complicates the question of the saints’ authenticity, and thus of Jeanne’s subject status, even further. If the saints do come down as Jeanne describes, then their presence confirms that Jeanne is neither a heretic nor mad, but God’s messenger and servant. Their silence, however, potentially reverses her status from one chosen to one forsaken by God. Their *speaking*, on the other hand, would not alter the question of Jeanne’s subject status, for the genre’s convention of the silent—or, rather, inaudible—auditor secures their speech from being heard by the reader. Consequently, the question of their authenticity would not be answered by the question of whether or not they speak. If the saints are not sent by God but are delusions or mad dreams, then Jeanne would be a heretic or mad regardless of whether they speak. And if the saints are authentic visions, then their speaking would still be insufficient to decide their authenticity; their speech would be unverifiable by anyone other than Jeanne. Put simply, the question of whether Jeanne is saint, heretic or mad still stands regardless of whether the saints speak to her in the poem. Webster’s decision to silence the legendary voices of Jeanne d’Arc therefore becomes doubly provocative: their silence is

inexplicable both in terms of Jeanne's historical narrative and in terms of the poem's central drama, the question of Jeanne's subject status.

In terms of genre, however, the silence of the saints exposes the assumptions underlying the auditor convention of Browning's dramatic monologue. Whether speaking or silent, absent or present, Browning's auditors have no effect on his speakers' subject status. His speakers all assume from the start the position of authoritative speaking subject, which is why "it makes so little difference" to the speaker "whether the dramatic monologue has or has not an ostensible auditor" (Langbaum 187) or whether or not the auditor actually speaks. For as Langbaum notes, "even where the auditor's remarks are implied, the speaker never learns anything from them and they do not change the meaning of the utterance" (187). Even in Mermin's theory of "auditor poems," in which the auditor is important for pointing up the status of the monologue as a representation of speech (*Audience* 2), for making manifest the speaker's power and freedom (*Audience* 48), and for acting as an analogue of the reader that the poet desires or fears (*Audience* 8), the auditor still seems gratuitous. While this is most evident in those poems by Browning in which "speech is a form of power and self-assertion" and "all that is ultimately required from [the auditor] is passive acquiescence" (*Audience* 53)—"My Last Duchess," "Count Gismond", "The Laboratory" (1844) and "The Bishop Orders his Tomb" (1842), for instance—even those poems in which the speaker tries to "elicit the auditor's understanding and sympathy" (*Audience* 53) suggest the auditor's ultimate superfluity, for the speaker's failure to do so seems to matter little to the speakers. In "Andrea del Sarto," for instance, by Mermin's own account, "Andrea paints and speaks to please himself" (*Audience* 57) and Lucrezia "hardly listens" (*Audience* 55);

“his words are intended to keep Lucrezia sitting with him, not to tell her anything” (*Audience* 55). In “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855), Fra Lippo’s auditors, the watchmen, “are interested only in the reveling monk, not in the artist-philosopher” (*Audience* 56), yet it is the artist-philosopher who speaks the substance of the poem—as Langbaum notes with amusement, “his biography as well as a whole theory of art and of the relation of physical to spiritual reality” (180)—all in spite of the guards’ indifference. In fact, even in those poems in which the speakers seem explicitly desirous “to gain the auditor’s good opinion and dissuade him of a previous bad one” (Mermin, *AP* 58), such as “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” (1855) and “Mr Sludge, ‘The Medium’” (1864), the auditor remains little more than a sign and function of the speaker’s linguistic power: “[t]he auditor functions in these poems,” Mermin concludes, “not only to show the speaker’s use of language for manipulative purposes, but to show how strangely and deceitfully they succeed” (*Audience* 63). While it may be true therefore that the “speaker’s words are intended to have an immediate effect on his auditor” in these poems, as Mermin argues, it seems not to be the case that “both his utterance and the poem’s meaning are significantly affected by the auditor’s responses or refusal to respond” (*Audience* 2), as Mermin contends.²

In “Jeanne d’Arc,” in contrast, Jeanne depends direly on both her auditors’ presence and their response. More than simply her lack of linguistic power and freedom, this dependence reveals the lack in Browning’s speakers of any consciousness of the constraints of speakability and the conditions of linguistic survival, the norms governing speech which condition one’s constitution as a subject of speech. Regardless of their

² Unless, that is, one follows Shaw’s suggestion that this failure on the part of the auditor leads the speaker to turn away from the real auditor within the poem to an “ideal” auditor without, such as God or the speaker’s ideal self. As both are projections of the speaker, however, Shaw’s argument returns the speaker once again to the position of speaking only to himself, and the auditor to a position of little consequence.

relation to cultural authority, whether a duke, medium, woman, or madman, Browning's speakers never experience any uncertainty about their subject status and never question their position as authoritative speaking subjects. Though Porphyria's lover may be deemed mad by Browning, for instance, as indicated by the poem's original title, "Madhouse Cells," neither the lover's speech nor his subject position is affected by his madness. He speaks with the same "absolute self-command" as the Duke and tells, with the same impunity, "the worst of truths": as the speaker asserts at the end of the poem, "God has not said a word!" (60). In fact, while Browning's original title may deauthorize the lover's speech by rendering uncertain his subjectivity, the subsequent removal of that title reverses that effect. While *we* may believe that the speaker "belongs in a madhouse cell" (Mermin, *AP* 49), Browning's withdrawal of the original title removes any reason to believe that he sits there now, or to disbelieve that he continues to sit, as he claims, with Porphyria's corpse (58). God's silence, then, like the envoy's, reveals and reinforces the speaker's power and freedom.

In "Jeanne d'Arc," in contrast, God's silence at the end of the poem implies the reverse. Having risked her subject status by her contemplation of an allegiance with the Fiend, Jeanne attempts to reinstate it by embodying speakability in her final prayer:

My God, I thank Thee who hast chosen me
To be Thy messenger to drive them forth:
And, since my death was destined with the mission,
Lord of my life, I thank Thee for my death. (198-201)

Here, too, however, God does not say a word. Yet God's silence here does not imply his approval of Jeanne, as it did in "Porphyria's Lover," but his rejection of her, as God becomes the last in a long line of auditors in the poem who fail to respond and whose failure places Jeanne's subject status at risk. In fact, God's silence at the end of the poem

makes any conclusion about Jeanne's subject status impossible, for it leaves in perpetual doubt whether God accepts her speech as the speech of his elect or whether Jeanne has in fact condemned her soul to everlasting fire by her prior slip from speakability. By thus leaving the status of Jeanne's speech in question, Webster reveals the contingency of linguistic power, challenging therefore the universalist assumptions about speech and authority which structure the auditor convention of Browning's monologues. And by staging ambiguous auditors who are neither fully present nor entirely absent, Webster reveals further the contingency of subjectivity, thereby challenging the equation of speech and subjectivity which underwrites both Browning's dramatic monologues and the prevailing theory of women's. The view that the form enables women poets to "speak for themselves" simply by speaking "I" presumes a linguistic power and freedom unconstrained by the conditions of linguistic survival. Yet it is precisely these conditions which Webster insists upon in "Jeanne d'Arc" by refusing to resolve the question of the auditors' authenticity, and it is in doing so that Webster reveals her indebtedness to Hemans.

II. Reprising Hemans

Webster's "Jeanne d'Arc" offers an obvious starting point for a reevaluation of Webster's relation to Hemans; its very choice of dramatic speaker invites a comparison with Hemans's "Joan of Arc, in Rheims" (1828). However, beyond this surface similarity of the speaker's identity, the two poems differ on all points of structure, setting, style, and substance. "Jeanne d'Arc" is a first-person dramatic monologue, "Joan of Arc, in Rheims," a third-person narrative. "Jeanne d'Arc" is set at the nadir of the speaker's

life and career, when Jeanne stands in prison, awaiting execution for heresy, while Hemans's "Joan of Arc" is set at its apex, when Joan stands "mantled with victorious power" (36) at the coronation of Charles VII at Rheims. In addition, Webster's characteristically unsentimental dramatization of female subjectivity sharply contrasts Hemans's signature strain of sentimentality assumed by the narrator of "Joan of Arc." In fact, the originality of Webster's drama of subjectivity, in which the speaker tilts between "fearful visions" (32) and "mad dreams" (31), between prophecy and heresy, appears antithetical to the conventional conflict at the center of Hemans's poem, that between love and ambition, woman and fame. For though Hemans's poem is set at the height of Joan's military career, at the crowning of the dauphin, it is Joan's reunion with her father and brothers, her repudiation of glory for domesticity, which constitutes the poem's climax. The poem signals Joan's return to domesticity by her rejection of "the pomp" (72), the "plumes" (73), and the "banners" (73) in favor of "her cabin-door" (73), "the Fairy's fountain" (74), and her "father's roof" (80). More pointedly, the poem represents Joan's return to domestic femininity as a return to "nature":

Her spirit turn'd. The very wood-note, sung
 In early spring-time by the bird, which dwelt
 Where o'er her father's roof the beech leaves hung,
 Was in her heart; a music heard and felt,
 Winning her back to nature. She unbound
 The helm of many battles from her head,
 And, with her bright locks bow'd to sweep the ground,
 Lifting her voice up, wept for joy, and said,—
 "Bless me, my father, bless me! and with thee,
 To the still cabin and the beechen-tree,
 Let me return!" (78-88)

The narrator quickly dispels this dream, however, with the familiar moral that the domestic cost of fame and glory can never be recuperated:

Oh! never did thine eye
Thro' the green haunts of happy infancy
Wander again, Joanne!—too much of fame
Had shed its radiance on thy peasant-name;
And bought alone by gifts beyond all price,
The trusting heart's repose, the paradise
Of home with all its loves, doth fate allow
The crown of glory unto woman's brow. (89-96)

Despite these differences, which may seem to support the prevailing view of Webster's larger rejection of Hemans's poetics, Webster's "Jeanne d'Arc" does not simply repudiate Hemans's vision of Joan, for the poem reprises the very sentiment which emblemizes for many critics the key difference between Hemans and Webster. Webster's Jeanne experiences as acutely the sense of domestic loss and isolation of Hemans's Joan and, significantly, expresses it in similar language and imagery. Following visions of her imminent trial, condemnation and death, Jeanne asks:

Was it for this that I was chosen out,
From my first infancy—marked out to be
Strange 'mid my kindred and alone in heart,
Never to cherish thoughts of happy love
Such as some women know in happy homes,
Laying their heads upon a husband's breast,
Or singing, as the merry wheel whirrs round,
Sweet cradle songs to lull their babes to sleep? (145-52)

Though Webster certainly inflects the Hemansesque melancholy of the passage with a note of indignation—"Was it for *this* that I was chosen out[?]" (145, emphasis added)—Jeanne's yearning for the comfort of "a husband's breast" and for the "happy love" of "happy homes" (148-50) distinctly echoes the longing of Hemans's Joan for "[t]he trusting heart's repose" and "the paradise / Of home with all its loves" (94-95). Both "alone in heart" ("Jeanne" 147), both Jeanne and Joan speak the same "language of the heart" which critics like Leighton and Byron claim Hemans's poetry embodies and

Webster's poetry repudiates. In fact, by dramatizing the torture and torment that awaits Hemans's Joan, Webster's poem stands as the logical extension of Hemans's; it proves what Hemans's "Joan of Arc" portends: that the "crown of glory" (96) is not worth its purchase price of domestic "paradise" (94).

If the striking differences between Webster's "Jeanne d'Arc" and Hemans's "Joan of Arc, in Rheims" appear to support the view that later women poets "like Webster" rejected the poetics of earlier poets "like Hemans," it must be equally acknowledged that the similarities between these poems complicate this view. To ignore these similarities risks re-silencing earlier women poets like Hemans by denying or dismissing their continued influence on later women poets like Webster, while continuing to silence those poems or parts of poems which do not satisfy the critic's desire for feminist polemic. This observation can be extended to the wider relationship between Webster and Hemans: it should be measured not merely by the comparison of poems conspicuously different, such as "Jeanne d'Arc" and "Joan of Arc, in Rheims," but also by the comparison of poems that are strikingly similar, such as Webster's "Jeanne d'Arc" and Hemans's "Arabella Stuart." Both poems coincide on all points of structure, setting, style, and substance—both are dramatic monologues; both feature a historical female persona who, alone in prison, speaks to an auditor who is absent (or at least not entirely present, in the case of "Jeanne d'Arc"); and both dramatize the disintegration of the speaker's speech and subjectivity through the course of the monologue. In fact, both poems follow a similar movement in doing so. Both poems open with the speaker's dream of a memory which disorients her upon awakening: Arabella, of a meeting with Seymour before their imprisonment; Jeanne, of the battles at Paris and Compiègne before

her own capture and imprisonment. Both poems stage the “imagined fluctuations” of the speaker’s “thoughts and feelings” while in prison (“Arabella” headnote), with each speaker moving from hope to despair and to a transgression of “speakability” in that despair which places each speaker’s subject status at risk. Just as Arabella had fallen from hope to despair when faced with the possibility of Seymour’s desertion (163-211), Jeanne too falls from hope to despair when the disappearance of the saints of her visions signals the possibility of her desertion by God (140-171). And just as Arabella had risked in her despair her status as a subject of speech by moving outside of the domain of feminine speakability—those norms which govern what will constitute the speech of a female subject and what will not—by denouncing Seymour, asserting herself and challenging the feminine principle of suffering in silence (187-202), Jeanne too risks her subject status as saint by contemplating in her despair an allegiance with the devil (171-76).³ And just as Hemans had marked the borders of speakability for the reader by preceding Arabella’s larger transgression with a lesser one, Arabella’s questioning of Seymour’s faithfulness (163-70), so too does Webster precede Jeanne’s larger transgression with an earlier instance of “impossible speech,” Butler’s term for speech that violates the norms of speakability and thus speech that cannot be regarded as the speech of a subject (*ES* 136). As visions of her past pass before her, Jeanne responds with “unspeakable” pride and self-assertion, underscored by her repetition of the pronoun “I”:

Yes, my king,
 So did he honour me when I declared him
 Among his courtiers****Yes, so Orleans fell—

³ See chap. 3, pp. 90-93, for a closer discussion of Butler’s concept of “speakability” and of Arabella’s transgression of feminine speakability.

Oh! my brave glory! yes *I* beat them back,
These Englishmen that were invincible!****
Yes, so I set the crown upon his head
In sacred Rheims. Oh noble! how the crowd,
Eager to kiss my vesture, touch me, throngs
Around me, me a simple peasant girl
Made first of women and of warriors
In all of France! (97-107, original emphasis)

Like Arabella, Jeanne immediately recognizes her transgression, censors herself, and conforms quickly to the norms of speakability:

Hush, hush, vainglorious heart,
How often have the voices chidden thee
For thy too arrogant delight! Not mine
The honour, but the Lord's who sent me forth.
I a mean herd-wench from the fields—what more?
But made God's instrument, to show Himself
And not the power of man conquers for France[.] (107-113)

Like Arabella, however, Jeanne ends up reproducing and restaging the very speech she is attempting to shut down.⁴ As discussed above, her attempt to disprove the accusation that she “commune[s] with the Fiend” (172) risks the very heresy she is attempting to deny:

They say
I commune with the Fiend and he has led
My way so high. Yes, if he could do this,
And I, deserted as I am of God,
Might cease to war with him and buy my life,
And greatness—and revenge! (171-76)

Significantly, Jeanne's immediate recoil back into speakability re-enacts Arabella's own.

Jeanne's impassioned plea for forgiveness—

Oh God! forgive.
I sin. Oh deadliest sin of all my life!
Oh! pardon! pardon! Oh! have I condemned

⁴ See chap. 3, p. 93-95 for a closer analysis of Arabella's “doublespeak.”

which hath sent me” (John 5.30). Hence also Jeanne’s resonant cry when faced with a vision of her imminent torture and death: “Oh! God, my God, / Dost thou behold, and shall these men, unjust, / Slay me, thy servant?” (166-68). Confronted with a death that would effectively dissolve her subject status as God’s servant, Jeanne’s anguished response echoes Christ’s own cry at the crucifixion, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (*King James Bible*, Matt. 27.46). Like her earlier attempt to instate herself a saint by speaking like one, Jeanne attempts here to constitute herself a Christian martyr by speaking like the ultimate martyr, Christ. And hence, finally, Jeanne’s closing prayer, her final clutch at speakability which receives no response (198-201).

Whereas the reliance on Browning’s model, with its emphasis on the psychology of the speaker may lead one to read this monologue as a dramatization of “the human challenge” to “renounce worldly satisfaction through courage and faith in exchange for self-mastery, confidence in God’s benevolence, and . . . a martyr’s death” (Hickock, “Augusta” 336); and to read Jeanne’s closing prayer as her act of “fac[ing] her immolation bravely” (Hickock, “Augusta” 336); and to conclude, in consequence, that Webster’s verse contains “few reserves of meaning, few secrets which are superfluous to its subject matter” (Leighton, *VWP* 174); Hemans’s model of dramatic monologue brings those secret reserves of meaning to light. The secret is that the poem’s drama of linguistic survival, for which her main model is Hemans, undercuts any claim of self-mastery, confidence in God’s benevolence, or certainty of a martyr’s subject status. Rather than a (rather flat) gesture of bravery, Jeanne’s final prayer, I suggest, enacts a final clutch at speakability which echoes once again Arabella’s own performance of self-sacrifice at the end of Hemans’s poem. Like Arabella’s final benediction of Seymour, in

which Arabella attempts to embody the norms of feminine speakability in order to reinstate herself as a viable subject of speech, Jeanne's final prayer seeks to shut down once and for all the threat to her subject status by embodying in her final speech act the "courage and faith" and "confidence in God's benevolence" which constitutes a martyr's death:

My God, I thank Thee who hast chosen me
To be Thy messenger to drive them forth:
And, since my death was destined with the mission,
Lord of my life, I thank Thee for my death. (198-201)

However, as discussed above, Webster leaves Jeanne's subject status in question by leaving in doubt the status of her speech: Jeanne does not know whether God affirms and authorizes her speech, for God remains not merely absent in the poem, like Seymour in "Arabella Stuart," but silent. In consequence, Jeanne's ultimate subject status, whether she is a saint or a heretic, remains in question, for it remains in doubt whether God accepts her speech as the speech of his servant or whether Jeanne has in fact condemned her soul to everlasting fire by her contemplation of an allegiance with the devil. Unlike Christ, therefore, to whom God remains equally silent at the crucifixion, and unlike the innumerable other nineteenth-century literary representations of Joan of Arc, which focus on vindicating her from the charges of madness and heresy, Webster's Jeanne is not, like Francis Palgrave's Jeanne, "in her innocence secure" (50).⁵ Her transgression of speakability, coupled with God's silence at the end of the poem, leaves in perpetual doubt the status of her speech and thus her status as saint.⁶

⁵ Francis Palgrave (1824-1897), "Jeanne d'Arc 1424" from *The Visions of England* (1891).

⁶ Of course, Christ's subject status in the biblical narrative is confirmed more obviously by his resurrection. Of the many 19th-century poems about Joan of Arc, perhaps the most notable is Robert Southey's epic in blank verse, *Joan of Arc* (1795), both for its sheer length (190 pages and 4773 lines) and for the fact that it went through five editions. The entire narrative is framed as the vindication of Joan from the charge of

God's silence in Webster's "Jeanne d'Arc" thus not only challenges the model of speech and subjectivity of Browning's dramatic monologue by reversing the implications of the silent auditor, but also develops Hemans's model of speech and subjectivity by extending the effects of the absent auditor. In Hemans's dramatic monologues, both "Properzia Rossi" and "Arabella Stuart," Hemans predestines her speakers for linguistic failure by absenting the auditor necessary to hear and affirm their speech. Hemans thereby foregrounds the dependence of one's subject status on both the recognition and recognizability of one's speech—on both the auditor who will affirm and authorize one's speech and the legibility of one's speech as the speech of a subject. In contrast, God's silence in Webster's poem leaves the status of Jeanne's speech in question, leaving as a question both its recognition and recognizability. Webster thereby shifts the focus of the poem from the performance of speakability—from the question of whether or not Jeanne's speech conforms to the norms of speakability—to the norms themselves: to that which demarcates the speech of a saint from the speech of a heretic. "The question is not what it is I will be able to say," Butler explains, "but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all" (*ES* 133). Since the question of Jeanne's subject status has received contradictory answers at different point in history, Webster's very choice of speaker crystallizes this link between linguistic survival and the larger domain of speakability. First condemned to death as a heretic in 1431, the Church reversed its decision and declared her innocence twenty-five years later. More than four

madness, beginning with the demonization of her parents who "mock at her and call her crazed" (29-30) and the contrasting heroicization of her Uncle Claude who recognizes in her the truth of God. This tension between doubters and believers impels the plot, as Joan is subjected to (and passes) a series of tests and as each disbeliever is converted. Indeed, Joan's first words in the poem are "I am not mad" (60), spoken with the full assurance of God's grace. Another notable text is Katherine Tynan's monologue, "Joan of Arc" (1885), which ends with Joan's first-person description of her ascension to heaven and thereby affirms her subject status as one of God's elect.

centuries after that, Jeanne was beatified in 1909, then canonized in 1920. In those five centuries between Jeanne's condemnation and canonization, Jeanne's speech had not changed; the domain of speakability had. By leaving Jeanne's subject status in question in the poem, Webster foregrounds the centrality of speakability to the constitution of the subject, provocatively suggesting that the only difference between a heretic and a saint is the fine and shifting line which circumscribes speakability.

III. Rereading Webster

Hemans's model of dramatic monologue thus casts new light on Webster's innovations with auditors, making possible new meanings which directly counter those discovered by the light (or in the shadow) of Browning's model. Webster's most celebrated and discussed dramatic monologues, "A Castaway," "Circe," and "Medea in Athens," are all praised for their female speakers' linguistic power, authority and agency. "A Castaway," heralded as "the single most effective and enduring poem Webster ever wrote" (Hickock, "Augusta" 339), is celebrated for its "frank tone," "daring" (Hickock, "Augusta" 339) and "straight-speaking dissent" (Leighton, *VWP* 200); for granting "narrative authority, psychological complexity, and a knowledge of social forces to a prostitute persona" (Sutphin, "Human Tigresses" 514); for "inscrib[ing] Eulalie not merely as a victim, but also as an agent and speaking subject" (Brown, "Economical" 90), and a "self-sufficient" one, at that (Mermin, *GR* 80); and for "simulat[ing] a marginalized, cast out figure of a prostitute speaking as if from a cultural center—or rather from the center of her self as sovereign subject" (Slinn 160).

Yet Webster's insistence on the auditor's absence throughout the poem calls into question the linguistic authority and agency persistently ascribed to her. Eulalie stresses at five different points of the monologue that she is alone, asking, "Why do I play the hypocrite alone, / Who am no hypocrite with others by?" (60-61); asserting at another time, "One cannot laugh alone" (163); and pleading at two different points, "Will no one come? / 'Tis dreary work alone" (187-88); "Will no one come and laugh with me? No feast, / No merriment to-night. So long alone! / Will no one come?" (454-55). Indeed, "alone" is the final word of the poem. While other critics have acknowledged the auditor's absence in the poem, I suggest that they have minimized its significance and its effect by substituting the real auditor expected of Browning's model with a "functional" (Slinn 164) one either in the form of the imaginary auditors of Eulalie's past and future selves, the implied auditor in the reader of the poem, or the ideal auditor of Eulalie's mirror reflection. For instance, Byron argues, following Cornelia Pearsall, that Webster's emphasis on the auditor's absence "points direct attention to the fact that Eulalie has actually not been alone, but surrounded by the variety of past, present and future selves that her literal solitude prompts her to examine" (*DM* 24; Pearsall 77). Pearsall argues further that the auditor's absence engages Eulalie in a discursive dialogue, placing her "in conversation with a range of other monologues by fallen women, thus acknowledging her solitude while breaking her silence" (76). Slinn extends this argument to posit more directly Eulalie's linguistic agency: while Eulalie's address to her mirror reflection "acts as a functional substitute for the interlocutors of more formal dramatic monologues," thereby "establishing the social and political dimension of monologic discourse," her self-objectification through mirroring both "reformulate[s] social reality by reciting and

recontextualizing its terms” and “enacts a moment of self-recovery, whereby a woman—in a form of reverse colonization—reappropriates her body from the appropriations of external social forces” (165). In this, Slinn extends the observation of several critics that Eulalie openly contests throughout her monologue the multiple discourses which have constituted her—in Eulalie’s own words—as either a “fiend, . . . a slimy thing out of pools” (28), or a “fractious angel misconceived” (78).

The argument for Eulalie’s power to dialogue and reconstitute social discourses and social reality, and thereby recover and reconstitute herself, thus relies on an elision between a real auditor to Eulalie’s speech and an ideal, imaginary, or implied auditor in the form of her mirror reflection, her imagined selves, or the reader who becomes representative of society and its discourses. And yet, Webster’s introduction of a real auditor at the end of the poem challenges this elision by highlighting the insurmountable difference between an actual auditor to Eulalie’s speech and an ideal, imaginary, or implied auditor: while the former directly subjects Eulalie to the norms of speakability, the latter does not. The entrance of the auditor at the end of the poem compels Eulalie to alter her “frank tone” of “straight-speaking dissent” into one of disingenuous companionability. Webster explicitly contrasts Eulalie’s private speech, her internal railing against “the cackling goose” (626) she sees in her auditor, with her public speech: “Most welcome, dear: one gets so moped alone” (630).

This conclusion to the poem makes clear Webster’s dual aims for the monologue: not only to criticize, through Eulalie’s direct speech, the gender ideologies and inequities that have necessitated prostitution as a “trade” (67) while condemning and “casting away” those women for whom it has become a necessity; but also, at one and the same

time, to expose the myth of linguistic agency and power which Eulalie's overt criticism invokes but which Webster's omission of the auditor undermines. While the "frank tone," "daring," "straight-speaking dissent," "narrative authority," "psychological complexity," and socio-political perspicacity of Eulalie's monologue all contribute to the appearance of Eulalie's "self-sufficiency," "agency" and "sovereignty," Webster dispels this myth by subjecting Eulalie's speech to the laws of speakability at the poem's end, foregrounding the fact that the linguistic freedom, authority and agency of her monologue is made possible only by the absence of an auditor—only by the fact that her speech is already foreclosed. While it is indisputable, therefore, that *Webster* reconstitutes, reformulates and reappropriates the terms by which Eulalie's self is discursively produced by addressing the *poem* to the *reader*, it is not the case that *Eulalie* does so in the absence of an auditor or in the presence of imaginary auditors—does so, in other words, by the mere fact of speaking or by the sheer force of linguistic will. Rather, the poignant point of the poem, I suggest, is that for all Eulalie's astute political and social analysis, there is no one she can speak it to—neither to the real auditor who enters at the end, nor the implied auditor in the reader whom *Webster* addresses. For the very form of the dramatic monologue stands as a formal reminder of the insuperable distance, however slight, between poet and persona, reader and auditor, real and fantasized speech. This distance Webster exploits to expose the constraints of speakability and the conditions of linguistic survival: the fact that Eulalie is not a speaking subject at all, but a mask; that this mask is the necessary condition of speech for real women like Eulalie precisely because the real Eulalies of the world are not speaking subjects; for if the real Eulalies were to speak, they could not speak thus, at least not to any auditor with any cultural

power. Like Webster's Eulalie, the speech of real prostitutes remains "impossible," consigned either to the silence of interior monologue or the silence of imaginary auditors.⁷ What Webster dramatizes in this poem is thus not simply the powerful voice of Eulalie, but, ultimately, her voicelessness, made visible by Webster's insistence that Eulalie is not "surrounded" (Byron, *DM* 24) or "flanked" by auditors (Pearsall 77), but speaks alone, in the absence of the auditor whose absence is the sole guarantor of her power to speak thus.

Webster similarly undermines the linguistic agency and power for which "Circe" and "Medea in Athens" are frequently praised: "Circe," for dramatizing a "powerful heroine" (Demoor 134) with "active female desire" (Leighton, *VWP* 194) and a "fierce female voice" (Hickock, "Augusta" 340); and "Medea in Athens," for Medea's "power to assert herself" and for her complete narrative control as "scriptwriter, director, stage manager, and actor" of her story all at once (Sutphin, "Representation" 386). As Sutphin argues, each poem presents a "strong and desirous" persona with "a distinctive and forceful female voice" ("Representation" 380), and "each conjures up a vision of female power, a power that is her ultimate desire" ("Representation" 388). Disrupting this vision of linguistic power in "Medea in Athens," however, is once again the absence of an auditor to Medea's monologue and, once again, Medea's subjection to speakability as revealed by the difference between her speech in the presence of auditors and her speech in their absence. In response to the news of Jason's death, in the presence of its messenger, Medea reproduces the "pat phrase" (9) of speakability, the speech proper to

⁷ While other critics have similarly observed that Eulalie's speech is made possible only by its mediation through Webster's own voice and authoritative subject position as a respectable, married, middle-class woman, none have noted the way in which Webster formalizes this condition of speech and survival in her experiments with auditors.

the wife of Ægeus: “Good news for us, but ill news for the dead, / When the gods sweep a villain down to them” (7-8). In the auditor’s absence, however—

when day, with all its useless talk
And useless smiles and idiots’ prying eyes
That impotently peer into one’s life,
When day, with all its seemingly lying shows,
Has gone its way and left pleased fools to sleep (13-17)

—Medea acknowledges the similarly “seemingly lying show” of her speech under the gaze of the auditor, in the presence of “idiots’ prying eyes,” calling it “the prompt trick of words” (9). She acknowledges further her alienation from the speech of speakability, likening it to “a pat phrase / From someone other’s song found on one’s lips / And used because ’tis there” (9-11).

Indeed, despite the fact that “Medea is the sole speaker of Webster’s version” of the myth, “with no comment from a chorus and no autonomous challenge from Jason,” the monologue repeatedly reveals not that Medea “controls her story,” as Sutphin argues (“Representation 385), but precisely her lack of narrative control. Just as she had found “someone other’s” words on her lips in her response to the news of Jason’s death, so does the prophecy she speaks come to her by way of another’s agency—it is “[s]ome prophecy a god breathed by my mouth” (34)—and she is at a loss to account for it: “Has a god come to me? / Is it thou, my Hecate? How know I all?” (36-37). The vision she receives and narrates, which constitutes nearly half of the monologue, she can recall only “dimly” (33), while its narrative layering dramatizes the way in which Medea is lost as a subject of speech within her own narration. Though as the prophetess, she holds the gaze on this vision of Jason, it is Jason who is its subject, the actor and agent of its events: it is he who “rests with lax and careless limbs” (47); he, who “props his head / On a half-buried fallen

spar” (49-50); “his thoughts” which “[d]rift languid to the steep Symplegades” (54); and he who “speaks out of his loneliness” (56). When Medea does appear in the vision, she appears only as a memory to Jason. Her speech is therefore narrated by him, and she reports her own words in the third person, in Jason’s voice (58, 61-63, 66-67). Moreover, she appears to herself in the vision as the object of his gaze: “She tossed her head back, while her brown hair streamed / Gold in the wind and sun, and her face glowed / With daring beauty” (64-66). Thus, though Medea gazes on Jason, it is his gaze that focalizes the vision and she who is the object of his gaze: “Shadows of me went misty through his sight” (70). Nearly half of her monologue is therefore devoted to a narration of Jason’s story and his speech, but another instance of another’s words breathed by her mouth. That “it is impossible to believe [Medea’s] final assertion, ‘I have forgotten thee’ (269), as she banishes Jason’s forlorn ghost from her one-woman drama,” as Sutphin argues (“Representations” 388), only affirms Medea’s lack of narrative control and reveals that Medea remains captive to its illusion.

In “Circe,” the illusion of agency is conjured by Circe’s opening identification with Darkness in which, as Leighton argues, the language is “charged with expectation and desire” and the “landscape enacts a wish-fulfilling sexual encounter in which female ‘Darkness’ draws down the male sun into her bed of storm” (*VWP* 194):

The sun drops luridly into the west;
 Darkness has raised her arms to draw him down
 Before the time, not waiting as of wont
 Till he has come to her behind the sea;
 And the smooth waves grow sullen in the gloom
 And wear their threatening purple; more and more
 The plain of waters sways and seems to rise
 Convexly from its level of the shores;
 And low dull thunder rolls along the beach:
 There will be storm at last, storm, glorious storm! (1-10)

Disturbing this vision of Circe's female power and agency, however, is her simultaneous desire to be "broken" (106), "master[ed]" (111), "bow[ed]" (113) and "abash[ed]" (193) by "him whom fate will send / One day to be [her] master utterly" (110-11)—a desire which critics have strained to redeem through feminist interpretation. For Sutphin, for example, Webster's decision to end the poem before Odysseus's arrival, and therefore to leave undramatized Circe's inevitable disappointment in and by him, celebrates romantic desire "on a woman's terms" ("Representation" 384) by suspending Circe in a moment of promised fulfillment. At the same time, Sutphin argues, by anticipating Circe's inevitable disappointment, the poem undermines the "powerful myth of heterosexual romance" that "lovers are all in all to each other" ("Representation" 383). The poem thus serves for Sutphin "as a warning to women . . . against centering one's being on the desire for an ideal lover" ("Representation" 384), as it is for Leighton a challenge to the myth of male superiority (*VWP* 195). As Leighton argues, "This is not another story about the enchanted princess waiting to be rescued by the explorer prince . . . it is about the total improbability of princes" (*VWP* 195).

Yet each of these readings requires the critic to repress one form of Circe's desire beneath another: her express desire to be mastered beneath her implicit desire for mastery, suggested by her identification with Darkness. For Leighton, for example, "Circe"—unlike Tennyson's version of the same myth in "The Lotos-Eaters" (1833)—is "not a poem about passive, male seduction, but about active female desire; it is not about being bewitched, but about being the witch" (*VWP* 194). While Circe's desire for agency in the opening passage is undeniable, reinforced, moreover, by her repeated call for violent change to the unmistakably Victorian "sickly sweet monotony" (32) of female

existence, it seems irreconcilable with her express desire to submit and to be mastered. My point is not that the two forms of desire must be reconciled or reconcilable, but that the consistent repression of one beneath the other in recent readings of the poem dramatizes on the level of discourse the clash between speakability and survival—the way in which the norms of feminist speakability have made one form of female desire “legible” to the modern critic, and another “illegible” or “impossible.”

On one level, then, Butler’s notion of “speakability” explains Circe’s own suppression of her desire for agency, cloaked as it is in personification and pathetic fallacy, and repressed beneath her explicit desire to be mastered. While expressions of passive desire would conform to the norms governing feminine speakability, ensuring Circe’s viability as a subject of speech, expressions of active desire would risk Circe’s status as speaking subject by violating those norms. On another level, though—and in some ways the more important one—the reversal of this gesture on the part of critics who repress Circe’s “passive” beneath her “active” desire, and thus her explicit speech beneath her implicit meanings, replay the drama of speakability and survival on the modern critical stage. For modern readers, the former is “unspeakable” and risks Circe’s viability as a “strong and desirous” female persona (Sutphin, “Representation” 380) and “powerful heroine” (Demoor 134), risking in turn the monologue’s viability as a “postmodern, feminist revision of the tale of Ulysses” (Demoor 134)—all in consequence of its illegibility to postmodern, feminist critics. This would explain the consistent reading of the poem’s opening scene as evidence of Circe’s “active female desire.” The next passage suggests, however, that Circe identifies not with Darkness, but with the objects subjected to the violence of the storm which Darkness raises:

Oh welcome, welcome, though it rend my bowers,
 Scattering my blossomed roses like the dust,
 Splitting the shrieking branches, tossing down
 My riotous vines with their young half-tinged grapes
 Like small round amethysts or beryls strung
 Tumultuously in clusters; though it sate
 Its ravenous spite among my goodliest pines

 Though it will hurl high on my flowery shores
 The hostile wave that rives at the poor sward
 And drags it down the slants. (11-17, 23-25)

Circe's desire is thus once again not to master but to be mastered, broken, bowed and abashed—in this passage, “rent,” “scattered,” “split,” “tossed down,” “hurled high” and “dragged down.” If this is the voice of a “powerful female” persona, which it certainly is, then the desire she speaks is not the one aligned with Darkness, but the desire of “a woman, not a god” (65)—a desire equally powerful but irreducible to the active/passive binary which structures the common conception of women's desire. That this desire, thus spoken, remains “unspeakable” more than a century later to modern readers attests to the continued “impossibility” of female desire outside of the norms of this distinctively masculine structure of speakable desire.

Webster's challenge to the myth of absolute linguistic power and agency—both the power to speak with impunity and to act merely by speaking, as epitomized by Browning's Duke—is perhaps best dramatized in “Sister Annunciata.” The poem opens with Annunciata's attempt to reconstitute through speaking the religious discourses which institute an essential and ineradicable difference between heavenly and earthly love. Questioning the logic of such a difference—“if the Church bless love, is love a sin?” (5)—Annunciata attempts to destabilize the boundaries imposed by religious discourse by exploiting the contradiction inherent to its metaphors and, indeed, to

metaphor itself—that something is both different and the same. Exploiting the metaphorization of Christ as a “bridegroom,” Annunciata attempts to dissolve the difference between a “simple happy wife” (1) and the “bride of Christ” (18) on her “anniversary,” the day she was “wedded . . . out of the world to Christ” (50):

My wedding day! A simple happy wife,
Stolen from her husband's sight a little while
To think how much she loved him, might so kneel
Alone with God and love a little while,
(For if the Church bless love, is love a sin?)
And, coming back into the happy stir
Of children keeping the home festival,
Might bring the Heaven's quiet in her heart;
Yes, even coming to him, coaxing him
With the free hand that wears his fetter on it,
Sunning her boldly in his look of love,
And facing him with unabashed fond eyes
Might, being all her husband's, still be God's
And know it—happy with no less a faith
Than we who, ever serving at his shrine,
Know ourselves His alone. (1-16)

Regardless of the logical force of Annunciata's argument, however, she is unable to reconstitute religious discourse by her speech; rather, she risks her own status as a “bride of Christ” by speaking it. Annunciata asks, “Am I sinning now / To think it?” (16-17), concluding that “no doubt I went too far: / The bride of Christ is more than other women; / I must not dare to even such to me” (17-19).

Like Webster's Jeanne d'Arc and Hemans's Arabella Stuart before her, Annunciata continually “sins” against speakability by failing to remember that “[o]bedience must not question” (58). Instead, her monologue is riddled with questions, one hundred and eighteen in all, leading Annunciata to exclaim, “How easy 'tis to sin!” (57). Indeed, like Arabella and Jeanne, Annunciata's frequent slips from speakability lead her to question her senses, even drive her to madness. Set by the Abbess to spend

the night reflecting on her “ancient life / With all its sins and follies” (47-48), Annunciata recalls the “comfort” (138) she found in tears before she entered her repressive “spousalship” (147). However, her innocent “almost wish” (139), that she could “weep so now” (139), becomes the sin of regret, “a mad sin against the spirit” (143) that must be retracted and repressed:

No, no, I take again my wish, which was a sin;
It was no wish, a fancy at the most;
Lord, let it not be numbered with my sins!
What mere mad sin against the spirit, that,
If I could wish to lose my hard-won state
Of holy peace. (140-45)

Annunciata quickly steps, as she must, on the other side of this line to the side of speakability: “And wherefore should I weep? / For what endurance? I who have inhaled / The rich beatitude of my spousalship, / To the heart’s core” (145-48). Yet the sin of regret, the “poisonous sad sweet sin of looking back” (55), repeatedly overcomes Annunciata as she chafes against both the religious and social bonds that have divided her from her Angelo and required her to renounce both romantic love and sexual desire. At the height of her frustration, she accuses God of selfishness for “condemn[ing] all love except of Him” (530) and of sadism for having

only market marriages
Or sprung from passion fancies soon worn out,
Lest any two on earth should partly miss
The anger and distrust that haunt earth’s homes
And cease to know there is no calm till death? (531-35)

Significantly, this is not the first time Annunciata charges God with sadism. Recalling her “first days” at the convent, she describes it as “a home / For stunting dull despair shut from the sun” (98-99) and a “nursery to bloat the sick self in” (100), and describes God as “a mis-shapen God to feed whose fires / The love and hopes and faiths, the very life / Of

the young heart must perish” (101-3). Once again recalling herself, though, Annunciata again recants, echoing Jeanne’s terror in the face of her own “wild words”:

Am I mad? Am I mad? I rave
Some blasphemy which is not of myself!
What is it? Was there a demon here just now
By me, within me? Those were not my thoughts
Which just were thought or spoken—which was it?
Oh not my thoughts, not mine! All saints of heaven
Be for me, answer for me; I am yours,
I am your Master’s, how can I be Satan’s?
I have not lost my soul by the wild words.
Not yet, not yet. (546-55)

As with so many of Webster’s monologues, bound up with the constraints of speakability is the question of linguistic agency, the power to act by speaking, to cause consequences and effects. In “Sister Annunciata,” Webster uniquely foregrounds this relation; rather than absenting the auditor entirely or relegating her to the margins of the monologue, Webster grants the absent auditor of Annunciata’s monologue a full monologue of her own. Annunciata’s monologue is followed by “Abbess Ursula’s Lecture,” in which Ursula presents her version of Annunciata’s story to a new arrival in the convent. As other critics have noted, the second monologue is a “study in irony” (Sutphin, *AW* 16): whereas Annunciata had spoken of her intentions to “bring stricter laws” (829) to the convent when it would be in her power, Ursula misinterprets Annunciata’s final words, which thank Ursula for her kindness, as a “lesson” (1477) to loosen the strictures of the convent for “the young souls / New to our holy bondage” (1479-80). As the reader knows, however, Annunciata had asserted the direct opposite: “Our novices must have their freedoms clipped” (839), she insists,

They must have longer vigils, sharper fasts,

Be more alone, have more hours for silence
Being together, learn to find their rest,
Their pleasure and their converse all in prayer. (835-38)

Unheard, however, her speech is as good as unspoken, as Ursula's monologue demonstrates. More than simply a study of irony, then, Webster's innovation with the auditor convention in "Sister Annunciata" uniquely explodes the myth of linguistic agency by formalizing the insurmountable divide between Annunciata's monologue and Ursula's. This divide foregrounds the dependence of linguistic agency on the auditor or other who affirms and authorizes one's speech by dramatizing the effect of the auditor's absence on the rhetorical power and agency—the power to produce consequences and effects—of Annunciata's speech. It is this divide which Webster's monologues return to again and again, transforming the linguistic agency and power of Browning's poems with auditors, his speakers' power to "speak with impunity" and to act by speaking, to the "impossible speech" of her poems without.

While critics are right to admire Webster's dramatic monologues for their "persistent feminism" (Hickock, "Augusta" 343), I hope to have shown in this chapter that this feminism extends beyond the polemics of her poems' content to the politics of their form. By repeatedly enclosing her female speakers in solitude, Webster forecloses their linguistic agency, insisting therefore on the conditions of linguistic survival. So many of Webster's poems—"By the Looking Glass" (1866), "Faded" (1870), and "The Happiest Girl in the World" (1870), in addition to the poems discussed here—stress the necessity of the speaker's retreat from society and from auditors in order to speak, even to think. When they speak, consequently, they speak, like Hemans's speakers, "as a woman" and not, like Browning's speakers, as "a god" ("Circe" 65).

Chapter 5

Speaking Impossibility: Amy Levy's Dramatic Monologues

While Webster's innovations with auditors highlight the limitations of Browning's model of dramatic monologue for reading and theorizing poems that do not "speak like Browning," Amy Levy's dramatic monologues reveal the limitations of Browning's model for reading even those poems which do. Levy's "Xantippe. A Fragment" (1881) may be considered the quintessential dramatic monologue for embodying each of the major theories of the genre to have emerged over the past sixty years, all of which have taken Browning's poems as their point of departure.¹ However, none of these theories, including those of women's dramatic monologues, registers the poem's central struggle with speakability, a struggle that recurs throughout Levy's dramatic monologues. Recognizing the persistent presence of this struggle in Levy's monologues and in women's dramatic monologues in general enables us to theorize the particular value women poets found in the genre: not as a mask of authority and power, as it is often taken to be, but as a masquerade of speech that reveals its impossibility.

I. Speaking like Browning

According to Ina Beth Sessions's 1947 taxonomy of the dramatic monologue, developed "from a careful analysis of the varying qualifications" of Browning's poems, "Xantippe" would be a "Perfect dramatic monologue" for "conforming" to all seven of its requisite characteristics (508): it contains a speaker, audience, occasion, interplay between speaker and audience, revelation of character, dramatic action, and action taking

¹ The poem's title is reprinted in 1884 as "Xantippe (*A Fragment*)" in her collection, *A Minor Poet And other Verse*.

place in the present (508). The speaker is Xantippe, the legendary shrewish wife of Socrates; her maids are the audience; Xantippe's waking from an attempt at suicide, if we follow Karen Weisman's reading, furnishes the occasion (if not, then Xantippe's waking from troubled dreams will); interplay between Xantippe and her maids is constant throughout the poem; Xantippe reveals her character through the course of the monologue; the action is dramatic, by Sessions's standards, involving Xantippe's marriage to Socrates, her climactic outburst against him, and his death; and, finally, in conformance to "the Perfect dramatic monologue," "the action unfolds as the poem develops, giving the reader the impression that this is the original occasion" (Sessions 509).

At the same time, however, "Xantippe" conforms to Robert Langbaum's counter-theory of "the poetry of experience," developed explicitly as a challenge to the classificatory approach epitomized by Sessions but similarly originating in the poems of Browning.² "Xantippe" achieves the dramatic monologue's characteristic effect of "lyrical intensity," an effect made possible, according to Langbaum, by the reader's suspension of moral judgment and willingness to sympathize with an otherwise morally reprehensible character. While the reprehensibility of Xantippe is debatable (unless one finds a shrewish wife unequivocally reprehensible), the lyrical intensity of the poem is not. "Xantippe" features the same "superabundance of expression, more words, ingenuity and argument" (179) that Langbaum finds in Browning's and Tennyson's monologues—"more," that is, "than seem necessary for the purpose" (179) if we follow the customary interpretation of the dramatic situation as Xantippe's waking from troubled

² Though Langbaum incorporates Tennyson's dramatic monologues into his theory, Browning's poems stand as the norm in relation to which Tennyson's poems are evaluated and understood.

dreams. As such, the dramatic situation seems an inadequate motive for “the total outpouring of soul” which the poem stages, the 279 lines of “expression of the speaker’s whole life until that moment” (Langbaum 179) that we find in “Xantippe.” Indeed, Langbaum’s explanation for this “outpouring of soul” captures precisely the motivation and movement of the poem. In the typical dramatic monologue, argues Langbaum, the speaker expresses himself in “order to learn something about himself”; not to “expound a meaning but to pursue one, a meaning which comes to him with the shock of revelation” (185). Furthermore, “[t]he meaning the speaker pursues is precisely his Song, his life’s meaning. To prolong that illuminating music, he prolongs his utterance—losing sight of its ostensible motivation and of the person towards whom it is ostensibly directed” (185).

Likewise, in the pursuit of her own “Song” and “life’s meaning,” Xantippe similarly seems to lose sight of the ostensible motivation of her utterance—to pass the time till daybreak in “aimless talking” (250)—and of her maids toward whom her speech is ostensibly directed. Though she addresses her maids at regular intervals throughout the monologue, the lengthy meditations between these moments seem to be directed “only obliquely at the ostensible auditor” and largely instead “to some projection” of herself, in accordance with Langbaum’s theory (187). Moreover, like the speakers of Langbaum’s dramatic monologue, Xantippe seems to speak not to “expound a meaning but to pursue one,” a meaning which comes to her exactly as Langbaum theorizes: with the “shock of revelation” (185). After 275 lines in which Xantippe insists on her “fierce acceptance of [her] fate” (236)—her “weary life, / The narrow life within the narrow walls” (223-24) in which “hope died out” (234) and in which she “spun away / The soul from out [her] body, the high thoughts / From out [her] spirit” (245-47)—both hope and high thoughts

return to Xantippe at the end of the monologue with shocking force. Glimpsing the dawn, Xantippe turns away from her auditors and from any further recollection of her past to embrace, with a desperation which bespeaks the suddenness of her discovery, the new day:

Ha! the dawn has come;
I see a rosy glimmer—nay! it grows dark;
Why stand ye so in silence? throw it wide,
The casement, quick; why tarry?—give me air—
O fling it wide, I say, and give me light! (275-79)

With this ending, Xantippe learns the lesson which Langbaum argues is the lesson of all poetry of experience—“the greatest possible surge of life” (205)—accomplished by “the speaker’s triumph over the conditions of the poem” (204). Though “the situation or argument of the poem ends in an *impasse*”—Xantippe’s dramatic situation has not changed over the course of the poem—the resolution comes, as with all poetry of experience, “from a breaking through to a new dimension of vision, from shifting the argument to a larger context, a deeper level of intensity” (205). Precisely as Langbaum theorizes, the ending of “Xantippe” encapsulates “the total life out of which the whole poem rises,” and Xantippe “resolves the poem lyrically by learning [her] song” (205). Furthermore, this effect of lyrical intensity is made possible, in accordance with Langbaum’s theory, only by the reader’s suspension of moral judgment. What Langbaum says of Tennyson’s poems can be said of “Xantippe”: there is in “Xantippe” “the same tension between sympathy and judgment [as in Browning’s poems]; our experience of a longing to evade experience becomes itself the most intense of experiences to the extent that we realize how far from the norm we are departing” (87). Thus, “our” experience of Xantippe’s desire for resignation, for relief from the pain of

hope and despair, overrides any feminist condemnation “we” may feel for her desire to embrace her “wrecked and shattered” (271) condition and to become the “household vessel” (237) and “baser treasure” (240) her husband sought. It is our willingness to sympathize with Xantippe’s longing to evade experience that makes possible the effect of lyrical intensity which is the meaning of her song and (for Langbaum) the spirit of the form, “its *way* of meaning” (72, original emphasis).

For Sinfield, in contrast, it is not the speaker’s ambiguous relationship to the auditor but his uncertain relationship to the poet that produces the genre’s characteristic effect. That effect is defined, in opposition to Langbaum’s theory, not as a split in the reader between sympathy and judgment, but as a split in the poem between the speaker’s and the poet’s consciousness. It is this “divided consciousness” (32) between the speaker’s “I” and the poet’s “I” which constitutes for Sinfield “the essential feature of the form” (24), and which achieves the poem’s central purpose: to destabilize the subjective-objective dichotomy that structures traditional views of consciousness. The poem’s doubleness results, according to Sinfield, from the poem’s status as *feint*, as a masquerade of “something other than what it is” (25). By speaking in the first person, the dramatic monologue masquerades as a lyric poem: “an invented speaker masquerades in the first person which customarily signifies the poet’s voice” (25). The genre’s status as *feint* not only reconciles for Sinfield the otherwise “impossible” experience of the reader who must simultaneously posit, on the one hand, a speaker dependent on and derived from the poet’s controlling mind and, on the other, a speaker who exists independently of the poet’s views and attitudes (30). It explains further the appeal and value of the genre for Victorian poets: as a *feint*, as a masquerade of the poet’s lyric “I” and not the poet’s

actual “I”, the dramatic monologue enables the poet to “evade the inconveniences of the Romantic ‘I’”—the demand of “simple sincerity,” integrity, and visionary capacity—while “at the same time achieving oblique self-expression through the device of the *feint*” (59). For all dramatic monologues, argues Sinfield, are “vehicle[s] for the poet’s opinions” (25), whether the vehicle operates by way of sympathy, whereby the speaker’s and the poet’s views are aligned, or by satire, whereby the speaker’s and the poet’s views are at odds, but which nonetheless “promotes the poet’s views by making the reader react against the speaker” (14).

“Xantippe” would therefore belong to Sinfield’s class of “sympathetic monologues.” It promotes the poet’s views, described by various critics as a feminist protest against female exclusion from patriarchal systems of authority, by “engaging the reader’s sympathies” for the oppressed speaker (Sinfield 14). At the same time, however, the poem’s status as *feint* prevents Xantippe’s “I” from slipping into a full identification with Levy’s “I”. In this way, Levy is able to evade not only the inconveniences of the Romantic “I”—what Carol Christ names “the disabling inwardness” of Romantic subjectivity (6); Martin, “the Romantic myth of wholeness” (29) and of the “homogeneity of the subject” (46); and Tucker, the “lyric isolation from context” which he calls “[a] kind of sublime idiocy” (“Dramatic” 24). More importantly, the distance of the mask or masquerade enables Levy to evade further the inconveniences of the female poetic “I”: the expectation of a personal, confessional and sentimental poetic voice in addition to the Romantic demand of “simple sincerity,” integrity, and visionary capacity. “Xantippe” thus upholds at once each of the diverse theories which conceive of the dramatic monologue as a reaction against Romantic conceptions of the self and as a remedy for the

dangers of Romantic solipsism, as well as the prevailing theory of women's dramatic monologue as a strategy of self-protection for the woman poet. In Isobel Armstrong's words, the use of the mask permits a "displacement of feminine subjectivity, almost a travesty of femininity, in order that it can be made an object of investigation" (253); in Kate Flint's, it protects women poets from "public, self-revelatory display" (159) and affords them the "particular freedom" (159) of "speak[ing] out from a position traditionally associated with silence" (160); in Dowson and Entwistle's, it "affords authorial self-concealment while liberating the writer's expressive creativity" (71); and in Glennis Byron's, it offers "a way of insisting that the voice is not to be identified with her own [the woman poet's], that her work *is* art, not simply an outpouring of personal feeling" (*DM* 47, original emphasis).

Even as "Xantippe" fulfills each of these diverse theories, none of which adequately accounts for the auditor in the poem, it exemplifies at the same time Mermin's divergent theory of the "auditor poem." In spite of Xantippe's "strange lack of connection" with her auditors, which confirms Langbaum's dismissal of the auditor in his own theory of the poetry of experience, Xantippe's relationship to her maids typifies the relationship between speaker and auditor of Mermin's theory, which holds that the auditor is central to the movement and meaning of the form. Like all "poems with auditors" in which "differences of status are indicated," Xantippe, as speaker, occupies a position of power and superiority over her maids, while the maids, as auditors, "are necessarily subordinate insofar as they are audience, not actors" (*Audience* 8-9). While Xantippe "exists as a voice," the maids "are voiceless and exist only as the speaker's utterance recognizes them" (*Audience* 9). In this way, the very presence of the maids in

the poem, in spite of Xantippe's lack of connection with them, accomplishes each of the three signature functions of auditors as theorized by Mermin: their presence points up the status of the monologue as a representation of speech (Xantippe's words are spoken aloud); it makes manifest the speaker's power and freedom; and finally, their presence in the poem permits the maids to function as an analogue for the reader whom the poet "wants or fears" (8). For instance, Xantippe's rejection of her maids' response at the end of the poem can be read, in accordance with Mermin's theory, as Levy's exploration of her personal-poetic fears about readerly misinterpretation:

You weep, you weep; I would not that ye wept;
Such tears are idle; with the young, such grief
Soon grows to gratulation, as, "her love
Was withered by misfortune; mine shall grow
All nurtured by the loving," or, "her life
Was wrecked and shattered—mine shall smoothly sail." (266-71)

In fact, it is by applying Mermin's theory of the auditor poem to "Xantippe" that Cynthia Scheinberg recuperates the very theory which Mermin's theory contests, Langbaum's theory of sympathy and judgment. In "Recasting 'Sympathy and Judgment,'" Scheinberg argues that Levy's monologue is motivated by, even as it recounts, Xantippe's search for a sympathetic audience first in Socrates, Plato and Alcibiades, then in her maids. While both groups, male and female, fail to identify with Xantippe's experience, the maids, Scheinberg suggests, will further "work to differentiate themselves from her misfortune" (182), as the passage above demonstrates. Scheinberg concludes from this that Levy's dramatization of pointedly unsympathetic auditors exposes two myths of universal sympathy: first, the maids' failure of sympathy reveals that "all women are not necessarily sympathetically allied" ("Recasting" 182); second, Xantippe's failure to find a sympathetic audience, female or male, reveals that an auditor/reader's capacity for

sympathy is not a universal trait, as Langbaum's theory had suggested, but one that is contingent on one's access to cultural power. Whereas Langbaum had universalized the reader's capacity for sympathy when he asserted that the reader's willingness to understand, even to sympathize with the speaker of a dramatic monologue, however morally reprehensible, was "the necessary condition of reading the poem" and "the key to the poem's form" (85), Scheinberg demonstrates that such sympathy may be impossible for some readers, determined as it is by their relationship to cultural power. For instance, readers from cultural, political and gendered positions other than Langbaum's might not find in Browning's misogynist Duke of Ferrara the "immense attractiveness" (77) which Langbaum does. Similarly, the maids cannot identify with Xantippe's experiences because they do not share her position of relative power and freedom, just as, conversely, Socrates, Alcibiades, and Plato reject and ridicule Xantippe's speech because she does not occupy the position of power and authority which they hold.

Socrates's power to silence Xantippe in the poem—and the means by which he does so—would seem to confirm Scheinberg's theory. Overhearing his generalizations about woman's frailty of body and mind, that

woman's frail—
Her body rarely stands the test of soul;
She grows intoxicate with knowledge; throws
The laws of custom, order, 'neath her feet,
Feasting at life's great banquet with wide throat. (168-72)

Xantippe blasts him for the *hubris* of presuming that the gods could not manage to construct a complete woman:

By all great powers around us! can it be
That we poor women are empirical?
That gods who fashioned us did strive to make
Beings too fine, too subtly delicate,

With sense that thrilled response to ev'ry touch
Of nature's, and their task is not complete?
That they have sent their half-completed work
To bleed and quiver here upon the earth?
To bleed and quiver, and to weep and weep,
To beat its soul against the marble walls
Of men's cold hearts, and then at last to sin! (177-87)

Xantippe is instantly silenced, however, by Socrates's appeal to the authority of high philosophy—or, rather, by his reminder of Xantippe's exclusion from it. He counters, with crushing “cold contempt” (211),

I thank thee for the wisdom which thy lips
Have thus let fall among us: prythee tell
From what high source, from what philosophies
Didst cull the sapient notion of thy words? (206-9).

Thus, as Scheinberg theorizes, Socrates's power to dismiss Xantippe's speech and his power to refuse identification with her experience arises out of Xantippe's exclusion from his “high source” of cultural authority.

While “Xantippe” thus fulfills each of these leading theories of the dramatic monologue of the past half-century, however divergent or contradictory, none of these theories acknowledges, let alone addresses, the central preoccupation of the poem: the problematics of speaking and the constraints of speakability. Though Scheinberg comes closest to it when she observes that “Levy reminds us how poetic or linguistic power is not merely something the speaker/poet/poem controls; on the contrary, the speaker is totally dependent on an audience's power to validate that speech—to claim it as representative” (“Recasting” 182), her focus on the auditor, in the interest of “recasting” Langbaum's reader-response theory, overlooks the implications of this insight for the speaker. In other words, her focus on the contingency of the auditor's capacity for sympathy does not address how the speaker's dependence on the auditor affects, even

effects, her speech. Yet at the very center of the poem, and hence, at the core of Xantippe's "life's meaning" and "Song," to borrow Langbaum's terms, is Xantippe's struggle to negotiate in her speech the terms of speakability; to reconcile, in other words, her desire for linguistic authority, power and freedom—her "yearn[ing] for knowledge" and "a tongue / That should proclaim the stately mysteries / Of this fair world" (38-40)—with the "lesson of dumb patience" (50) which that world insists she must learn. This lesson, Xantippe makes clear, is one of feminine speakability: not only "the implicit and explicit norms that govern the kind of speech that will be legible as the speech of a subject" (*ES* 133), as Butler defines the domain of speakability in general, but also the particular norms that govern the kind of speech that will be legible as the speech of a female subject—what will constitute the norms of "woman's thoughts" ("Xantippe" 44) and what transgression. What Xantippe "grew / To learn" (41-42) was that "those vague desires, those hopes and fears, / Those eager longings" (30-31) she speaks of are themselves a "sin" (43), a transgression of a specifically feminine speakability—for, as Xantippe observes, "such are not woman's thoughts" (44). Rather, as the monologue reveals, to speak such thoughts is to risk being constituted as a "woman-mind . . . gone astray" (42). In her confrontation with Socrates, she is reduced, beneath the "weight" (211) of his words, not only to silence, to "dumbness" (211), but to the very irrationality Socrates identifies with women: "with both angry hands," Xantippe flings the wineskin upon the marble (214-15), just as Socrates's "frail woman" "throws / The laws of custom, order, 'neath her feet" (170-71). Rather than reason, then, it is "fury" (176, 213) that lights Xantippe's words and actions, until she becomes herself the picture of Fury—of a pointedly female figure of vengeance—first "[h]olding the swelling wine-skin o'er [her]

head, / With breast that heaved, and eyes and cheeks aflame” (176-77), then fleeing across the threshold with “hair unbound” and “[w]hite garment stained to redness” (218-19). In this scene, Xantippe therefore becomes the very picture of a “woman-mind gone astray” (42), while her speech is dismissed as the “impossible speech,” in Butler’s words, of another “impossible” subject.

Though Xantippe’s search for a sympathetic auditor might be the motive for her speaking, and the contingency of sympathy, the poem’s moral, as Scheinberg argues, the poem’s meaning, I argue, lies in Xantippe’s struggle for speakability—her struggle to attain linguistic authority without violating the norms of feminine speakability. Through her dramatization of this governing conflict, Levy suggests that feminine speakability and linguistic authority are inexorably at odds. From the “fair Aspasia” (163), the woman praised by Socrates for her difference from the “frailty” of women, Xantippe learns that to attain linguistic authority, she must speak not as a woman, but like a man; Aspasia earns Socrates’s “love” (225) and her “freedom” (228), by Xantippe’s account, by her ability to imitate his “glib philosophy” (228). Accordingly, Xantippe ventriloquizes at different times in the monologue the two men who embody for her the linguistic authority she seeks, her father and her husband. These shifts in Xantippe’s speaking “I” are signaled by Levy, fittingly, by Xantippe’s grammatical shifts in first-person pronoun. When Xantippe lectures her maids on the superiority of the gem hard-sought, a metaphor for Socrates’s deeply buried beauty of soul and mind, her shift from the personal “I” to describe her first impression of Socrates to the impersonal “we” to repress that first impression marks the dissolution of her subjectivity under the pressure of speakability. “I saw him,” she first asserts boldly, “all ungainly and uncouth” (56), and then asserts with

equal boldness the effect of this first sight: “I saw his face and marked it, half with awe, / Half with a quick repulsion at the shape. . . .” (59-60, original ellipses). Thus bordering on the unspeakable, however, Xantippe’s “I” dissolves in the ellipses and re-emerges as the “we” of the passage that follows. In the voice of this new speaking subject, she invokes a voice and authority not entirely her own:

The richest gem lies hidden furthest down,
And is the dearer for the weary search;
We grasp the shining shells which strew the shore,
Yet swift we fling them from us; but the gem
We keep for aye and cherish. So a soul,
Found after weary searching in the flesh
Which half repelled our senses, is more dear,
For that same seeking, than the sunny mind
Which lavish Nature marks with thousand hints
Upon a brow of beauty. We are prone
To overweigh such subtle hints, then deem,
In after disappointment, we are fooled. . . . (62-73, original ellipses)

Since this lesson is followed by her father’s announcement that she was to wed “great Socrates” (74), absent of quotation marks, the jarring discord between the two images of him—the “all ungainly and uncouth” Socrates experienced by Xantippe’s “I” and the “great Socrates” named by an authoritative “we”—suggests that it is to her father that we can attribute both the voice and the authority which Xantippe here intones. It is surely his voice we hear, again, when Xantippe calls herself “foolish” (75) for weeping at the news of her engagement, for rejecting, in other words, the high philosophy of her father’s lesson recited above: “I, foolish, wept to see at once cast down / The maiden image of a future love, / Where perfect body matched the perfect soul” (75-77). In the same way, it is surely Socrates’s voice we hear, signaled this time by Xantippe’s shift from the first to the third person, when Xantippe recites the lesson she learns in marriage: that the “great wisdom” which Xantippe seeks, one

which dispels
Narrowed conclusions of a half-grown mind,
And sees athwart the littleness of life
Nature's divineness and her harmony,
Was never poor Xantippe's. . . . (100-4, original ellipses)

At the center of Xantippe's "life's meaning" and "Song" thus lies a paradox. To attain the authoritative speaking position, Xantippe must speak, like Aspasia, like the men whose authority she seeks. However, to speak like them requires her to espouse a philosophy which demands of Xantippe the same "dumb patience" (50) which authority, knowledge and power had promised to countermand. While her father's high philosophy compels her to "cast down / The maiden image of a future love, / Where perfect body matched the perfect soul" (75-77)—to accept, in other words, and accept quietly, her marriage to the "all ungainly and uncouth" (56) and even repulsive (60) Socrates—the "great wisdom" (100) of the "great Sokrates" (74) commands her to accept her inferiority as a woman. Levy therefore suggests in "Xantippe" that the path toward linguistic authority, freedom and power leads the female speaker to two untenable choices, both tantamount to silence: either to speak like men, as Aspasia does, or else "find / Her tender language wholly misconceived" (138), like Xantippe.

II. Speaking like Women Speaking like Men

That this paradox mirrors the impossible condition of female speakers foregrounded by Hemans's model of dramatic monologue highlights the implications of a new methodology for theorizing the dramatic monologue. By beginning with Hemans's model, we make possible not only new poems hitherto excluded from the genre, but also new interpretations of conventional, Browningsque dramatic monologues like

“Xantippe”—interpretations unrecognized by the traditional model but “key to the poem’s form,” to borrow Langbaum’s phrase. Rather than the reader’s willingness (Langbaum) or capacity (Scheinberg) to sympathize with the speaker, or the poet’s projection of his fears onto the auditor (Mermin), or the poet’s promotion of his views through the speaker either by satire or sympathy (Sinfield), or the poet’s attempt to escape the disabling inwardness of romantic subjectivity (Armstrong; Christ; Martin; Tucker), in this quintessential dramatic monologue, it is the speaker’s struggle for speakability and linguistic survival that “alone is responsible for a meaning not inherent in the content itself but determined peculiarly by the treatment” (Langbaum 85). For only the constraints of speakability can account for Xantippe’s continual self-censorship throughout the monologue, her suppression of what she “will not tell” (256), “would recall no more” (105), or would not have her maids think (113). It alone recognizes the double and divided movement of Xantippe’s speech between the desire to remain silent and maintain speakability, on the one hand—to “recall no more, no more of life, / Than just the incomplete, imperfect dream / Of early summers” (105-7)—and the urge to speak, on the other:

But something strong within me, some sad chord
Which loudly echoes to the later life,
Me to unfold the after-misery
Urges, with plaintive wailing in my heart. (109-12)

Finally, it is the constraints of speakability alone which explain Xantippe’s otherwise inexplicable reading of her maids’ response at the end of the poem, her interpretation of their tears—the apparent if not quintessential sign of sympathy—as the failure of sympathetic identification. While Scheinberg’s argument is irrefutable, that “Xantippe does not welcome the appearance of sympathy in the weeping of the maids because she

does not trust their interpretation of her story” (“Recasting” 181), it fails to explain both the reason for Xantippe’s mistrust and the reason for her rather perverse interpretation of the appearance of sympathy as its opposite. Moreover, Scheinberg’s assertion of the maids’ failure of sympathy as a “fact” which “reminds us that all women are not necessarily sympathetically allied” (“Recasting” 182), though a compelling conclusion, obscures the error of its premise: that the maids’ failure of identification is not a “fact” of the poem but the interpretation of the speaker. In other words, we do not know whether the maids identify with Xantippe since, as with all dramatic monologues, we have only the speaker’s response to the auditor, not the auditor’s response to the speaker. While this is equally true of Socrates as of the maids, Xantippe’s detailed account of Socrates’s actions and her direct quotation of his words make it reasonable to believe that Socrates does respond with crushing “cold contempt” (211) as Xantippe reports. In contrast, Xantippe gives us no reason to believe, solely on the basis of their weeping, that the maids “will work to differentiate themselves from her misfortune” (Scheinberg, “Recasting” 182) as she presumes.

Xantippe’s mistrust and possible misreading can be explained, I suggest, by her struggle for linguistic survival and speakability. When we compare Xantippe’s projection of the maids’ interpretation with her own telling of her story, it becomes apparent that it is not their misinterpretation that she fears, but her own misspeaking. The two statements which she projects onto the maids and rejects, that “her love / Was withered by misfortune” (268-69) and “her life / Was wrecked and shattered” (270-71), in fact faithfully represent both the story she has told and the way she has told it. The passive construction of both statements reproduces the deterministic register of

Xantippe's narration which she invokes to defend Socrates against blame for her life's misfortune—more precisely, to defend herself against the charge of blaming him for her misfortune. The difference between these two positions, between blaming Socrates and appearing to blame him, makes manifest the poem's central preoccupation with speakability. Xantippe insists to her maids, "Yet, maidens, mark: I would not that ye thought / I blame my lord departed" (113-14), not: "I would not that ye blamed my lord departed." Xantippe's concern, therefore, is not for protecting Socrates from censure, but for preserving her speakability. Hence, in order that her maids would not think that *she* blamed her "lord departed," Xantippe displaces the blame throughout the monologue on the "Fates which marked [her] an Athenian maid" (233) and the Fates which "had destined for [her] life" the "barren shape" it became (128-29)—indeed, in her maids' anticipated words, on the "misfortune" which "withered" her love and "wrecked and shattered" her life.

Xantippe mistrusts her maids' interpretation, then, not because she fears that they will misinterpret her words, but because she fears that they will take her at her word—i.e. that she would not have them think she blamed Socrates—and thereby fail to register the meanings which she cannot, or cares not to, entirely repress: that Socrates is in fact to blame. This is the story that she "will not tell" (256), at least not fully or directly, for fear of transgressing that norm of "dumb patience" governing and suppressing women's speech. Tell it she must, however, if she is to tell her story, as Xantippe herself realizes:

But something strong within me, some sad chord
Which loudly echoes to the later life,
Me to unfold the after-misery
Urges, with plaintive wailing in my heart. (109-12)

The strain of speakability on her speech is witnessed in this passage by its disjointed syntax, in which the transitive verb “urges” is disconnected from its direct object, “me,” and their usual order inverted. The strain is visible again in Xantippe’s defense of Socrates, which attempts simultaneously to excuse and expose him for his cruelty:

Yet, maidens, mark: I would not that ye thought
I blame my lord departed, for he meant
No evil, so I take it, to his wife,
‘Twas only that the high philosopher,
Pregnant with noble theories and great thoughts,
Deigned not to stoop to touch so slight a thing
As the fine fabric of a woman’s brain—
So subtle as a passionate woman’s soul. (113-20)

What Levy’s readers would unmistakably mark here, however, contradicting Xantippe’s express intent, is Levy’s alignment of Socrates with Browning’s notorious Duke, who also deigned “[n]ever to stoop” (“My Last Duchess” 43). Levy thus clearly condemns Socrates for a cruelty made manifest by this allusion. At the same time, however, this is a meaning necessarily lost to Xantippe’s maids (and Xantippe), who are situated outside of this reading community. Bound to her own linguistic community and confined to the domain of feminine speakability, Xantippe can only tentatively suggest to her maids the meaning she expressly repudiates. The strain of speakability can be seen once again here in the grammar of her speech—in the tenuousness of the subjunctive mood, the halting hesitation of the multiple commas, the implied uncertainty of the phrase, “I think,” all attenuated even further by the closing ellipses which deny Xantippe any closure or resolution:

I think, if he had stooped a little, and cared,
I might have risen nearer to his height,
And not lain shattered, neither fit for use
As goodly household vessel, nor for that
Far finer thing which I had hoped to be. . . . (121-25, original ellipses)

Yet again, the same signs of linguistic struggle mark Xantippe's second attempt to intimate Socrates's blame, though her earlier hesitation is now replaced by resignation:

I think I could have borne the weary life,
The narrow life within the narrow walls,
If he had loved me; but he kept his love
For this Athenian city and her sons;
And, haply, for some stranger-woman, bold
With freedom, thought, and glib philosophy. . . .
(223-28, original ellipses)

Extracted as it is from a narrative of 279 lines, and with the 98 intervening lines removed, Xantippe's message seems clear: if he had stooped and cared, she would not have lain shattered; if he had loved her, she could have borne the weary life. Whether the maids register this second meaning which contradicts Xantippe's express intent to avoid blaming Socrates, we cannot know. What we can be certain of, however, is the reason Xantippe fears this meaning has been lost on her maids: her doublespeak, necessary for linguistic survival, threatens to eclipse the untellable with the speakable, to obscure the transparency of these eleven lines by entangling them in the remaining 268 and the intervening one hundred. Her story, so long as it is confined to feminine speakability, will remain "incomplete, imperfect" (106), necessarily the "fragment" which Levy names the poem.

By this reading, it is not the search for a sympathetic audience that Xantippe deems is "[i]n vain, in vain, in vain" (272), as Scheinberg argues, but the act of speaking itself. For Xantippe finds herself transgressing speakability at every turn, from her first

desire for linguistic power and freedom—for “a tongue / That should proclaim the stately mysteries / Of this fair world” (38-40)—to her “quick repulsion at the shape” of Socrates (60); to her explicit defiance of the great philosopher; to, finally, her seemingly innocuous interpretation of her maids’ tears. Each constitutes a “sin” against speakability requiring Xantippe to censor her speech and to rewrite her reading: “The gods forgive me! Sorely have I sinned / In all my life. A fairer fate befall / You all that stand there. . . .” (273-75, original ellipses). It is therefore unsurprising and entirely fitting, thus circumscribed by speakability, that Xantippe should crave the symbols of linguistic freedom—the air and light—as desperately as Levy pictures at the end of the poem:

Ha! the dawn has come;
I see a rosy glimmer—nay! it grows dark;
Why stand ye so in silence? throw it wide,
The casement, quick; why tarry?—give me air—
O fling it wide, I say, and give me light! (275-89)

That the air and light symbolize a specifically linguistic freedom and power for Xantippe is indicated by the performative nature of each of her commands; with each, Xantippe attempts to act by speaking: “throw it wide,” “give me air,” “give me light.” In fact, the final command unmistakably imitates the divine performative, “Let there be light.” God therefore becomes the third and final figure of patriarchal authority that Xantippe ventriloquizes in the poem in a final clutch at linguistic power. However, by this act of impersonation, Levy reminds the reader that Xantippe remains excluded from any such power, in spite of her position of authority and power over her maids. For this ending reminds us that it is for this moment, this rosy glimmer over which she has no control—“nay! it grows dark” (276)—that Xantippe has waited and watched all night. It is this waiting and watching that furnishes the poem’s dramatic occasion, the narrative frame for

Xantippe's entire speech, as Xantippe states at the outset: "The still morn stays expectant, and my soul, / All weighted with a passive wonderment, / Waiteth and watcheth, waiteth for the dawn" (5-7). It is thus Xantippe's linguistic impotence, her "*passive* wonderment," which the ending underscores by its parody of linguistic power.

III. Speaking Impossibility

Like Webster and Hemans, Levy adopts the voice of a female speaker marginalized in history not to endow her with the authoritative speaking position but to interrogate the conditions of linguistic authority and freedom. The current theory of women's dramatic monologues, which holds that the mask provides women poets with a strategy of self-protection to speak freely and with authority, overlooks the profusion of women's dramatic monologues which stage instead the impossibility of such authority and freedom. While "Xantippe" is variously described as the speaker's "expression" of her "resentment" (Leighton, "Amy Levy" 589) or "rage" (Armstrong, *VP* 375), or as a "feminist railing against women's exclusion" (Weisman 75), I argue that Xantippe's active repression of her resentment and rage calls into question the possibility of unfettered self-expression which the phrase "feminist railing" implies.

Levy's "A Greek Girl" (1884) furnishes another example. In it, the speaker mourns the fact that she "may not weep, not weep" (1) the death of her beloved because, unloved by him in life, she does not occupy the authorized subject position to mourn his death. It is "that other, fairer maid" (31), "[t]hrice-crowned, thrice honoured, with that love of his" (39), who is authorized to publicly perform the rites of mourning: she "tombward brings / Her gold, shorn locks and piled-up offerings" (31-32); it is she "who,

unchecked by any thought of shame, / May weep her tears, and call upon his name, /
With burning bosom prest to the cold ground” (36-37). Levy’s emphasis on the ritualized nature of these acts reveals, however, that even the fairer maid, though positioned as authoritative subject and “unchecked by any thought of shame,” is still checked by speakability. What is described is not a free expression of the fairer maid’s grief, but a performance prescribed by speakability—by the norms that govern what will constitute the speech and actions of a female subject who mourns the man who “honoured” her with his love. Levy therefore pointedly suggests that both women of the poem, loved and unloved, are equally bound by the domain of speakability, both in authorized speech and in de-authorized silence. Indeed, though the confessional mode of the poem conjures the illusion of unfettered self-expression, Levy dispels this illusion at the end of the poem by revealing the necessary condition of linguistic freedom. It is only in the absence of any auditor or witness—either “when quick lips, keen eyes, are closed in sleep” (62), or when, in the self-enclosed and silent act of self-dialogue, no others can hear—it is only “then” that the speaker “may weep” (63) and speak freely. The crucial point, however, is that even then, when the speaker is able to speak freely, she speaks of the impossibility of doing so.

“Magdalen” (1884) similarly conjures the illusion of linguistic freedom only to dispel it at the end. Here, however, Levy creates the illusion of linguistic freedom not by dramatizing the silent, self-enclosed confession of a female speaker, as in “A Greek Girl,” but by disguising the silent, self-enclosed thoughts of the speaker as a spoken address to an auditor. Up until the final stanza, the speaker, at once the biblical Magdalen and a Victorian “Magdalen” or “fallen woman,” seems to speak directly to her

lover—at once Jesus and a Victorian lover—and seems to do so unconstrained by speakability.³ The poem opens with an explicit indictment of her lover for seducing her while knowing full well that he would abandon her afterward:

All things I can endure, save one.
The bare, blank room where is no sun;
The parcelled hours; the pallet hard;
The dreary faces here within;
The outer women's cold regard;
The Pastor's iterated "sin";—
These things could I endure, and count
No overstrain'd, unjust amount;
No undue payment for such bliss—
Yea, all things bear, save only this:
That you, who knew what thing would be,
Have wrought this evil unto me. (1-12)

As other critics have noted, Levy is clearly criticizing in this passage the hypocrisy of compassion underwriting "Magdalen" reformatory institutions by depicting their severe living conditions: the "bare, blank room where is no sun," the "parcelled hours," the "pallet hard" (2-3). As Emma Francis observes, "far from being benevolent and palliative as was claimed, the regime in these 'sisterhoods' was punitive, organized around the attempt to induce guilt and self-loathing in the women admitted, by physical privation and moral terrorism" (189). By Francis's reading, the poem celebrates the speaker's triumph over the reformatory's religious and ideological strictures in the final stanza, in which the speaker fantasizes a reunion with her lover:

The doctor says that I shall die.
You, that I knew in days gone by,
I fain would see your face once more,

³ By identifying the speaker with both the biblical and Victorian Magdalen, I follow Cynthia Scheinberg's argument in *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England* (2002) that the poem necessitates this dual identification for its symbols to function fully in the poem. For example, if one views the speaker solely as a Victorian prostitute, as most critics have done, then only the romantic connotations of the rose of line 26 would register, while the significance of the thorn—and the lover's anguished response to it—would not (lines 22-33).

Con well its features o'er and o'er;
And touch your hand and feel your kiss,
Look in your eyes and tell you this:
That all is done, that I am free;
That you, through all eternity,
Have neither part nor lot in me. (77-85)

Thus, the sexual nature of the fantasized encounter—the persistence of the speaker's desire to “touch” and “kiss”—repudiates, argues Francis, “the corrupt orthodoxy which has condemned” the speaker and resists through parody the conventional prostitute's deathbed repentance scene (189).

Integrating religious and feminist discourses, Scheinberg finds a similar triumph and a more radical critique in the speaker's resistance to and rewriting of the conventional deathbed conversion scene. For Scheinberg, the speaker's desire to touch and kiss Jesus in a presumably post-Resurrection state (i.e. upon his return after his abandonment of Magdalen) repudiates and rewrites Jesus's injunction, “noli mi tangere”—“touch me not”—in the garden after his resurrection (John 20.17). As Scheinberg explains: “The ‘noli mi tangere’ moment is a crucial one in understanding that Jesus' [s] crucifixion and Resurrection created an entirely new relationship with his apostles, and most obviously, Mary Magdalen, whom the Biblical text suggests had indeed gone forward to ‘touch’ Jesus” (*Women's Poetry* 220). This scene thus becomes for Scheinberg “much more than a fallen woman's address to her lost man”; it becomes a “specifically Jewish resistance to the Christian narrative”—one which aligns the speaker with her Jewish poet-creator, Levy. According to Scheinberg, in this final scene, the speaker severs her ties to Christ and thus to Christianity by confirming her Jewish and “defiantly unconverted” identity and denying Christ any role in her “eternity” (*WP* 220-21).

The triumph which both Francis and Scheinberg find in the final stanza, whether feminist or religious, hinges on the fantasmatic nature of the final scene. For Francis, the fact that the poem ends with a sexual fantasy proves the speaker's unrepentant nature and, therefore, her refusal to submit to the reformatory's "moral terrorism." For Scheinberg, the status of the reunion as fantasy implies that Jesus "never really returns" (*WP* 221), which proves his abandonment of her "through all eternity" ("Magdalen" 84) and justifies her rejection of him for the same. I argue, in contrast, that the fantasmatic nature of the final scene effectively reverses any potential triumph of the speaker over her conditions by undercutting the linguistic and performative power of her speech. As Magdalen herself recognizes, in order for the words "all is done," "I am free," "you have neither part nor lot in me" to have the effect of severing the ties between herself and her auditor, they must be spoken to him: she must "*tell* [him] this" (82, emphasis added). That she does not because she cannot because Jesus never returns makes her speech more than simply a failed performative or a fantasy; it makes her speech "impossible" in the ordinary sense: it is impossible for Magdalen to speak these words to Jesus because he is not present and never returns.⁴ Because he never returns, the words will never be spoken, and because they will never be spoken, Magdalen will remain bound to him "through all eternity"—to lie "all night" and "think and think" (60) of him who will never hear the words which, once heard, will release her from these bonds. That she remains thus bound is witnessed by the simple present of her verbs, the mood of habitual and repeated actions: "I lie" (56, 60), "I wonder" (33, 35), "I hear" (49), "I think" (52), she reports, both "now" (17, 19) and "often" (57).

⁴ A performative fails or "misfires," according to J.L. Austin, when the act one purports or sets out to perform by one's speech is not achieved, for one reason or another. Since Magdalen's words are never spoken, they never have the opportunity to fail or misfire.

Rather than a celebration of the speaker's triumph over her conditions, then, the poem ends, I suggest, with a parody of linguistic power which—as in “Xantippe”—reinforces those very conditions. Magdalen remains bound to her auditor ““[h]ere, on [her] pallet-bed alone” (54), where she “thinks and thinks” (60) repeatedly, compulsively, of him. Moreover, as fantasy, the final scene reveals that the auditor has been absent all along, transforming the entire monologue from a speech act seemingly unconstrained by speakability to a fantasy of speech whose linguistic freedom is predicated, as in “A Greek Girl,” on the auditor's absence. Unlike “Xantippe” and “A Greek Girl,” however, “Magdalen” is not centered on the drama of speakability or linguistic survival. I do not read in the speaker's closing fantasy of freedom from her auditor a desire for linguistic freedom that is the central thrust of the poem. My intention here is not to reduce this complex poem to a generic theme or moral (in both senses of the word “generic”); nor is it to reduce all women's dramatic monologues to the same. Rather, by highlighting the persistent presence in women's dramatic monologues of the strain of speakability, whether at the center or in the margins, I wish to suggest that the peculiar value women poets found in the genre is not the opportunity to speak with the linguistic authority, power and freedom denied them in both their private and public lives, but to foreground the impossibility of such authority, power and freedom for their female speakers—even and especially in those dramatic monologues which seem to dramatize that very freedom and power. Amy Levy is a particularly fitting poet for investigating this paradox, as she is continually aligned with her female speakers' marginality and “minority,” as Scheinberg puts it, for being a Jewish and lesbian poet. Her choice of speakers “whose voices are not normally granted poetic authority in Western culture” (Scheinberg,

“Recasting” 180) is often interpreted as her means of assuming the authoritative subject position, of “raging” and “railing” against the patriarchal systems of religious and aesthetic discourses by way of the mask. However, Levy’s dramatic monologues, like those of Hemans and Webster, consistently deny her speakers that authoritative subject position, dramatizing instead voices that struggle against speakability and speakers who are continually misheard, misunderstood, or simply silent. The consistent conclusion of her dramatic monologues is that the “total life” out of which the whole genre rises for Langbaum (205), and the linguistic power and freedom which it stages for many theorists of the genre, is but an illusion for her female speakers: an “incomplete, imperfect”—and impossible—“dream” (“Xantippe” 106).

Conclusions and Further Questions: The Question of Difference

Theorizing the dramatic monologue as though disencumbered by Browning's model has made possible a model of genre that recovers the poetic innovations and influence of women poets without separating them from or subordinating them to the dominant male tradition. This model recovers dramatic monologues hitherto excised from the genre, like Hemans's "Properzia Rossi" and "Arabella Stuart"; it brings to light poetic influences and affiliations previously repressed, like those between earlier women poets like Hemans and later women poets like Webster and Levy; and it makes legible new modes of meaning in the most "traditional" of dramatic monologues, like Levy's "Xantippe."

Yet to theorize the dramatic monologue "as though" disencumbered by Browning's model is notably not the same as theorizing the dramatic monologue actually disencumbered by Browning's model. While Hemans's position in literary history makes the former possible, writing as she is well before Browning's first dramatic monologues were published and long before the dramatic monologue began to be theorized, my own position in literary history makes the latter impossible, writing as I am long after Browning's model has been formalized as "the" dramatic monologue. Indeed, at this juncture of literary history, the dramatic monologue is unthinkable apart from Browning's model, as it is his model which has defined the conceptual limits of the genre, drawing the lines by which this "new literary form" (Curry 1) has become an identifiable class of poetry and an intelligible category of thought. This dilemma of genre and of history becomes evident when I ask of my own study the question I had asked of Scheinberg's in chapter two: how have I come to select these particular poems

by Hemans for the basis of my theorization of the dramatic monologue? Which criteria have these poems fulfilled to qualify as the new origins of the form?

In chapter three, I construct a narrative of discovery to defend the origins of the genre in Hemans's poems. There, I suggest that it is the radical differences of Hemans's two monologues from the rest of *Records of Woman*, the collection in which they appear, which urges the question of generic innovation: why does Hemans adopt in "Properzia Rossi" and "Arabella Stuart"—for the first time in her career—both the mask and the monologue form? What is the effect and what is at stake in this presentation of women speaking for themselves, unmediated by a narrator but mediated by the mask? After examining the differential relation of the two monologues to the rest of the volume, I argue that Hemans turns to the dramatic monologue form—"invents" it, if you will—in order to supply her poetry with the two conditions necessary for destabilizing the "fantasy of woman," the fantasy of an essential gender and an abiding gendered self. As I argue there, the monologue form provides Hemans with the claim of authenticity missing from her narrative poems through the monologue's posture of authentic voice and unmediated speech, while the addition of a dramatic speaker to the monologue form provides Hemans with the distance that is missing from her lyric poems but which is necessary for exposing the monologue's posture of authenticity *as* posture. However, the question remains: how have I come to identify this particular formal innovation, the combination of the mask and the monologue, as the origins of the dramatic monologue? Indeed, how have I come to recognize this particular formal innovation at all?

The answer is simple: my position at the end of the dramatic monologue's long history of theorization has trained me to identify the addition of a dramatic speaker to the

monologue form as the single essential criterion of the genre, whatever other features may have been appended or excised during the course of that long history. This prior theory of the dramatic monologue permitted me to recognize this essential feature in both “Properzia Rossi” and “Arabella Stuart,” then to posit it as Hemans’s formal innovation on her lyric and narrative poems which gave rise to the dramatic monologue. In short, my theory of the dramatic monologue is no less performative than those I critique in chapter two: it is not Hemans’s formal innovations which led to my discovery of the dramatic monologue, but my prior theory of the dramatic monologue which led to my discovery of Hemans’s formal innovations. More to the point: since that prior theory is derived from the existing discourses on the dramatic monologue, my own theory, which posits Hemans’s poems as the new origins of the genre, ultimately—inevitably—originates with Browning. Indeed, literary history precludes any other possibility, since every theory of the genre from the first description of the form in 1869 by Buxton Forman has been derived from a study of Browning’s poems.¹ Thus, while I may theorize the genre as though disencumbered by Browning’s model, my theory necessarily remains bounded by the limits of generic intelligibility originally marked by Browning’s poems.

If all theories necessarily begin with Browning by beginning with this single essential feature historically derived from Browning’s poems, then the question arises whether all theories of the dramatic monologue necessarily reinscribe the exclusion of women poets implicated in Browning’s model. More specifically, is my theory equally guilty of relegating women poets to a second silence, as I had argued of past feminist

¹ One possible exception is A. Dwight Culler’s theory of the genre’s origins in monodrama, which is based primarily on Tennyson’s dramatic monologues. However, as discussed in chap. 2, the classification of Tennyson’s poems as dramatic monologues relies on a definition of genre derived from Browning’s poems.

attempts to re-theorize the genre? If not, then where does the difference lie? To the first question, my answer is “no”: past theories of the dramatic monologue founded on the formal features first founded on Browning’s poems *have* reinscribed the exclusion of women poets, but *need not* do so “necessarily.” For instance, Byron’s theory posits women’s dramatic monologues as a different line of development from men’s, one which focuses on social critique rather than the critique of the self characteristic of the Browning tradition. Insisting, however, that women’s dramatic monologues originate in the same tradition, in Browning’s destabilization of the self through historical contextualization, Byron’s theory disqualifies Hemans from the genre for the perceived essentialism of her poems. As Byron argues, Hemans’s poems place the self in context not to reveal “the fixed and essential self to be in fact fragmented, composite, and the product of a particular set of socio-cultural conditions,” but to reinforce “the idea that, in all times and all places, the essential nature of woman is fixed” (“Rethinking” 84; *DM* 52). In Byron’s case, then, beginning with Browning leads her to repeat the exclusion of women poets by obscuring other possible strategies for destabilizing the self apart from Browning’s method of historical contextualization. However, it need not have done so. As I argue in chapter three, Hemans destabilizes the self by dramatizing the way in which the illusion of an abiding gendered self is performatively produced through the process of “corporeal stylization,” Judith Butler’s term for the process by which gender is inscribed onto the body, on the skin, through “that array of corporeal theatrics” of bodily gesture, movement and gait (“Imitation” 317). Through this dramatization of gender performativity, Hemans’s poetry reveals “Woman” to be not an essential, universal category, but a fantasy which produces the illusion of a gender essence through the

repetition of actions, postures and gestures culturally coded as “femininity” and “female subjectivity.”

A theory of dramatic monologue founded on the features of Browning’s model therefore need not reinscribe the exclusion of women poets which his model has historically implied, though Byron’s theory does. Similarly, Cynthia Scheinberg’s attempt to “recast” Langbaum’s theory of the genre in light of women’s dramatic monologues need not repeat their exclusion, but does so insofar as she restricts her discussion to poems which conform to Browning’s model, Amy Levy’s “Xantippe” and “A Minor Poet.” While this approach may be useful for examining the limitations of a theory founded on Browning’s poems, which is Scheinberg’s express purpose, it risks reproducing the exclusion of women poets by missing the innovations which diverge from that model. In consequence, women poets may enter the discourse on the dramatic monologue by this approach, but end up excluded once again from the genre’s theorization.²

The difference, then, between a theory that originates with Browning and reinscribes women’s exclusion, and a theory that originates with Browning but does not, lies in the space between historical necessity and theoretical possibility: though the dramatic monologue may be unthinkable apart from Browning’s model, it is not untheorizable. The value of theorizing the dramatic monologue “as though” disencumbered by Browning’s model—even if impossible in actual fact—I hope to have demonstrated in these pages. Doing so not only recovers women’s poems, poetic

² Scheinberg seems to recognize this danger when she admits that her essay does not actually theorize the genre in relation to women’s dramatic monologues and identifies this as the critical “next step” (“Recasting” 187). Had she taken this step in her essay, it seems to me she would have circumvented this danger of excluding women poets once again from the form’s theorization.

innovations and influence, but also sheds new light on their poetic strategies. Beginning with Hemans instead of Browning for a model of the dramatic monologue—even if it is a feature of Browning’s model which had led me to Hemans—has uncovered the “peculiar genius” of the genre for women poets. It is not simply the possibility of seizing the authoritative speaking position consistently denied them, as is often supposed; as Armstrong points out, this does not explain the “insistence” of women poets “on speaking in another *woman’s* voice” (*VP* 325, original emphasis)—on dramatizing, in other words, marginalized or de-authorized speakers in their monologues. Nor, however, is it the prospect of taking control of their objectification and circumventing masculine representations, as Armstrong suggests (*VP* 326), for this does not distinguish the dramatic monologue from other poetic genres like the monodrama or verse narrative. The same is true of Byron’s theory that women poets “appropriated” the dramatic monologue for the purpose of social critique (“Rethinking” 85): it is not clear how the dramatic monologue proves a more useful or more effective form for this purpose than other poetic genres. I suggest, rather, that the peculiar value women poets found in the dramatic monologue is the possibility of speaking “impossibility”: first, of foregrounding, through the dramatization of unmediated speech directed to an auditor invisible and inaudible to the reader, the necessary conditions of subjectivity (i.e. both speakability and recognition by the other); of revealing, furthermore, that these necessary conditions are often absent for women; and of dramatizing the effects of this absence on the subjectivity and subject status of the speaker.

By dramatizing “impossible speech,” failed subjects and subjectivities at risk, women poets challenge the assumption that the act of speaking automatically entails

linguistic authority, freedom and power, an assumption which underpins both Browning's model and the prevailing reading of women's dramatic monologues. More significantly, through these poetic strategies, women poets extend and expand that tradition. Where men's monologues have long revealed the self to be an effect, not the cause, of speech—not an originating, abiding, and authentic self, but a subject of language who is also subjected to it; produced in and by it—women's dramatic monologues reveal further that the subject is not always thus produced. In other words, that the effect of speech is not always or automatically a speaking subject; rather, that there are conditions necessary for becoming a subject of speech and that those conditions are not always or automatically present. Thus, if the tradition and purpose of the dramatic monologue is to call into question the nature of the self, women's dramatic monologues can be seen to initiate, even epitomize that tradition by calling into question the possibility of the subject. To reverse Byron's formulation of the genre's development, we can now say that it is only once Hemans had used the monologue to call into question the possibility of the subject that Browning and other poets then go on to exploit the form's central dynamic of speech and subjectivity to call into question the nature of the self.³ At stake in this reversal is not simply the claim of women poets' generic invention, but more significantly, their claim to a full place in the theorization of the dramatic monologue. For it is there, through their development of the dramatic monologue, that women poets have found a place where they can speak themselves—with full self-contradiction, to reverse Mermin's thesis—in order to reveal the necessary conditions of speaking otherwise.

³ Byron's original formulation goes: "Once Browning and Tennyson have used the monologue to challenge Romantic representations of the self, they [women poets] and other poets then go on to exploit the form's central dynamic of self and context in various diverse ways" ("Rethinking" 84-85).

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