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Dramatic audition: listeners, readers, and women's dramatic monologues, 1844-1916

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DRAMATIC AUDITION: LISTENERS, READERS, AND WOMEN'S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES, 1844-1916

by

Laura Capp

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Florence Boos

ABSTRACT

The "dramatic monologue" is curiously named, given that poems of this genre often feature characters not only listening to the speakers but responding to them. While "silent auditors," as such inscribed characters are imperfectly called, are not a universal feature of the genre, their appearance is crucial when it occurs, as it turns monologue into dialogue. The scholarly attention given to such figures has focused almost exclusively upon dramatic monologues by Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, and other male poets and has consequently never illustrated how gender influences the attitudes toward and outcomes of communication as they play out in dramatic monologues. My dissertation thus explores how Victorian and modernist female poets of the dramatic monologue like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, and Charlotte Mew stage the relationships between the female speakers they animate and the silent auditors who listen to their desperate utterances. Given the historical tensions that surrounded any woman's speech, let alone marginalized women, the poets perform a remarkably empathetic act in embodying primarily female characters on the fringes of their social worlds—a runaway slave, a prostitute, and a modern-day Mary Magdalene, to name a few—but the dramatic monologues themselves end, overwhelmingly, in failures of communication that question the ability of dialogue to generate empathetic connections between individuals with radically different backgrounds. Silent auditors often bear the scholarly blame for such breakdowns, but I argue that the speakers reject their auditors at pivotal moments, ultimately participating in their own marginalization. The distrust these poems exhibit toward the efficacy of speaking to others, however, need not extend to the reader. Rather, the genre of the dramatic monologue offers the poets a way to sidestep dialogue altogether: by inducing the reader to inhabit the female speaker's first-person voice—the "mobile I," in Èmile Benveniste's terms—these dramatic monologues convey experience through role-play rather than speech, as speaker and reader momentarily collapse into one body and one voice. Such a move foregrounds sympathetic

identification as a more powerful means of conveying experience than empathetic identification and the distance between bodies and voices it necessitates.

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Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Laura Capp

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in English at the December 2010 graduation.

Thesis Committee: Florence Boos, Thesis Supervisor

Garrett Stewart

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Mary Trachsel

For Jennie,
whose voice I will forever miss listening to,

and for Josh,
who has heard me as no one else could.

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ABSTRACT

The "dramatic monologue" is curiously named, given that poems of this genre often feature characters not only listening to the speakers but responding to them. While "silent auditors," as such inscribed characters are imperfectly called, are not a universal feature of the genre, their appearance is crucial when it occurs, as it turns monologue into dialogue. The scholarly attention given to such figures has focused almost exclusively upon dramatic monologues by Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, and other male poets and has consequently never illustrated how gender influences the attitudes toward and outcomes of communication as they play out in dramatic monologues. My dissertation thus explores how Victorian and modernist female poets of the dramatic monologue like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, and Charlotte Mew stage the relationships between the female speakers they animate and the silent auditors who listen to their desperate utterances. Given the historical tensions that surrounded any woman's speech, let alone marginalized women, the poets perform a remarkably empathetic act in embodying primarily female characters on the fringes of their social worlds—a runaway slave, a prostitute, and a modern-day Mary Magdalene, to name a few—but the dramatic monologues themselves end, overwhelmingly, in failures of communication that question the ability of dialogue to generate empathetic connections between individuals with radically different backgrounds. Silent auditors often bear the scholarly blame for such breakdowns, but I argue that the speakers reject their auditors at pivotal moments, ultimately participating in their own marginalization. The distrust these poems exhibit toward the efficacy of speaking to others, however, need not extend to the reader. Rather, the genre of the dramatic monologue offers the poets a way to sidestep dialogue altogether: by inducing the reader to inhabit the female speaker's first-person voice—the "mobile I," in Èmile Benveniste's terms—these dramatic monologues convey experience through role-play rather than speech, as speaker and reader momentarily collapse into one body and one voice. Such a move foregrounds sympathetic

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In the Victorian era, the desire to record the human voice became a cultural obsession, so much so that Ivan Kreilkamp has suggested that "the Victorian era was fundamentally phonographic" (14). Decades before Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1877, the development of phonography—a type of shorthand—was heralded as one potential method to transcribe the human voice more faithfully. As Kreilkamp explains, "The grandiose claims made for shorthand in the early Victorian era signal a new way of thinking about writing and its relationship to human utterance. Shorthand promises not simply an efficient system of information storage, but a means by which writing might be infused with orality and the living breath of vocal articulation" (15).[1] Kreilkamp points to the dialogue of characters like Jingle in Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* to highlight the emerging emphasis on orality in print, but his hypothesis is perhaps better substantiated by a different literary specimen. After all, not just an individual character but an entire *genre* grew out of and participated in this cultural attempt to capture human utterance on the page—the genre of the dramatic monologue.

Although writing can be signaled as speech in a variety of ways, one feature often present within the dramatic monologue—that of the "silent" auditors built into the poem—leaves no doubt about whether or not a particular voice is meant to be speaking aloud. One could suggest that such auditors only matter insofar as they clarify the spokenness of a particular utterance—a point that has been argued, as we will soon examine—but this study aims to treat auditors as actors in their own right, forces whose give and take with the

[1] According to Kreilkamp, shorthand methods such as Isaac Pitman's, in addition to capturing speeches verbatim (as opposed to the common practice of paraphrasing), also register "the actual sounds of human speech" (14) through notations recording volume, inflection, and other ephemeral qualities of the voice.

speakers necessarily shapes the outcome of the communicative situations depicted. After all, the word "audition" provocatively contains two almost antithetical meanings. In its more primary and original sense dating back to the seventeenth century, "audition" is defined as "the action of hearing or listening" or "the power or faculty of hearing" (def. 1a and 2). However, in a secondary sense as "a trial hearing or performance of an actor, singer, etc., seeking employment" (def. 1b), dating to the late nineteenth century, "audition" has come to stand for dual aspects of the same event—the "hearing" done by the evaluators of a performer as well as the "performance" itself. "Audition," then, curiously—and rather poetically—functions as its own unity of opposites, meaning at once the act *of* listening and the act listened *to*. This definitional collapse of hearing and performance is arguably even a reversal, colloquially speaking, as the trial performance itself is perhaps what one chiefly imagines today upon hearing the word. The reason for this may simply be a function of imagination: it is difficult to "see" the act of listening. Much easier, really, to focus on a speaker, center stage, than to envision the silent bodies being spoken to.

The obstacles involved in seeing listening (or hearing listening, for that matter)—especially in the dramatic monologue in which the not-entirely-silent auditors are relegated to textual silence—are what I have attempted to overcome in the work that follows. I examine how Victorian and modernist female poets of the dramatic monologue like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, and Charlotte Mew stage the relationships between the primarily female speakers they animate and the silent auditors who listen to their desperate utterances. Although the poets perform a remarkably empathetic act in embodying ostracized female speakers like a runaway slave, a prostitute, a nun, and Socrates's wife, Xantippe, the dramatic monologues themselves end, overwhelmingly, in communicative failure and actual or spiritual death. Given their textual silence, auditors—and "society" more generally, of which they are often considered representative—are easy to blame for these failures of communication. Yet I claim that the speakers of the dramatic monologues that I examine participate in their own marginalization by rejecting the inscribed

audience of the poem (or the other minor characters therein) before those auditors have the chance to pass judgment on the speaker and her utterance. In doing so, these speakers exhibit a distrust of the ability of communication to forge empathetic bonds between self and other. Yet while these poems showcase abandoned attempts at dialogue, the *poets* of these communicative failures do not eschew communication entirely. By inducing the reader to inhabit the present-speaking, first-person voice of the dramatic monologue, their work attempts to sidestep dialogue altogether, conveying experience not through rhetoric but through role-play. Such a move foregrounds *sympathetic* identification as a more powerful form of understanding than the empathy dialogue might have generated.

A consideration of Bakhtin's "entire speaking situation" has begun to appear in historical accounts of the Victorian period—a consideration, that is to say, of how audiences figure into public speaking. Janice Schroeder, for instance, reconstructs speaker-audience interactions in forums for women's public speaking in the 1850s and 60s like the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (SSA) and the Victoria Discussion Society. James Vernon, too, illustrates that Victorian political oratory was largely shaped by the lively, vocally responsive audiences present. While the sheer imbalance of authority in an oratorical situation makes the speaker and his words the obvious focus and the collective audience the relegated backdrop, historians are beginning to heed the centrality of the audience in an actively oral Victorian culture. These revisions of nineteenth-century political history highlight what is also true of fictional representations of speaking situations often containing a live audience in the dramatic monologue: that auditors wield power and necessarily affect the outcome of an utterance.

While Robert Langbaum gave us a persuasive and widely-cited account of the dramatic monologue's effect as a "tension between sympathy and moral judgment" in his seminal *Poetry of Experience*, he also dismissed the internal audience often present in dramatic monologues as a mere prop to give the character an occasion to speak. Dorothy Mermin corrects this dismissal, claiming that "[p]oems with auditors are about communication,

regarding the individual as part of society and speech in terms of its effects on an audience" (8),[2] and Loy D. Martin further affirms this idea in his examination of Browning. "In the structure of the dramatic monologue," Martin argues, "isolation represents a fear while coherent interaction represents a desire; and the particular poems examine subjects who either succeed or fail to 'realize' their listeners in meaningful reciprocity and exchange. This is true even when an actual listener is not implied but only projected or desired… All dramatic monologues at least fantasize a listener" (132-133).[3] Mermin and Martin's positions here are foundational to my investigation into women's dramatic monologues: no conclusions can be drawn about the subjectivity of the speakers without understanding their relationship to the others who serve as their audiences. To speak, in other words, is to speak *to* someone, real or imagined, highlighting the inextricability of the voice with the goals and desires inherent in communication and making integral to the dramatic monologue the intersubjectivity established between speaker and auditor. Thus, internal auditors cannot be dispensed with as mere props whose role consists of nothing more than to give the character an occasion to speak. Rather, their presence emphasizes the dramatic monologue's preoccupation with communication and the ways in which communication can fail its speakers, its listeners, or both.

To consider the silent auditors within the dramatic monologue, however, is a difficult process, given that they typically have no lines. This is not to say, oddly enough, that these

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[2] While I share my focus on the internal audience and its relationship to the utterance and its outcome with Mermin, her study, *The Audience in the Poem*, focuses entirely upon male monologists, leaving room for an exploration not simply of female poets but of the unique speaker-audience relationship that is necessarily inflected by women's historically vexed relationship to speech and their inexperience at having an audience for a sustained utterance.

[3] Loy D. Martin's articulations of the psychoanalytic implications of the dramatic monologue are incredibly useful to me throughout the dissertation. However, Martin asserts that the chief issue that engendered the monologue in the Victorian world is the artist's relation to his public, an argument that does not persuasively circumscribe women poets' use of the genre. Also, in his investigation into reciprocity and exchange beyond the boundaries of the genre, Martin looks to the larger arena of Browning-as-speaker and the Victorian audience-as-auditors; his treatment of readers as auditors is a line of argument that I depart from.

minor characters within the poem don't speak; often they do. In many cases, the speakers' utterances indicate that their auditors *are* speaking, usually by asking questions that the speaker repeats and then responds to, making these utterances dialogic in nature, though monologic on the page. What's more, the auditors' questions often dictate the entire structure of the speaker's narrative, all while their actual voices are given no representation. Thus, because the auditors' part in the dialogue is only implied, it is solely through the speaker's mediating presence that readers of the conventional dramatic monologue can form any judgment about the auditors. The auditors' consequential textual silence and what Martin calls the genre's "built-in ambivalence" toward them make interpreting their role extremely difficult—or rather far too easy. Their "silence" often turns them into one-dimensional figures who can be all too readily used to support whatever argument a critic is attempting to make. Consequently, because dramatic monologues by the women poets in this study typically feature marginalized speakers who have been unjustly treated, in the small amount of criticism that exists on these monologues, the auditors are often treated as scapegoats who represent society's wrongs and are made to shoulder the blame for the communicative malfunctions often dramatized.[4] To be sure, the "silent" listeners who populate women's dramatic monologues are typically not ideal audiences, but I argue that the speakers of these monologues are equally culpable for the communicative failures that ensue. Unwilling to trust their auditors, the speakers of these monologues turn away from those auditors and obstruct the possibility of their narratives to generate empathetic identification between the parties involved, opting instead to return to the isolation and silence that prompted their speaking in the first place.

Dorothy Mermin's acknowledgment of the shaping role of auditors in the dramatic monologue is vital not only to my project but to all scholarship on the genre, but many of

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[4] This is different for monologues written by Browning and Tennyson that depict criminal, immoral, or insane minds. Since these speakers are not victims in the same sense that the speakers of my study are, auditors are generally not blamed for communicative failures.

her conclusions about the power dynamics between speakers and auditors—founded on works by Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Clough and Meredith—do not apply to dramatic monologues written by women poets of the period. Mermin asserts, for instance, that "[s]peech in these poems is the mark of power—when differences of status are indicated the speaker is usually superior (even Fra Lippo Lippi has a Medici patron)—and the auditors are necessarily subordinate insofar as they are audience, not actors. The speaker exists as a voice, while the auditors are voiceless and exist only as the speaker's utterance recognizes them" *(Audience* 8-9). Mermin's claim may be true in regard to the canon she works from—auditors generally do line up to listen to a speaker who wields some kind of political or cultural power, as the mariners gather around Tennyson's Ulysses or the sons and nephews close in around Browning's Bishop. Even Tennyson's St. Simeon Stylites—the "basest of mankind" (1)—performs miracles for his admiring crowd. This formula, however, is strikingly inaccurate when applied to dramatic monologues by women poets of the period. The poets I turn to—Barrett Browning, Webster, Levy, and Mew—choose as their speakers marginalized figures who are decidedly powerless in relation to their auditors and to society. From a runaway slave to a jilted, dying woman to a modern Mary Magdalene, to name just a few, the characters that women poets of the dramatic monologue embody and give voice to do not generally speak to subordinates. They speak, most often, to those holding the upper hand. To slaveholders. To the chosen and loved. To Christ. Or, in resignation to their powerless position, to no one.

The reversal of this power dynamic becomes especially crucial to consider given the genre's focus on communication. In the dramatic monologues that I study, the speakers either grasp fleeting opportunities to attack auditors who have oppressed or betrayed them, or they plead with seemingly inattentive audiences to listen up. When it is not at all clear to the speakers of these poems, then, that their words are of value, the speakers lose faith in the ability of communication to unite individuals with varied backgrounds. Consequently, while a speaker like Browning's Duke Ferrara expects his auditor to grasp his message—or a

speaker like Tennyson's Ulysses has no discernable anxiety about his auditors at all—the speakers I examine throughout this project anticipate hostile audiences and deaf ears, leading them to sabotage their own attempts at communication by turning on their auditors before their auditors have a chance to turn on them.

The obvious anxieties present in women poets' dramatic monologues about addressing unreceptive auditors bear some relationship, perhaps, to the cultural limitations upon women's voices. Although accounts of private speech are difficult to access, women's public speech in the Victorian period provoked widespread disapproval. During the 1850s and 60s when forums for women's public speaking like the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (SSA) and the Victoria Discussion Society were coming into being, such forums—and the women bold enough to speak at them—came under vicious attack in the press. Janice Schroeder explains that the press characterized women's public speech "as both a display and a contradiction of moral, middle-class femininity" (101), and Robyn Warhol contends that "the incompatibility of public speaking with not only feminine propriety, but also female sexuality, would surely have presented a daunting picture to any 'respectable' woman with ambitions of exerting a public influence" (161).[5]

The disapproval—denial, even—of the female speaking voice in the public sphere can be extrapolated to a broader denial of female subjectivity. Drawing on Jacques Derrida, Mladen Dolar argues that "[t]o hear oneself speak—or, simply, just to hear oneself—can be seen as an elementary form of narcissism that is needed to produce the minimal form of a self" (39). Dolar suggests that the self-recognition that arises from hearing one's own voice precedes the mirror-stage which Jacques Lacan recognizes as the initial moment of Ego-formation for human beings. While women were certainly able to hear their own voices in a

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[5] Such attitudes and anxieties were not confined to Britain at the time. In America, too, Caroline Levander notes, "Friends, family, and academic institutions actively discouraged women who wanted to speak publicly and shunned those who actually dared to address the public from the podium" (3).

very ordinary sense, the restrictions upon what women should speak about and where limited the scope of the self that they could realize. And although, to be historically accurate, mothers were the primary instructors for their children's acquisition of language, Friedrich Kittler establishes by looking at ABC primers from the early nineteenth century that ultimately "[s]he doesn't speak, she makes others speak" (35). Thus, nineteenth-century women found themselves in a highly problematic relationship to the voice—expected to master language as teacher and yet unable to exercise that mastery outside of the home. Such parameters around where women could hear their own voices meant that women's Ego-formation was likewise stunted, leaving them not, importantly, unable to fully express themselves as subjects, but far worse: unable to fully *realize* themselves as subjects.

For women in such a position, the burgeoning awareness in the Victorian period of the centrality of communication to subject formation only added to the problem. Achieving this ideal of the Cartesian subject—of a whole, unified self—was possible in the Romantic imagination. In the Romantic lyric, the speaker is alone within Nature, and while he too may suffer from existential crises, there is a pervasive faith in Nature and the transcendent that reaffirms the speaker's sense of self. A successful construction of the self begins to seem far more elusive, however, when faced with Victorian and modernist poems in which the voice and language are no longer instruments that can be used in isolation. As Ekbert Faas explains of this transition:

> [H]owever much dramatic monologue and greater Romantic lyric resemble each other in delineating the speaker's setting, they differ in their evocation of a second person or listener. For ideally speaking, it is nature herself who should listen to the Romantic poet as he unites himself with her… The poet who no longer feels in unison with nature will naturally want to explain his problems to someone else. (150)

Dorothy Mermin seconds this idea, contending that while "the early Victorians read and wrote in the light cast by the great Romantics, their deepest hopes and fears about poetry

centered on its power to communicate" (4).[6] This emphasis on communication in Victorian poetry revised the way the voice and language were understood—rather than function as independent instruments, the voice was inextricably connected to other voices.

But communication is never straightforward. Though Lacan has argued that the image of the mother challenges the mastery the infant feels at the recognition of the self, Dolar contends that it is the *sound* of the mother's voice that provides the "first problematic connection to the other" (39, my emphasis). The growing consciousness of subject formation's reliance upon intersubjectivity and, by extension, upon the collective use and interpretation of a common lexicon that was consequently rendered unstable naturally created psychological anxieties in the period. Such anxieties about the "problematic connection" between self and other are precisely what the dramatic monologue stages; as Martin puts it, the speakers of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues "furnish hypothetical centers of being-in-language. But the language in which they have their being always fuses them with that which is outside themselves—other persons, other times, other cultures. The dramatic monologue, more perhaps than any other literary form, challenges the immense prestige of the Cartesian dualism of the self and other" (28). The fantasy of a unified self is thus called into question by the dramatic monologue, even though a cohesive sense of self is desperately desired by the speakers.

Given the simultaneous roles language and the voice play in the formations of the ego and of social and communal networks, the problem of marginality that the speakers in the dramatic monologues of this study struggle with becomes exacerbated. If self-

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[6] The distinctions Faas and Mermin make here between Romantic lyrics and the Victorian dramatic monologue hold true, I would suggest, even for Romantic "conversation poems" like Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." Although the poem is addressed to the speaker's sister, rather than see his sister as someone other and separate upon whose response his subjectivity is dependent, the speaker of "Tintern Abbey" rather sees his sister as a younger version of himself, declaring, "May I behold in thee what I was once, / My dear, dear Sister" (120-121). His relationship with Nature intact, he wishes merely to pass on this certainty of the self's relationship to Nature to that living reminder of a subjectivity less aware and fully-formed. While an anxiety does creep in to trouble the speaker's sense of self, it is an anxiety about death rather than about communication.

recognition can only be constituted through a language which is necessarily tied to a world within which the self is marginalized, the construction of a "being-in-language" cannot ultimately occur in any satisfactory way. The instrument that the speaker is using to define herself as distinct from and misunderstood by the world in which she finds herself is at the same time the instrument which connects her to—and makes her dependent upon—that world. Thus, she is made to simultaneously desire self-sufficiency and recognition by the community. Such an antithetical position leaves the speakers of these dramatic monologues in a very vulnerable position, desperately in need of auditors who will validate their utterances and yet unable to trust them to do so.

The anticipation of communicative failure grows out of speakers' disbelief in what we, today, would call empathy. Empathy is often hyped as a means to bridge the gaps of human experience and result in more understanding, harmonious communities in which all individuals have a place. The dramatic monologues I examine here, however, exhibit skepticism of such an idealistic solution to the challenges of marginalization the speakers have been encountering for their entire lives. Rather than offer optimistic scenarios in which communicative impasses are overcome and new social bonds forged, Barrett Browning, Webster, Levy, and Mew present quite the opposite: scenes in which talk solves nothing and speakers and their auditors are no more unified than they were at the outset.

My decision to employ the term "empathy" anachronistically grows out of the fact that though it did not yet have its own designation until 1904—the year that the *OED* notes its first usage—empathy as a concept existed much earlier. It was merely subsumed under the term of its close relation, "sympathy." Adam Smith, in his 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, carefully defines the cultural understanding of "sympathy," and in doing so, describes in detail the process of imagining another's experience. Smith argues in the section, "Of Sympathy":

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation.

> Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did and never can carry us beyond our own persons, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations… By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body and become in some measure him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (2)

Smith's notion of sympathy contains in its description what we would distinguish today as empathy—an act of the imagination that allows for the emotional or psychic identification with another. Or, as the *OED* more briefly defines it, "The power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation." In contrast, sympathy is, according to the *OED,* "[a] (real or supposed) affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence, affect or influence one another (esp. in some occult way), or attract or tend towards each other" (def. 1a). Empathy is distinct from sympathy, then, in that one can only empathize if one cannot draw from a similar firsthand experience to inform his or her conception of another's position.

Empathizing, in other words, requires an act of imagination or projection while sympathizing requires a like experience from which one extrapolates another's position. I can sympathize, for instance, with the experiences of women, parents of twins, mothers in academia, youngest children, and rural Midwesterners, to name just a few of the demographic subsets to which I belong. I can only empathize, however, with the experiences of individuals in demographic subsets to which I have never belonged—men, ethnic minorities, oldest children, urbanites, and so forth. My usage of these terms departs from Suzanne Keen's, which she sets up in her 2007 *Empathy and the Novel.* Ultimately, she breaks the terms down in this way: empathy, to Keen, means "I feel what you feel" while sympathy means "I feel a supportive emotion about your feelings" (5). In contrast, I use empathy throughout this study to mean, "I feel what I *imagine* you feel" (a crucial distinction,

I think), while I use sympathy to mean, "I have felt from direct experience something akin to what you feel."

My definitions of these terms may not exactly align with Keen's, but I do participate alongside her in a larger discussion about empathy, a topic that has gained currency both within and outside of the realm of literary criticism in recent years. [7] Often treated as a panacea to the multiple ways in which we are divided from others—from race, class, and gender to politics to age to geographical locale—empathy is frequently presented as an obviously desirable good. While concerns have been raised about the consequences of feeling empathy for *fictional* characters—namely, that charitable feelings channeled into fiction will necessarily be channeled away from the real individuals who could actually benefit from them[8]—few scholars on the subject question the going assumption that empathy is possible and a worthwhile emotion to encourage.[9]

The female poets I turn to throughout this study, however, question this assumption. To be sure, they participated in their own empathetic projects by imagining individuals with sometimes vastly different experiences than their own. As Kate Flint offers, "For *women*

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[7] Several nonfiction books on empathy have emerged in recent years, examining empathy's role in social progress. See *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential—and Endangered* by Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child* by Mary Gordon, and *The Empathy Gap* and *Why Empathy Matters: The Science and Psychology of Better Judgment* by J. D. Trout.

[8] Mary-Catherine Harrison offers a helpful overview of this debate in "The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dickens's Realism," particularly noting William James's and Elaine Scarry's arguments.

[9] Keen herself participates in a specific tangent of the current debates about empathy involving the relationship between novel reading and empathy. As Keen explains, her book "questions the contemporary truism that novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens of the world" (xv), acknowledging that while "[i]t would be comforting to believe that links between novel reading, empathy, and altruism or committed action in favor of human rights really exist," she is suspicious of the fact that the insistence upon these links has increased "just as reading becomes a minority pastime" (xxi). My own project does not concern itself with novel reading specifically nor with what the actual outcomes of the practices of reading are; rather, I limit my observations to what women poets of the Victorian and modernist periods seemed to believe about the possibility of empathy and what they hoped to achieve with their readers through their dramatic monologues.

poets of the period, crossing the borders of the self becomes a way to explore the possibilities of identification with others… writing the dramatic monologue is a form of literary transvestism, allowing slippage between gender positions, between classes, between races" (165, original emphasis). Nonetheless, in the monologues themselves, Barrett Browning, Webster, Levy and Mew present empathy with skepticism and distrust, and their work taken together forms a compelling argument about the impossibility of generating identification through dialogue in the Victorian and modernist periods. Although speakers *appear* to be attempting to make themselves understood to whomever is there to listen, I argue that it is the speakers who cause their own failures of communication, as they choose to sabotage the efforts they begin rather than to maintain faith in their auditors to accurately understand the experiences of marginalization they have described. Each speaker has been misunderstood for so long that she cannot bring herself to trust her present auditors to change this fact, though not necessarily through their own insensitivity or self-centeredness.[10] Rather, Barrett Browning, Webster, Levy, and Mew collectively question the plausibility of empathy altogether, forwarding instead the suspicion that no two people worlds apart can accurately understand each other, regardless of the time exhaustively spent in explanation. Their characters want to—but ultimately do not—subscribe to the notion that their experiences can be accurately imagined by another who merely *hears* descriptions.

My observation that the speakers of women's dramatic monologues often participate in their own marginalization is not intended to be critical of them; why would figures like the ones Barrett Browning, Webster, Levy, and Mew choose—sinners, saints, slaves, and the otherwise spurned—expect their auditors to behave charitably toward them when experience has proven otherwise throughout their lives? And why *should* they? The move is unsurprising, though tragic all the same, since the speakers understand—and accept, given

[10] I have chosen to use feminine pronouns in generalizing about the speakers I examine in this study, although I do investigate two poems that utilize either a male speaker (Amy Levy's "A Minor Poet") or one whose sex is not explicitly mentioned (Augusta Webster's "A Dilettante").

their options—that they are likely their own best auditors. Such an attitude seems defeatist, but the women poets of this study do not eschew all forms of communication or the possibility of identification. Although they do not champion empathy as a social cure-all and accordingly reject dialogue as a means of communication, their work as poets and their consent to publish betray some measure of faith in the communicative exchange occurring between texts and their readers.

It is through their use of the dramatic monologue as a genre, though, that they optimistically offer a different avenue for identification: embodiment of a first-person voice speaking in the present. By necessarily adopting the first-person voice of the speaker, the reader of the dramatic monologue is impelled not simply to imagine another individual, separate and distinct from herself, but to give body to that individual's voice. The reader of the dramatic monologue consequently functions more as an actor than an auditor, who, in lending her voice to the marginalized speaker becomes, albeit figuratively and momentarily, the speaker herself. The resulting collapse between character and reader generates, I posit, an emotional response more akin to sympathetic identification than empathetic, as the reader is more transformatively made to put herself in the speaker's place rather than retain her own distance from the character that would require the greater imaginative leap of empathy to overcome. Clearly, embodying another's voice and vocalizing a history riddled with misunderstandings and thwarted hopes is not tantamount to the direct, firsthand experience upon which sympathy is more commonly founded. I do not mean to imply otherwise. What I suggest, however, is that although the women poets of this study found it problematic to imagine two people with drastically different backgrounds successfully relating to one another—found empathy, in short, implausible—they did retain a hope that the experience of reading, especially in the first-person voice requisite to the genre of the dramatic monologue, could generate a different avenue for identification, an avenue more closely approximating sympathy than its more demanding, less self-referential counterpart.

Given that the "speakers" and "auditors" at a remove from the text—namely, the women poets and their readers—are also invested in communication and the transmission of meaning, I further explore what the speakers' rejection of their audiences implies about those other vital listeners and the poets who speak to them. Some have taken the internal audience to be a stand-in for what the poets themselves assume of their readers' response. Some, like Jack Maynard and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, have suggested that the reader will occupy a third position, distinct from both speaker and auditor. Wagner-Lawlor argues, for instance, that "[w]hile the silence of the auditor in the poem represents a failure of language, it is a failure any responsible literary reader, searching for meaning… cannot abide" (292-293), and thus she asserts, "Auditor and reader must, therefore, part ways" (293). This "third position," then, is one that is informed by witnessing the failure of the utterance and utilizing it as a teaching tool that can guide readers toward a more humane response.

Yet because these dramatic monologues pointedly illustrate the obstacles that interfere with communication, interpretations that depend upon the reader to respond "correctly" where internal auditors fail necessarily repeat the mistake from which the speakers of these monologues turn. In responding to Jonathan Culler's arguments on apostrophe, Garrett Stewart argues, "In the alienated world of withdrawn subjectivity… the trope of invocation marks the gap *it can only pretend to close*" (*Dear Reader* 30, my emphasis); in much the same way, dramatic monologues attempt to bridge the gap that exists between self and other, only to unravel and ultimately expose the pretense of the endeavor. Therefore, I would like to suggest an alternative to these arguments about reader response, an alternative that leads us back to the centrality of orality in these monologues. To sidestep the problems inherent in attempts at communication between self and other, these monologues allow the reader not to be a recipient of the message, as the internal auditors are, but to effectively become the speaker herself. As Emile Benveniste has shown, "*I* cannot be defined except in terms of 'locution,' not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies 'the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*'" (218). The "mobile sign" of *I*,

then, ceases to point to the fictional character as soon as it is inhabited by the reader in the present.

Consequently, the message of the utterance is sent not through communication but through the replication of experience, through the temporary inhabitation of the "I" of the character's role. By assuming the speaker's first-person voice—a voice that is speaking aloud on the page—the reader too speaks from the speaker's position, momentarily embodying that marginalized figure just as the poet embodied her in the process of writing. Rather than depend upon communication that travels from one perspective to another, foreign and apart, the dramatic monologue attempts to convey the speaker's position through a re-vocalization in the reader. Anthony Easthope's conception of the enunciation reaffirms this argument: if the enunciation is a speech event, the subject of the enunciation is both the "speaking subject"—here the speaker in the dramatic monologue itself—as well as the "producer of meaning," or the reader. In other words, "A reader … is always positioned in enunciation as its subject, and this means that he or she always in fact produces the poem in a present reading, just as actors and technicians produce a play from a script" (46-47).

Taken to its extreme, this argument might suggest that all narratives replicate experience in their reader rather than convey it through communication; this is not, however, what I mean to suggest. My argument certainly resonates with Georges Poulet's contention that, when reading, "I am the subject of thoughts other than my own. My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another" (1322). His arguments apply to all narratives, however, including third-person. Yet as Benveniste illustrates in "The Nature of Pronouns," third-person pronouns "are, by their function and by their nature, completely different from *I* and *you*," and in fact, "Certain languages show that the 'third person' is indeed literally a 'non-person'" (221). Thus, while a reader can identify with a character written in the third-person, he cannot *inhabit* that pronoun in the same way he can inhabit the "I." As a result, I limit my own claims to the first-person present that is characteristic of the dramatic monologue as a genre: it is precisely because

the dramatic monologue represents a *speaking* voice (which speaks necessarily in the present) that it is not fully realized as printed text. Just as a play calls for performance, dramatic monologues make that same kind of demand for re-vocalization, whether it's an interior kind of "evocalization," as Garrett Stewart calls the act of reading "aloud" internally, or an actual re-vocalization of the text itself (*Reading Voices*).

It is in this way, then, that doubts about the efficacy of communication are validated and communication from self to other avoided. The untrustworthy audience that each of these female speakers turn from need not include the reader; rather, women writers of the dramatic monologue generate comprehension of their marginalized figures through the reader's imitation and replication of that self, abandoning direct address to the other entirely. While this passing on of a script is certainly still a kind of communication, it is a communication that occurs through role-play rather than rhetoric.

The disenfranchised speakers central to this study are perhaps unsurprisingly the output of poets who struggled with similarly marginalizing circumstances both during their lives and since. As a result, this project would not be possible without the resurgence of interest in women writers that has occurred over the last several decades and the recovery work involved in producing the anthologies and individual collections of women's poetry now available. Nor would it be possible without the efforts of professors like Florence Boos to dedicate entire courses to women's poetry. Yet even with such strides toward the recognition of women writers forgotten by history, three of the four poets I work on—Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, and Charlotte Mew—remain obscure literary figures outside the world of Victorian and modernist studies and even within the realm of generic theory and criticism of the dramatic monologue. In recent years, Glennis Byron, in a chapter of her guide, *Dramatic Monologue*, and Cornelia Pearsall in her entry on the dramatic monologue in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* have made the case and laid the groundwork for further scholarship on women poets' use of the genre, but neither of these publications constitute major critical studies. That said, the critical landscape is shifting rather suddenly:

in 2008 alone, three dissertations were completed on women poets and the dramatic monologue, among five that have been written since 1998.[11] This number of comprehensive studies of women poets of the genre—though all are unpublished as of yet—is a comparative explosion to what the field has yet seen on the subject.

I find myself, consequently, in the midst of a number of new voices on women's poetry and the dramatic monologue and thus part of a critical cohort that aims to reshape more specifically the way we think about and teach the genre, and poetry more broadly, of the Victorian and modernist periods. Given the recent groundswell of interest in the poets I study, however, it bears stating that the contribution to the discussion that I make here is unique in its objectives and insights. Of the recent dissertations written on the topic, my work most closely aligns with Helen Luu's "'Impossible Speech': 19th-Century Women Poets and the Dramatic Monologue," a project which endeavors to re-theorize the dramatic monologue by departing from the typical starting points of Tennyson's "St. Simeon Stylites" and Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola in Meditation," beginning instead with Felicia Hemans's monologues and tracing her influence through the work of Webster and Levy. Ultimately, Luu posits that the dramatic monologues of these poets produce speakers whose speech—and by extension, very subjecthood—is impossible.

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[11] These dissertations include Laura Marie Williams's "'I, Writing Thus': Victorian Women Poets Write the Dramatic Monologue" (1998) which examines how Hemans, Landon, Webster, and Levy deployed and constructed the "I" in epitaphic, political, and "minor" ways; Carrie J. Preston's "Women's Solo Performance: A New Genealogy of Modernism" (2006), which discusses how dramatic monologues written by women emerged from other forms of solo performance of a dramatic "I" (like attitudes and monodrama) and explores the idea of the female "individual"—a category abandoned by feminist studies; Kasey Dawn Baker's "Gender, Genre, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue" (2008), which charts conversations about objectivity and subjectivity through women's and men's dramatic monologues; Susan Jane Soroka's "'She Who Did This Thing Was Born To Do It': Nineteenth-Century Women Poets and the Dramatic Monologue" (2008), which explores how women poets questioned the category of "woman poet" through the embodiment of historical figures, contemporary fictional artists, and Sappho; and Helen Luu's "'Impossible Speech': 19th-Century Women Poets and the Dramatic Monologue" (2008), which attempts to re-theorize the dramatic monologue by departing from the usual categorizations and definitions, beginning with Felicia Hemans as one of the progenitors of the genre.

With such a goal in mind, Luu does carefully examine Webster's and Levy's use of auditors, arguing that the speakers of women poets' monologues depend on their auditors for their very "linguistic survival" and thus, it is the auditors' silences that expose the "impossibility" of the speakers' subjecthood. Yet I offer a different perspective on what, more precisely, precipitates the failures of communication that result, for Luu, in impossible subjects. I illustrate that in many instances of women's dramatic monologues, speakers reject their auditors *before* those auditors have had the opportunity to silence the speakers, making the failed speech as much the speakers' doing as the auditors'. Although speakers, to be fair, turn from their auditors *in anticipation of* responses that would discredit their utterances and thwart their attempts at establishing authority and agency, their choice to turn before such ends have taken place crucially exhibits a degree of agency and a grab at control over the outcome of the utterance. It also precludes the auditors from fully expressing whatever response they may have had. Fundamentally, then, my project attempts to hear out the silent auditors of these dramatic monologues more objectively than is possible for desperate speakers grappling with painful histories and uncertain futures.

My consideration of the complex circuit of communication among poets, speakers, silent auditors, and readers begins as these monologues tend to: dramatically. In "'(Man, drop that stone you dared to lift!—)': Death-by-Auditors in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Bertha in the Lane' and 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point,'" I examine two poems which, while radically different in terms of their plots, are united by the threat the auditors within them pose: they both, in their exploration of the act of communication, illustrate that throwing oneself at the mercy of one's auditors is such a hazardous endeavor that the ultimate price in attempting it could be a permanent silencing of self. It might seem as though the speakers' deaths are predetermined at the outset of the poems, but those deaths transpire, I argue, only with the auditors' assistance as the monologues progress. While the dying speaker of "Bertha" hopes to find in her eponymous sister-auditor an empathetic companion who will choose sisterhood over romance, Bertha's evasive responses illustrate

that she has chosen sides, and not in the speaker's favor. Similarly, the lack of responsiveness the slave encounters from the pilgrim-ghosts she initially addresses functions as a spiritual death that symbolically plays out as her actual murder at the hands of the slaveholders. These texts demonstrate not only how auditors can shape the outcome of an utterance but also to what extreme. Consequently, Barrett Browning's dramatic monologues offer argumentative justification for the more circumspect attitude speakers have toward their auditors in the works of the poets that follow.

As I will exhibit, for instance, in my second chapter, "'Most welcome, dear: one gets so moped alone': Avoiding Auditors in Augusta Webster's 'Sister Annunciata' and 'A Castaway,'" Webster creates speakers who are so circumspect that rather than employ auditors in a more generically conventional way, she writes minor characters into her dramatic monologues who do not actually hear the utterance. Instead, the monologues are spoken in private after the minor characters have left (as Annunciata reviews her "sins and follies" after the Abbess Ursula goes) or before they have arrived (as Eulalie's meditations on her past and present situation conclude with a peer's arrival). By peopling her fictional worlds with *potential* auditors who are not privy to the speakers' utterances, Webster draws deliberate attention to the absence of what is often present (though repressed) in dramatic monologues: dialogue. The lack of a dialogic split between the speakers and their auditors showcases instead the extreme psychic split from which the speakers suffer. As characters simplistically categorized by Victorian society—sinner and saint—Annunciata and Eulalie verbalize a far more complex experience. Because they cannot entirely extricate themselves, though, from societal dictates, both speakers serve at once as defendant and judge, justifying their deviations from virtue and propriety while also chastising themselves for their swervings. Webster's pointed decision to keep auditors metaphorically at the door, though knocking, appears to offer a rather bleak perspective on the use and value of communication. Yet her investment in drama and the role-play it requires suggests an alternative interpretation: although meaning is not conveyed from self to other within her

dramatic monologues, it is conveyed from speaker to reader through the reader's embodiment of Benveniste's "mobile sign" of "I." Rather than depend upon the imaginative work of empathy to unite self and other, Webster utilizes the genre of the dramatic monologue to collapse speaker and reader into a singular voice and sympathetic alliance—a more powerful form of identification than what Webster believes can come of dialogue.

Although Webster's speakers address no one, Levy's seem even more closed to the possibility of connection, though they do apostrophize (in one case) and speak (in the other) to individuals not wholly unlike themselves. In my third chapter, "'I am myself, as each man is himself—': Rejecting Peers in Amy Levy's 'Xantippe' and 'A Minor Poet,'" I demonstrate that even though both monologues immediately reveal their speakers' impending demise (Xantippe expects death to take her at any moment, and the Poet drinks poison as his monologue begins), Xantippe and the Poet still long for their auditors to legitimate their experience of and perspective on the world. Yet because the speakers die without the affirmation they seek, critics can be quick to blame the auditors, in the small amount of scholarship that exists on these poems, for a failure to empathize. I contend, instead, that while both Xantippe and the Minor Poet seem to desire unification with their auditors, their actions at decisive moments belie an inability to believe fully in the empathy they seek and go further by rejecting even sympathetic identification. When Xantippe's maids weep, she dismisses their tears, believing them to be self-centered, and when Tom Leigh, the Poet's "friend" whose philosophic views radically oppose the Poet's own, gets to speak in the Epilogue of "A Minor Poet," his words suggest that he cared about and understood the Poet far more than the Poet gave him credit for. Evidence such as this ultimately suggests that the communicative failures occurring for Xantippe and the Minor Poet are not for lack of a potentially empathetic audience, but rather due to their own insistence that their lives are controlled by Fate. While they do seem to want transformation, the certain death they await—coupled with the ultimate meaning that death helps to give to their lives—prohibits

them from genuinely entering into the narrative exchange before them. The tragic endings of Levy's poetry presage her own tragic end—suicide at age twenty-seven. While this action can be read alongside her dramatic monologues as another final statement on the impossibility of any kind of human connection and identification that could assuage one's marginalization, I argue that she too sees first-person narratives as a means of generating sympathetic identification in readers; however, Levy does not ultimately believe that emotions evoked by reading can alleviate the problems that real bodies face in the real world.

In my fourth chapter—"'I cannot bear to look at this divinely bent and gracious head': Abandoning Christ and Dialogue in Charlotte Mew's 'Madeleine in Church'"—I examine how Mew's dramatic monologue, spoken by a modern Mary Magdalene figure, takes the speaker-auditor divide to yet another level: rather than address another human being directly or through apostrophe, Madeleine's silent auditor is Christ, the only auditor in the study who is wholly silent and unresponsive. On the one hand, Christ seems to be a safer auditor for a marginalized figure like Madeleine to address since, for the Christian at least, Christ is arguably the most trustworthy and ideal auditor a speaker could have, as he fulfills a desire for the divine human. On the other, however, he also represents the highest stakes, since while a human's judgment could always be wrong, Christ's is ultimate. Yet the lack of indicators from Christ signaling either validation or judgment prompt Madeleine to reject him as an auditor—a desertion made traceable through Madeleine's subtle shifts in address throughout the poem, as she speaks directly to Christ at moments and relegates him at others to the third person, including at the monologue's end. Because Christ is also the Logos and etymologically tied, as such, to the concepts of word, speech, and discourse, Madeleine does not reject him alone in abandoning her address to him. She symbolically abandons dialogue as a means of achieving effective communication and forging connections between unlike individuals. "Madeleine in Church," then, offers perhaps the most powerful repudiation of communication of all the dramatic monologues of this study. However, the stance on communication taken within the poem is once again complicated by

what the poems themselves aim to accomplish with their readers. Mew's own penchant for performance as well as her solicitude regarding the typesetting of her formally unique work illustrate that she wanted her poems to be experienced orally, desirous to unite character and reader not only in perspective but in body as well, as the reader must literally give her voice to the speaker.

In *Gendered Interventions*, Robyn R. Warhol makes an observation about George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Harriett Beecher Stowe that applies equally to the women poets of my study. Warhol writes, "They wanted readers' sympathy, and they wanted that sympathy to spill over from the realm of the fiction and transform the world…" (180). While I also suggest that Barrett Browning, Webster, Levy, and Mew wanted sympathy—if not for themselves, then for the actual counterparts of their fictional characters—their views on how such sympathy could "transform the world" seemed to become less optimistic over time. Barrett Browning and Webster may have made activist efforts toward social reforms, but Levy and Mew were far more private, less politically active individuals. Such an observation is likely less a historical argument than a matter of personality and circumstance, but a dissertation that champions reading begs the question of what, more precisely, reading is meant to accomplish. So a reader might be in a better position to sympathize; what then?

It is irrefutable, as Stewart contends, that "[b]efore and after all, at a bare minimum there is one thing you prove by reading: In the midst of inevitable social fragmentation, at least somewhere someone is paying the emotional price of attention." And yet I would hesitate, when faced with these texts, to go so far as to argue that by reading, we "alleviate the narrative agent's own emotional isolation" (*Dear Reader* 31). If we call that narrative agent the author, such alleviation rarely touches her directly, except, perhaps, via sympathetic reviews and fan mail. It is plausible, then, that communication not only fails in these dramatic monologues but that the act of writing fails, on some level, the poets of this study as well. Sympathy may be desirable from readers, but when the nearest material object of such sympathy is a book rather than an author, the evocation of sympathy seems to be most

directly channeled, apart from its untraceable personal effects upon a reader, down a dead-end. I speak from experience: reading and re-reading the dramatic monologues of this study has left me with many feelings—horror, sorrow, and disturbance certainly, but far and above all, helplessness. I'm left, as a reader, merely to ask what Amy Levy poignantly did of James Thomson after his suicide: "[W]hat is there for us to do now that the great agony is over? We read the books of the dead man, close them, and away. They are books over which one wrings the hands in despair" (508). This question is at the heart, I would suggest, of communication's ultimate failure between authors and readers: what is one to *do*?

There is no perfect answer to this question. While writers and readers may operate within closed communicative circuits, the creation of those circuits and their reiterations through the act of reading offers, perhaps, a close enough approximation to the identification with others that we can't help but seek, though that identification occurs beyond the view of those it might help most directly. Barrett Browning, Webster, Levy, and Mew will never know me, or that I have been moved by their work. But just as Levy's Minor Poet was deeply affected by the work of Shakespeare, Goethe, and Heine, so too did these poets feel their own moments of identification with writers whose voices felt audible, somehow, and alive. Perhaps it's not reciprocity, in the end, that these poets need most. Perhaps what they need is a shelf of their own filled with the books that speak to them, or more accurately, through them. A shelf, too, upon which they can add their own printed voices—voices that call out for audition.

CHAPTER I:
"(MAN, DROP THAT STONE YOU DARED TO LIFT!—)": DEATH-BY-AUDITORS IN ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S "BERTHA IN THE LANE" AND "THE RUNAWAY SLAVE AT PILGRIM'S POINT"

In their introduction to the Winter 2006 edition of *Victorian Poetry*, a bicentenary issue on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor draw attention to an unpublished fragment from Barrett Browning's pocket notebook, presumably kept from 1842 to 1844, in which she asks her audience to lend her the authority to speak. Calling upon her English sisters, Barrett Browning writes, "Give me your ear & heart—Grant me yr voice / Do confirm my voice—lest it speak in vain" (391). As Stone and Taylor rightfully note, in this excerpt, Barrett Browning "underscores the way in which receptive readers contribute to the woman writer's struggle to create a public poetic voice" (25). Yet the fragment itself pushes this point further. What this plea poignantly illustrates is the necessity of an audience not simply to "contribute" to the creation of an author's voice but quite literally to *author*ize a voice—to make someone into an author—through the act of listening and judging them as worthy. Rather than merely participating in a process that could go on without it, a receptive audience is essential to the generation of an author.

While a writer might always hope to be granted a receptive audience, the anxiety motivating this excerpt indicates that the opposite is equally plausible. An audience may very well refuse to grant authority, may refuse to give one's ear or heart, may ultimately withhold the authorization for one to speak or write. While the absence or disapproval of an audience does not literally prevent one from writing or speaking, without an audience to offer their attention and consequently affirm an author's voice, poets like Barrett Browning might speak all they want, but they would speak, in the end, "in vain."

It is precisely this anxiety about speakers and audiences that propels the genre of the dramatic monologue, and for this reason, examining Barrett Browning's dramatic monologues, "Bertha in the Lane" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," can help to expose what the stakes of this struggle to find audience and voice were.[12] Although the radically different subject matter of these poems perhaps makes it counterintuitive to group them together, these two dramatic monologues of Barrett Browning's actually exhibit a striking resemblance. I contend that they both, in their exploration of the act of communication, illustrate that throwing oneself at the mercy of one's auditors is such a hazardous endeavor that the ultimate price in attempting it could be death. Rather than find empathy and solidarity during moments of crisis, a speaker can just as easily find further isolation and even downright hostility. While the speakers of "Bertha in the Lane" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" are in life or death situations, it is their auditors who help to determine which side of that divide they end up on.

The anxiety expressed in the opening fragment about the role that a human audience plays in determining a poet's success is not only explored by Barrett Browning in the early part of her career or in the dramatic monologues I will be examining. In the Fifth Book of *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning depicts Aurora's struggle to understand how she ought to gauge her success as a poet. Aurora acknowledges that "Fame itself, / That approbation of the general race, / Presents a poor end" (64-66), believing instead that "the highest fame was never reached except / By what was aimed above it" (68-69). Desiring to work, then, for the sake of Art and God (69-70), Aurora dismisses the importance that is often placed by writers upon how critics and the public evaluate their work. And yet, despite her attempts to convince herself, she cannot entirely disavow her desire for an appreciative audience. Later,

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[12] Barrett Browning did not write dramatic monologues frequently, though she did often work in other dramatic forms. "The Seraphim" and "A Drama of Exile" illustrate her interest in drama, as does her translation of "Prometheus Bound." In addition, many of Barrett Browning's poems contain characters' speech, either as soliloquy after a third-person introduction, or as dialogue.

during this same meditation on success, Aurora's position fluctuates, as she suddenly points to approving readers as a yardstick for her talent. "What the poet writes, / He writes: mankind accepts if it suits," Aurora reasons, "And that's success" (261-263). If mankind should not accept it, though, Aurora does not at this moment turn to Art or God as her object but instead imagines a text being passed down through generations "[u]ntil the unborn snatch it, crying out / In pity on their fathers' being so dull, / And that's success too" (265-267). Although Aurora attempts to set her sights on Art and an audience of God himself, she remains ambivalent at times, unable to assert consistently that success could still come even if an admiring public never does.

The suggestion that Elizabeth Barrett Browning exhibits a preoccupation with the obstacles involved in finding a receptive audience might come as something of a surprise. While Robert Browning was notorious for obsessing about his audience, the same does not seem to be true of Elizabeth, most likely because their public reception was so different.[13] Popularity and praise—or at least the type he wanted—eluded Browning, but by the middle of the nineteenth century, Barrett Browning "stood with Tennyson among the first rank of English poets, celebrated not only by the public, but also by other writers and artists" (Stone and Taylor 391). Julia Markus's anecdotes suggest the truth of this: "English fans sent her rosebushes; an American admirer wrote a letter to her addressed 'Elizabeth Barrett, Poetess,

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[13] Although Browning's first major works, *Pauline* and *Paraclesus*, received critical acclaim, *Sordello* "became the most notoriously obscure poem of the nineteenth century" (Kennedy and Hair 65), and reviews of his later works were largely negative. *Pippa Passes* opened to mixed reviews, and "[s]ome of the reviews of *Dramatic Lyrics* had been encouraging, too, even though the big quarterlies still ignored Browning's poetry" (101). Later, Browning's high hopes for *Men and Women* were initially dashed due to negative reviews in *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review*. Although he did win praise elsewhere, the "admiration of a cultural elite was insufficient for his satisfaction. He yearned for 'popularity'" (279). While *Poetical Works* (1863) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864) were more positively received, Kennedy and Hair observe of *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869) that "judgment of the poem itself varied widely" (326). Kennedy and Hair go on to say about Browning's response to such inconsistent criticism from his public that "[h]e was frustrated by criticism which simply dismissed his poems as 'obscure' and angered by criticism which attacked him as unpoetic or confused or incompetent… In spite of his expressed indifference to fame, he harbored a lingering resentment over its slowness in coming to him" (352).

London,' and the letter was delivered" (13). While literary history may have silenced her for a time, in her lifetime, at least, Barrett Browning had found a wide, receptive audience and could safely lay claim to the mantle of "poetess." [14] And yet achieving this status did not come without struggle. Tellingly, in 1843, Elizabeth Barrett offered a physical description of herself to her painter-friend Benjamin Haydon, saying, "Not much nose of any kind; certes no superfluity of nose; but to make up for it, a mouth suitable to a larger personality—oh, and a very very little voice" (Markus 14). While the description is meant to be literal, one cannot help seeing in that doubly-emphatic, diminutive, tacked-on phrase apprehension about the figurative scope of her voice as well.

Such an anxiety about the interdependence of speakers and audiences plays out in both "Bertha in the Lane" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." In "Bertha," the then Elizabeth Barrett explores a relationship between a dying woman and her younger sister, Bertha. While the deathbed scene might lead a reader to believe that death is the only possible outcome, I would like to suggest that the silent auditor has more power in this exchange than has previously been acknowledged. As the dying sister explains the reason for her current condition—her realization that her fiancé, Robert, loves Bertha instead—she attempts to give Bertha opportunities to fault Robert's behavior and side with her. Although Bertha's silence throughout the dramatic monologue is generic convention to be sure, I want to consider the silent auditor in the way Dorothy Mermin emphasizes in *The Audience in the Poem*—not as a passive listener but as a potential responder and agent of change. Thus,

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[14] The decline of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reputation as a poet in the early twentieth century has been widely noted. As Marjorie Stone observes in her most recent biography, "In anthologies and literary histories after 1900… the poetical achievement of 'Elizabeth' or 'Mrs Browning' was relegated to footnotes or to supplementary sections of chapters on Browning... In effect, Elizabeth Barrett Barrett the poet was erased, and replaced by the woman chiefly known as one man's daughter and another man's wife" (16). Active critical interest in her work resurfaced in the 1970s, "a regeneration initiated by feminist criticism," Margaret Reynolds explains, "in which *Aurora Leigh* becomes "'*the* feminist poem' radical in its celebration of the centrality of female experience" (2).

Bertha's lack of response cannot just be considered as customary in the dramatic monologue but rather as a specific choice that helps to result in her elder sister's death.

Similarly, in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," I contend that what I interpret as the slave's murder at the poem's end is not a foregone conclusion but instead an end that the slave deliberately chooses after a tragic breakdown in communication with her initial group of auditors—the pilgrim-souls that she summons forth to hear her out after her arrival at Pilgrim's Point. Although the slave hopes that the pilgrim fathers will be an ideal audience for her, given that they understand what it means both to lack freedom and to be made to fight for it, racial differences divide them, leaving the slave without any audience that understands her or will validate her independence and agency as a human being. Thus, the slave attacks the slaveholders who arrive at Pilgrim's Point in pursuit of her as her only avenue to authority. By spilling her blood at the critical location of Pilgrim's Point, the slave claims the agency and authority of the pilgrim fathers and their Christian God despite the fact that such authority has been withheld from her by those auditors.

Consequently, in both of these dramatic monologues, Barrett Browning illustrates the hazards involved in putting trust in one's auditors. Rather than being receptive to the speakers' addresses, as Barrett Browning optimistically hopes her own readers will be in the opening fragment, the auditors in both of these poems fail to respond in a way that could potentially change the course of the utterance. Their lack of response, instead of being merely generic convention, implicates the auditors in the speakers' deaths and exposes the potentially extreme perils in communicating with an audience under the assumption that such communication can result in change. This is not to say that Bertha's dying sister and the runaway slave are entirely without agency. Rather, each speaker is able to get something she wants—namely, revenge and authority—despite her auditors' undesirable reactions. Though such gains are seemingly minimal, they allow Barrett Browning in turn to more effectively and persuasively prompt her contemporary Victorian and American audiences to

think critically about the sexist and racist conventions that leave the speakers of these monologues so few options.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning found so much success in her literary life that it seems unlikely she would have felt herself to have failed with her audiences in the same way that the elder sister in "Bertha in the Lane" and the slave in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" fail with theirs. However, as Dorothy Mermin indicates, "the struggle that began in [EBB's] early childhood to find woman's place in the central tradition of poetry" (*Elizabeth* 8) was the defining endeavor of her career. Barrett Browning, like Aurora Leigh, may have wanted to understand her literary ambitions and achievements independently of public opinion, but when a poet's livelihood and legacy are so dependent upon his or her reception by contemporary audiences, such a task is fairly impossible. It takes readers and audiences to create authors.

Silencing Sisterhood in "Bertha in the Lane"

Preceding Barrett Browning's best-known works like *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, *Casa Guidi Windows*, and *Aurora Leigh*, "Bertha in the Lane" has received almost no critical attention, most likely due both to its status as a less mature poem and to its allegedly sentimental subject matter. While critical texts tracing dramatic monologues throughout the Victorian period mention it here and there,[15] only Glennis Stephenson provides an extensive analysis of it in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love*—an astute reading of the poem that illustrates the ways in which Barrett Browning might have intentionally been resisting the societal expectations placed upon Victorian women. What is missing from previous critical response to this poem and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point,"

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[15] Glennis Byron references "Bertha in the Lane" when discussing the kinds of characters and topics women monologists tended to use, and Ekbert Faas catalogs the poem as one of the handful that appeared prior to Tennyson's *Maud* and Robert Browning's *Men and Women*.

however, is an understanding of how Barrett Browning employs auditors in order to expose the hazards involved in communicating under the assumption that communication might help to revise those societal expectations. The sister in "Bertha in the Lane" does not ultimately want to die; nor is death what the runaway slave most desires. However, the only way in which they can continue to live is if they are validated by their auditors. Without that validation, there is no clear place in the world for these speakers, and they must accordingly leave it. Thus, these poems suggest that in depending so completely on one's audience as do the sister and the slave in Barrett Browning's dramatic monologues, the speakers' own voices essentially lose agency while the silent auditors become all too powerful.

"Bertha in the Lane" is spoken to Bertha by her elder and significantly unnamed sister who is clinging to her last moments of life. As the poem opens, the dying sister, who has been acting as Bertha's caretaker since the death of their mother, has just finished sewing a wedding gown for Bertha, the bestowal of which begins the speaker's utterance. "Put the broidery-frame away," she orders, "For my sewing is all done. / The last thread is used to-day, / And I need not join it on" (1: 1-4). The speaker had been betrothed to a man named Robert up to this point, but she means to hand over to Bertha, in these final moments of her life, both what should have been her own wedding gown and—surprisingly—her fiancée, Robert, himself. Bertha is clearly bewildered by this, as the reader most likely is too, but the dying sister's utterance goes on to reveal the reasons behind this peculiar gesture. As the sister reveals, back in the spring, when the three of them had been out "gathering / Boughs of May-bloom for the bees" (1: 66-67), she had overheard Robert confess his feelings for Bertha. While she never explicitly quotes what he said about Bertha, the sister does reveal what Robert said about her; from a distance, she "listened in a dream, / And he said in his deep speech, / That he owed me all *esteem*" (1: 128-130, original emphasis). Upon hearing this and understanding Robert's love had been directed elsewhere, the elder sister "fell flooded with a Dark, / In the silence of a swoon" (1: 134-135), only to wake up during the night, chilled and wet with dew. Thus, presumably, begins the illness that the elder sister

suffers as she speaks these words to Bertha, pressing her to marry Robert and forget about her since, as the sister says, it is "Fit, that I be plucked for thee" (1: 182).[16]

The nature of this plot would seem to align it with the narrative convention of "deathbed scenes"—scenes, as Peter Brooks explains, that "[represent] the moment of summing-up of a life's meaning and a transmission of accumulated wisdom to succeeding generations" (246).[17] The notion of deathbed narrative, however, fails to provide an adequate conception of "Bertha in the Lane." While the poem certainly begins with the suggestion that the sister is about to die, I propose that the sister is very much open to the possibility of life and transformation. Speaking of novels, Garrett Stewart describes the "Victorian metaphoric treatment of death not as an irrevocable end but as a life-defining experience capable of being caught in the act" (*Death Sentences* 9). This statement can be equally applied, though—and, in my line of argument, perhaps even more literally—to the dramatic monologue. What masquerades as the march toward death in these dramatic monologues is actually "a life-defining experience"—and importantly, an experience that could result in *life* rather than death. Indeed, what the elder sister needs to bring her back from the path toward death is simply an empathetic auditor in Bertha, whose sisterly solidarity could undo what seems to be the irrevocability of death and help the elder sister regain the will to live. Although one might conclude that it is Robert's betrayal that is most responsible for the sister's condition, I would suggest that the more powerful propulsion toward the elder sister's death is her failure to find a vocally responsive auditor in Bertha.

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[16] Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor, in their headnote to "Bertha in the Lane" in Volume I of *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, contextualize the use of sisterly rivalry for love in Victorian poetry and prose, noting similar themes between "Bertha" and Tennyson's "The Sisters," Dickens's *The Battle of Life*, and Barrett Browning's own "A Romance of the Ganges," "Bianca among the Nightingales," and "Void in Law."

[17] While Peter Brooks makes this assertion about novels specifically, his point would be easily extended to dramatic monologues in which speakers are on the verge of death and are attempting to say something meaningful about their lives. However, as I will attempt to illustrate, death is not always as certain an ending as readers might initially take it to be in the dramatic monologue.

The notion that the elder sister is open to another narrative is established in her apostrophe to her mother early in the poem. Bertha is the one physically present auditor in the poem, but the elder sister also briefly addresses the ghost of her mother, who presumably appears to take the sister to heaven with her. Her appearance, however, is unwelcome to the speaker, who says that "thy smile is bright and bleak / Like cold waves -- I cannot speak, / I sob in it, and grow weak" (1: 47-49). Yet the elder sister cannot *not* speak either, and she accordingly begs her "[g]hostly mother" to "keep aloof / One hour longer from my soul -- / For I still am thinking of / Earth's warm-beating joy and dole!" (1: 50-53). Her mother's presence demands a sacrifice that the elder sister is not yet prepared to make—and that she hopes, in addressing Bertha, she may not have to.

"Bertha" was, Stephenson notes, "unanimously acclaimed for its pathetic beauty and womanly tenderness" (44) in its time, as readers pitied the sister as a "dying angel" archetype, which, as Stephenson observes, is also how Gilbert and Gubar refer to her. By relinquishing her claim on Robert and making way for true love, the sister is complying with high-minded Victorian and Christian ideals—and by dying, she even more thoughtfully removes any trace of herself with which to mar their happiness. And yet when one takes stock of the subtle ways in which Bertha's sister ensures that her sacrifice will taint Bertha and Robert's future, her renunciation begins to look less selfless and more calculated. As Stephenson suggests, the elder sister "extracts a terrible price for her own suffering and loss: her heroic love feeds on Bertha's guilt and ultimately leaves the younger girl with little chance for future happiness with Robert" (48). The fact that the consequences of listening will linger on for Bertha is made symbolically plain given the sister's one small request:

> And, dear Bertha, let me keep
> On my hand this little ring,
> ……..
> Let me wear it out of sight,
> In the grave, — where it will light
> All the Dark up, day and night. (1: 204-210)

While the sister downplays the significance of this request by diminutively calling it a "little ring," the fact that she depends upon it to "light / All the Dark up" reveals how meaningful the ring—and Robert—remain to the speaker. In saying all of this, furthermore, to Bertha, the sister hopes, perhaps, that the absent ring will always be a reminder that Robert is symbolically married to a dead woman.

One could even argue that the elder sister takes some pleasure in dying, as she imagines the blow it will be to Robert to see her. As the sister instructs Bertha:

> Let the folds lie straight and neat,
> And the rosemary be spread,
> That if any friend should come,
> (To see *thee*, sweet!) all the room
> May be lifted out of gloom. (1: 199-203)

Disingenuous as the sister is about her intentions, this passage illustrates the extent to which she has thought about the impact she wants the moment of Robert's entrance to have upon him. The sister, in these moments, seems a little too willing to play the martyr, making it all too easy to swing from perceiving her as a sympathetic, angelic victim to something else entirely.

Turning on initial reactions to the dying sister as an angel in order to expose her as self-pitying and manipulative, as Glennis Stephenson so deftly does, doesn't, however, complete the picture here. Plumbing the depths of this poem requires attending not only to the dying speaker but turning our heads, as much as the poem will allow, to see Bertha. Indeed, what Dorothy Mermin argues about the role of auditors within a poem is crucial to my concerns here and throughout an exploration of dramatic monologues by women poets. As Mermin establishes, "The auditor's silent presence directs our attention to what we do not usually expect to find in poems, and take for granted in dialogue and drama: that the speaker is understood to be speaking out loud, not to the reader or to himself but to someone who could answer or interrupt or do something unexpected before he has finished speaking" (2). In other words, the presence of those auditors within the dramatic

monologue forces the reader to always keep in mind that the ability exists for auditors to respond. And when no response comes, we must likewise treat that as a palpably absent voice rather than dismiss it as mere convention.

Thus, one must turn to examine more closely Bertha's role in this exchange. Stephenson certainly does not ignore Bertha as an auditor; in fact, she muses, "If [the elder sister] desired only to be the martyr, only to make Bertha happy, the most charitable thing would be to do as the dead mother urges, to say nothing at all—or Barrett Browning could have written the monologue without an auditor. Bertha's presence suggests there must be some reason for the revelations" (46-47). The reason, Stephenson later suggests, is to "extract some proof of gratitude and affection" (47). I agree with Stephenson's premise but I would push this argument to its limits: what the elder sister wants from Bertha is not simply proof of affection but a reason to live.

Bertha, as Mermin's account suggests, could "answer or interrupt or do something unexpected" before her sister "has finished speaking." She certainly does react, but not necessarily in ways that would alter the outcome of the sister's resolution. As the elder sister reveals through her utterance, Bertha is visibly affected by what she has to say. When the speaker indicates in the opening stanzas that she has sewn Bertha a wedding gown, the dying sister cries, "Do not shrink nor be afraid, / Blushing with a sudden heat!" (1: 10-11). And when the sister gazes at Bertha in order to admire the beauty that the speaker herself lacks, Bertha apparently cannot look back. "Ah! –," the dying sister remarks, "so bashful at my gaze, / That the lashes, hung with tears, / Grow too heavy to upraise?" (1: 23-25). Bertha's body language here—her shrinking, blushing inability to look her dying sister in the eye—conveys her comprehension of her sister's actions, even before the elder sister has sufficiently explained them. Clearly caught off-guard by her sister's words, Bertha is nonetheless well aware of their accuracy.

Bertha's continual physical reactions emphasize the absence of a verbal one. The sister observes of Bertha, "Little sister, thou art pale!" (1: 57), and during her revelation that

she overheard Robert's confession to Bertha, the elder sister admonishes, "Do not start so!" (68), pleads that Bertha "[d]o not weep so – do not shake –" (1: 103), and reiterates, "[d]o not weep so – Dear – heart-warm!" (1: 155). If the reader can trust the picture of Bertha that the dying sister paints here, she is certainly a responsive auditor and is clearly affected by her sister's speech. The color rises and drains from her cheeks; her body shrinks and jerks; and twice, at least, she is in tears. Such a variety of physical responses to her elder sister's utterance, then, makes all the more evident the absence of another possible type of response—a verbal one. Bertha's bodily response might suggest a number of emotions—sorrow, guilt, regret, or pity, to begin—but the nature of her feelings is never clarified through speech, making Bertha's precise emotional response to the situation all too ambiguous.

What makes the absence of such a verbal response even more noticeable is the fact that the sister asks Bertha questions directly, giving her specific opportunities to speak. For instance, early in the monologue, the sister asks, "Have I not been nigh a mother / To thy sweetness – tell me, Dear?" (1: 29-30). While the initial part of this question seems rhetorical, implying the desired response as it does, the emphasis conveyed through the imperative to "tell me" suggests that the sister is genuinely asking for a reply, or at the very least, pretending to want one. That emphatic desire for a verbal response must be kept in mind throughout the poem as the questions escalate in consequence. When the sister, for instance, recounts the day under the trees when she overheard Robert's confession, she asks Bertha, "Could he help it, if my hand / He had claimed with hasty claim?" (1: 108-109). While a reader might immediately supply the artfully begged-for answer to this question (Yes!), Bertha's voice remains absent, leaving the sister to reason, "That was wrong perhaps — but then / Such things be — and will, again. / Women cannot judge for men" (1: 110-112). Ironically, this is precisely the moment in which two women might "judge for men" and point the blame at Robert for turning sisters into rivals for love, and yet because Bertha does not speak, this possibility is occluded. The sister might attempt to plant the seed that

Robert acted dishonorably, but without her sister's affirmation of that accusation, Victorian notions of propriety leave her little to do but excuse him.

The emphasis I'm placing upon sisterhood here is complicated by the fact that the mother's death has left them less like sisters and more like mother and daughter themselves. In her biography of Barrett Browning, Angela Leighton locates the "dramatic conflict of the poem… not between the two sisters, but between the elder sister and the ghostly presence of the mother" (63), arguing that the elder sister wants to—and temporarily does—reject the mother's role of self-sacrifice and denial that has been thrust upon her in the wake of her own mother's death. "This particular elder daughter," Leighton observes, "perceives too clearly that the saintly ideal of motherhood is an ideal that kills" (65) and consequently "abhor[s]… that role of the death which she inherits" (66). While I agree with Leighton that the elder sister resists the Victorian expectation for her self-sacrifice, I also think that the speaker provides her sister with an opportunity to challenge those expectations by her side. In other words, although the death of their mother would necessitate that the elder sister adopt a motherly role toward Bertha, such a wholesale shift in their relationship need not be inevitable: they could instead attempt to remain sisters, carrying equal parts of the burden that their mother's death has left upon them. While the elder sister is neither direct nor selfish enough to ask Bertha to be her peer outright, she does want to present Bertha with the chance to offer herself in solidarity, equality, and sisterhood.

The sister's attempt to broach the subject of Robert's guilt a second time illustrates how much she wants to generate a narrative ending for herself that triumphs in sisterhood rather than in death. Just two stanzas later, the sister again presses on Robert's guilt in instigating the messy love triangle in which they now find themselves. She asks, "Could we blame him with grave words, / Thou and I, Dear, if we might?" (1: 120-121). The repetition of this question of blame exposes the sister's feelings on the matter. She implies that Bertha is not to blame here; nor does the sister indicate any guilt on her part. It is Robert who has wreaked this havoc upon their relationship as well as upon the sister's health, and the elder

sister seems to be pressing Bertha to decide what union will be left standing at the end of the poem. It is a decision that has considerable consequences: while the elder sister has made clear enough her relinquishment of Robert, she doesn't yet seem resolved to the necessity of her death, and she depends upon Bertha's response to dictate the course of her trajectory. In asking Bertha, "Could we blame him… Thou and I, Dear, if we might?" (1: 120-121), the sister pushes Bertha to reveal where her loyalties ultimately lie. The line itself is rife with emphasis on the union that they share as sisters. "[W]e" indicates capably enough to whom the speaker refers, but the elder sister spells it out further, saying "Thou and I"; moreover, by calling Bertha "Dear," the speaker reminds Bertha that the intimacy they share as sisters affords her the privilege of using terms of endearment.

All of this stress on their union in sisterhood is meant to remind Bertha that she need not inertly reflect and return whatever male desire is directed toward her; rather, the elder sister seems to suggest, Bertha has her own choice to make. Margaret Forster, in her biography of Barrett Browning, contends that the elder sister in "Bertha in the Lane" "die[s] after the futility of earthly love, *man's* love, has been exposed to [her]" (130, original emphasis). I would argue, however, that it is not solely the futility of "*man's* love" but of sisterly love that allows for the speaker's death. If Bertha were to indicate that she believed Robert at fault in this situation, as the elder sister insinuates, the third wheel suddenly becomes not the elder sister but Robert himself—a reversal that could make for a radically different ending to the poem than the sister's death.

It is Bertha's "response," however—or more accurately, her lack thereof—that seals the sister's fate. After asking this decisive question, the sister observes, "Thy brown eyes have looks like birds, / Flying straightway to the light: / Mine are older. — Hush!" (1: 122-124). Bertha, here, seems to be avoiding her sister's question altogether, her eyes seeking escape, her voice willing neither to disavow Robert nor to hurt her sister so overtly. Although Bertha, perhaps, interjects in the space of the dash to backpedal or apologize or explain, the sister's command to "Hush!" reveals that Bertha's failure to speak at the most

crucial moment of her utterance has left her with little need to hear anything else. The elder sister understands that Bertha has, through her silence, chosen Robert, and consequently, while the sister's narrative ending might have been rewritten with Bertha's help, Bertha's failure to respond effectively sanctions her death.

In this early dramatic monologue, then, I argue that the importance of the silent auditor is not simply to listen but to act as an agent who could potentially change the outcome of the poem. When the poem begins, Bertha's loyalty in "Bertha in the Lane" is not, in her elder sister's mind, decided—and neither, consequently, is the elder sister's death. While Bertha may initially seem insignificant, silent figure that she is, when we treat her as a character who *could* interrupt or respond, the failure of that response in coming turns the poem on its head. Bertha is not innocently tending to her sister in death but is instead helping her on her way.

"The Runaway Slave" and the Silence of Fathers

I have argued that in Barrett Browning's early dramatic monologue, "Bertha in the Lane," Bertha's failure as an auditor to respond vocally to her dying sister is the actual catalyst for that sister's death rather than the pain of a broken heart. The speaker is symbolically killed by her silent auditor. This potential outcome of communication is even more blatantly realized in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," in which the runaway slave is literally—and brutally—murdered by the white slaveholders who, in the final moments of the poem, comprise her immediate audience.

The relationship between the runaway and her auditors, however, is not quite as straightforward as that between the dying sister and Bertha. While the sister in "Bertha in the Lane" appeals to Bertha, the runaway willfully provokes the slaveholders, making it difficult to interpret her address to them as a communicative failure. To be sure, a communicative failure is dramatized in "The Runaway Slave;" it is a failure, however, that

occurs between the slave and the pilgrim-souls she initially addresses in the poem. Hoping to forge a lineage based on their shared desire for freedom, the slave is unable to receive the acceptance she seeks, and thus she goads the slaveholders in pursuit of her to spill her blood at Pilgrim's Point. By dying upon this critical mark, the slave generates a symbolic lineage with the pilgrim fathers and their God, despite the fact that they refuse to grant authority to her. In this dramatic monologue, then, the slave is able to retain some agency even though her attempts at communicating with the pilgrim-souls fail. While it might seem an affront to current feminist scholarship to claim that a marginalized speaker demonstrates agency by validating white male authorities and dying, I would suggest that Barrett Browning's understanding of the hazards besetting communicative attempts—an understanding she demonstrates in both monologues—prompts her to make calculated and strategic choices in the poem that will allow for her plainly abolitionist message to be received by an American audience still entrenched in a culture dependent upon slavery.

When the poem begins, the runaway slave is already at Pilgrim's Point, telling the "pilgrim-souls" that she has been running "[a]ll night long from the whips of one / Who in your names works sin and woe" (1: 12-14). Her purpose there is desperate: she has come in hopes of commiserating with the pilgrims who arrived at the same place in search of freedom, but she has also come to curse their descendants for their blatant hypocrisy, valuing freedom and independence while simultaneously depending upon the enslavement of an entire race of people. Her color seems necessarily to exclude her from all happiness and fulfillment, as she recounts, "I am black, I am black! – / But, once, I laughed in girlish glee" (1: 57-58)—a glee that she felt upon meeting another slave with whom she subsequently fell in love. Only horror, however, follows this moment of happiness: their relationship is discovered, her lover is murdered, she is raped by her master, and finally, she

murders the resulting child that was "far too white . . too white for me" (1: 116).[18] Having killed and buried her child, the slave has come to Pilgrim's Point to tell her story to the pilgrim-souls until a group of five white men in pursuit of the runaway reach her at last. In the final seven stanzas of the poem, the runaway slave turns her attention toward those silent slaveholders, directly addressing them.

"The Runaway Slave" might not initially appear to fit quite so neatly into the paradigm I established for "Bertha in the Lane." In that monologue, as I argued, it is Bertha's presence that turns what might have been a soliloquy into an open-ended communicative act that does not have to end where it is headed. However, given the litany of transgressions the slave has performed, her death seems to be the prescribed and non-negotiable ending in "The Runaway Slave." The white men, one could easily argue, are there with one objective alone: to murder the slave.[19] Historically speaking, however, this would not be the necessary conclusion. According to John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger in *Runaway Slaves*, following the capture of the average runaway, "it was highly likely he would indeed be punished … The punishments for runaways included placing them in irons or shackles, putting them in stocks, leaving them in jail, and, most commonly, whipping" (239). Furthermore, "[f]or a first offense, an overseer might administer a mild correction" (239). While fifty lashes or more—a typical correction, according to Hope and Schweninger—is hardly "mild," the point is that runaways were not automatically killed for their disobedience, and even "[t]he worst offenders were sent to jail, turned over to slave 'breakers'… and, usually as a last resort, traded or sold. Most large owners preferred not to employ drastic solutions" (243). Runaway slaves were such a common problem, in fact, that

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[18] I have reproduced the punctuation of "Runaway Slave" as it appears in Sandra Donaldson's critical edition of Barrett Browning's works. In many instances in this poem, EBB uses a two period ellipsis rather than the typical three periods.

[19] Helen Cooper makes this assumption, saying that "the speaker knows her death is at hand" (121) when the slaveholders arrive.

large slaveholders "established a routine for capturing, returning, and correcting absentees that was almost casual" (242). Smaller holders who stood to lose more per slave also generally attempted to reform behavior first and only resorted to more severe floggings when they grew angered by a slave's actions.

Thus, regardless of how vindictive a slaveholder might have wanted to be in response to a slave's flight toward freedom, the fact that a runaway slave was still a commodity—and in a woman's case, still capable of reproducing more commodities for her master—meant that killing an escaped slave was not the most economically effective response. For this reason, although it is tempting to assume that the speaker in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" can hope for nothing else, history tells us otherwise. Particularly had she been supplicating, contrite, or cooperative, she might have stood a chance of surviving this moment, if only to be ushered back to her master for further, protracted abuse.

Rather than apologize or surrender, though, the runaway attacks the slaveholders. While in the beginning of the poem, the slave appeals to the pilgrim-spirits, hoping that they will be sympathetic to her desire for a life free from persecution, when the slaveholders discover her, she turns on them with venom. The runaway does not address the slaveholders in order to plead for their mercy, or ultimately, for her life. Indeed, the faith that she exhibits in communication by addressing the slaveholders is not, it seems, a faith that supplication will free her. Instead, immediately after the white men enter the poem and the runaway slave turns to address them, she taunts and curses them. "Keep off!," she urges, "I brave you all at once – / I throw off your eyes like snakes that sting!" (1: 206-207). From the moment of their arrival, the slave antagonizes them, ready not to fold but to fight back. As she shrieks next, "You have killed the black eagle at nest, I think. / Did you never stand still in your triumph, and shrink / From the stroke of her wounded wing?" (1: 208-210). She clearly seeks neither their sympathy nor patience in addressing them, instead using this opportunity to give vent to her true feelings toward these men who represent a group

that has enslaved her, murdered her lover, raped her, and even debased the sacred bond between mother and child.

Furthermore, while the slave might soften the consequences of her actions by pleading insanity, she refuses. Although the concept of "drapetomania"—a name given by Samuel A. Cartwright to the "'disease causing [slaves] to run away"' (Franklin and Schweninger 274)—was not coined until 1851, four years after the composition of "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," Franklin and Schweninger record several cases throughout the 1820s and 30s in which assertions of mental derangement were made when slaves fled their plantations. In the poem, the slaveholders might have reason to label the runaway as insane, since she laughs, crazed, when the white men find her. "Ah! –", she cries, "in their 'stead, their hunter sons! / Ah, ah! they are on me – they hunt in a ring –" (1: 204-205). Furthermore, as Marjorie Stone points out, a draft of the poem was actually called "Mad and Black at Pilgrim's Point" but was "wisely… altered" ("Between Ethics" 145) since the point of the poem is not to expose mental derangement but to indict an institution that drove victims to such emotional and mental extremes that they could be mistakenly believed to be insane. Lest her auditors draw such a conclusion, the runaway denies any lunacy. In the most quoted line of the poem, the slave clarifies her state in no uncertain terms, saying, "I am not mad: I am black" (1: 218). Thus, whether or not readers agree with her assertion, the slave leaves the slaveholders no other way to justify or tolerate her transgressive behavior, removing any inducement that they may have for keeping her alive.

Unsurprisingly, the slave's verbal attack and refusal to plead insanity provoke physical consequences. As the slave turns to the men, her words make evident that their circle closes upon her violently. Shortly after she addresses them, for instance, the slave exclaims, "(Man, drop that stone you dared to lift! –)" (1: 211). Similarly, the slave's rebuke four stanzas later to "(Stand off!)" reminds the reader of the violent scene the speaker is in the midst of, despite the auditors' silence (1: 243). Her desire to speak honestly earns her a quick death, and the following stanza brings both what I read as her murder, and with it, the

poem's end. Thus, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" illustrates quite brutally what the repercussions are when a marginalized figure voices her actual feelings to an audience so far removed from her experience. Like the elder sister in "Bertha in the Lane," the runaway dies at the hands of her auditors, though in her case, this happens at its most literal and horrifying level.

Because the slave does not address the slaveholders with a genuine desire to survive the moment—a possibility I suggested Bertha's sister is open to—the fact that she is killed by her auditors does not prove that her communicative attempts were unsuccessful. Saving her life, it seems, is not her goal here. However, the runaway does suffer a communicative failure over the course of this poem—a failure that leads her, as I've established, to lash out toward the slaveholders at the end. This failure occurs, however, in the course of her utterance to the other audience she addresses for the majority of the poem. Indeed, while I have referred to the white slaveholders as the slave's auditors, there are in actuality two specific groups that the runaway addresses in a sustained manner: prior to addressing the slaveholders, the runaway addresses the souls of those slaveholders' ideological, if not actual, ancestors. While the slave also momentarily apostrophizes to God and to other slaves, it is these two groups of the pilgrims and their descendants that occupy the bulk of the slave's attention. It has been common in criticism not to distinguish carefully these two audiences, since one is ancestor to the other, but the stark difference between how the runaway addresses these respective audiences illustrates that, at least initially, she does not consider these groups of auditors as one.[20]

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[20] Although Sarah Brophy is focused on the interactions between the speaker and her auditors in "The Runaway Slave," she does not establish what, if anything, makes these groups of auditors different. When she argues that "Barrett Browning's chief concern is to target the poem's male auditors, implying that they will function as the final arbiters of the slave woman's fate" (279), she does not clarify which group of male auditors she means. In addition, although Marjorie Stone's observation that the slave "… identifies the slave hunters as 'born of the Washington-race', connecting the sins of these sons to the sins of the fathers, and the curse on them to the curse on their ancestors" ("EBB and the Garrisonians" 34) is correct only toward the end of the poem, the slave importantly does not begin by conflating these two audiences; she neither blames the pilgrim-fathers for sinning nor curses them directly.

As the spirits no longer have bodies or voices, the claim that they are auditors in their own right might seem a bit tenuous. They certainly cannot fulfill Dorothy Mermin's conception of an auditor in that they are physically unable to "answer or interrupt or do something unexpected before" the runaway, in this case, "has finished speaking" (2). While this is the case on a literal level, though, the act of invocation, as Jonathan Culler has established, mimics the act of communication. Culler's arguments about apostrophe deal primarily with inanimate objects, but they pertain to absent others as well. "[T]o apostrophize," Culler contends, "is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire. In these terms, the function of apostrophe would be to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces: forces which can be asked to act or to refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave" (139). From this perspective, then, simply by calling, "O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you!" (1: 8), the runaway "will[s] a state of affairs" in which the spirits become "potentially responsive forces." Essentially, the slave's utterance invites the spirit-world into the poem, turning the supernatural from an absence into a silent-presence. By calling them, she has made them into listeners.

Having come specifically to Pilgrim's Point, after all, the runaway clearly has an objective in mind. While the settlement of Jamestown preceded that at Pilgrim's Point or Plymouth, Massachusetts by thirteen years, the settlers of Jamestown were largely entrepreneurial while the pilgrims who landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts were specifically seeking religious freedom (Geiter and Speck 51-52, 69). Consequently, both the slave's identification with the pilgrims' cause and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's northern audience for the poem make this setting a particularly intentional and calculated choice, as Ann Parry and Sarah Brophy have both noted. Arriving at Pilgrim's Point allows the runaway to set foot on the "mark" that the pilgrims themselves left to signify their quest for freedom. As E. Warwick Slinn contends, the runaway slave "has spent a night running from the whips of slave masters, so that standing and then kneeling on the first Pilgrim's mark become the

culmination, the implicit goal, of her desperate flight. In thus attaining the goal and bending her own knee on the mark, the speaker reenacts the supplication of her cultural forebears" ("The Mark" 57). Indeed, invoking the pilgrim-souls at the very mark upon which they tasted freedom, the slave achieves the nearest proximity to the pilgrims that is physically possible.

While it is clear that the slave is deliberately channeling the pilgrim-souls by these methods, it is necessary to understand her motivation in doing so. I would suggest that the runaway invokes the pilgrim-souls upon their mark at Pilgrim's Point not to berate them but instead to establish their shared and common purpose—to demonstrate, in short, their equality. This reading radically differs from Slinn's, who contends that while "the Pilgrims bent their knees in gratitude to God for their survival, this slave's genuflection is an act of bitter accusation. It is hardly supplicatory and certainly not performed in humble obeisance: she kneels to 'curse' this land that the Pilgrims had 'blessed'" (57). While Slinn does not assert that the slave curses the pilgrims themselves, the fact that he does not specify the object of her "bitter accusation" suggests that he sees little difference in her attitude toward the slaveholders and pilgrims. To be sure, the runaway is rightfully bitter and has every reason to curse, but her anger is not directed toward the pilgrim-souls. I don't suggest as an alternative that she kneels on their mark "in humble obeisance" to the pilgrims, but the slave does not, importantly, curse and oppose them as she does the slaveholders.

Not only does the runaway never specifically curse the pilgrim-souls, but she also attempts to establish camaraderie between herself and them. A couple of moments early in the monologue illustrate what she perceives as their shared sense of purpose. When the slave calls out, "O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you!", she immediately notes, "I see you come out proud and slow / From the land of the spirits pale as dew, / And round me and round me ye go!" (1: 9-11). The fact that this encirclement by the spirits is echoed later in the poem when the slaveholders arrive and surround her might immediately cast it as threatening, and yet it is important to note the difference between these two encounters.

Later, she is quickly murdered by the men that surround her; at this point in the poem, however, the slave has twenty-seven stanzas in which to speak to the souls she has called forth to listen. The camaraderie the runaway desires to create with the pilgrim-souls becomes further evident as she reveals her intentions in coming to them. Upon reaching Pilgrim's Point, the slave first explains what it required to arrive there. "O pilgrims," she cries, "I have gasped and run / All night long from the whips of one / Who in your names works sin and woe" (1: 12-14). Importantly, the slave is not blaming the souls for their descendants' injustice; she is simply telling them, as though they do not know, what those descendants are practicing in their names, and thus suggesting that their descendants' behavior is not what the pilgrims would have anticipated. The slave further signals the demarcation between the pilgrims and slaveholders when she says, "I am black, I am black! / And yet God made me, they say" (1: 22-23). Speaking of the slaveholders in the third person while addressing the pilgrim-souls illustrates that at least at this early moment in her utterance, she pointedly does not conflate these two groups of people.

The suggestion that the pilgrim-souls are unaware of what has come to pass in the country that, to them, symbolized liberty emphasizes the slave's awareness that there might have been another narrative trajectory in which she could have enjoyed the same freedoms for which the pilgrim-souls fought. Assuming the pilgrim-souls' disapproval of their descendants' deeds, the slave attempts to construct, through her actions and language, a different type of lineage. As she explains directly after revealing that the pilgrims' progeny are working "sin and woe" in the pilgrims' names:

> And thus I thought that I would come
> And kneel here where ye knelt before,
> And feel your souls around me hum
> In undertone to the ocean's roar;
> And lift my black face, my black hand,
> Here, in your names, to curse this land
> Ye blessed in freedom's, evermore. (1: 15-21)

The relationship the slave establishes here is not an antagonistic one; what she feels among them in this stanza is not hostility so much as communion. By repeating the pilgrim souls' actions—kneeling "where ye knelt before"—the slave is grouping herself together with them, attempting to create a new lineage that is based not on blood but on the shared cause of freedom. The fact that the souls are not equated with "the ocean's roar" but instead with the "undertone" comprised of a "hum"—a gentle, comforting, and intimate sound—suggests that slave and pilgrim are not, in this moment, foes. The slave is engulfed by their presence, but rather than fear drowning she feels an equality with them which allows her to curse not the pilgrims, tellingly, but "this land" in the pilgrims' names, as though she is the one who has inherited the right to judge through their eyes.

The slave's assumption that she is entitled to speak for the pilgrim-souls or in their name further indicates her sense of equality and solidarity with them—and their mutual difference from the slaveholders. This desire to redefine the ties that bind around values and desires rather than blood is a bold move on her part, especially since the influence of blood was still responsible for much of the social landscape. Blood, for much of the nineteenth-century Western world, meant inheritance. Whether that inheritance was comprised of land, money, status, or in the runaway's case, bondage, it was a fact of life. Although it wasn't until late in the nineteenth century that "laws in some southern states attempted to ascertain varying degrees of mixture, from one-half to one-thirty-second black 'blood'" (Smedley 250), anxieties over the purity of blood and ancestry certainly preceded these laws in the U.S. The slave's rejection of the dictates of blood is not only apparent in her address to the pilgrim-souls. Rather, the runaway's decision to kill her own child is an even more literal manifestation of her refusal to grant blood the authority it had historically been given.

The runaway's act of infanticide has been critically discussed largely in terms of her destruction of the master within her child and her attack on the system of slavery as a whole, perhaps most powerfully by E. Warwick Slinn. "The smothering of her child," Slinn argues, "constitutes the act whereby her figurative role as cultural womb… transforms into a literal

role as cultural transgressor. As transgressor, she attacks the slaveowning system at the heart of its oppressive and contradictory ideology—an ideology that insists that all slaves are inhuman, and yet not so inhuman that they cannot bear the children of their masters" ("The Mark" 58). Accurate though his argument might be, the critique implicit in the runaway's murder of her own child extends beyond an indictment of slavery itself. As Susan Brown has noted, the runaway's act of infanticide destroys "what is both self and other, the product of both her flesh and the system which denies her control of her body" (129). While Brown, a little more broadly than Slinn, reads this as a "sweeping critique of racism" (129), the poem's implications reach further still. By severing the blood-bond between mother and child and attempting to generate a bond between herself and the pilgrims, the runaway slave is not only challenging the system of slavery or the racism inherent in it but also the larger cultural context that the system of slavery operates within and that attempts to naturalize it: the notion that one inherits, through one's blood, a life determined by one's ancestors.

Although the slave's goal is to generate this shared lineage with the pilgrim-souls, it becomes evident that her utterance is unsuccessful. While she had hoped to find understanding from an audience that faced similar kinds of persecution, the way in which their interaction ends illustrates that some kind of breakdown has occurred. After the slave has finished relating the murder of her child, she says:

> I look on the sea and the sky!
> Where the pilgrims' ships first anchored lay
> The free sun rideth gloriously,
> But the pilgrim-ghosts have slid away
> Through the earliest streaks of the morn.
> My face is black, but it glares with a scorn
> Which they dare not meet by day. (1: 197-203)

Her emotion at this moment is hardly ambiguous: her scornful glare, she insinuates, is so potent that the pilgrims' spirits flee to avoid it. To make matters worse, when the slaveholders in pursuit of her enter the poem in the next stanza, she remarks, "Ah! – in *their*

'stead, *their* hunter sons!" (1: 204, my emphasis). Her perception that the pilgrims' departure is merely substituted by the slaveholders' arrival does not, needless to say, cast those pilgrims in the positive light in which I've been suggesting that the runaway initially sees them. Furthermore, specifically labeling her captors "their hunter sons" reaffirms the familial ties between them that the runaway had earlier been challenging. So simply and clearly establishing in language the lineage she had been rejecting indicates that the slave's perspective has altered significantly. Once believing that the pilgrim-spirits could be an empathetic audience for her, she now sees the pilgrims and her captors as interchangeable. Consequently, this moment in the poem indicates that a decided shift has occurred over the course of her utterance to them, a shift that leaves her feeling that her attempts at communication with the pilgrim-spirits have failed. This shift can be detected even in how the slave refers to her spirit-auditors, for what were "pilgrim-souls" in the start of the utterance—and even in stanza fourteen—have, in the passage above, become "pilgrim-ghosts." Such an alteration suggests that while the slave initially thought these auditors might offer some kind of spiritual salvation, they instead have developed the power to haunt her.

The precise cause of this shift in the slave's attitude toward the pilgrim-spirits, however, is one of the more difficult ambiguities of the poem. Because the slave refers to her auditors as "pilgrim-souls" in Stanza 14 and "pilgrim-ghosts" in Stanza 29, the fourteen stanzas between these mark the time during which the runaway's communicative efforts break down. Since these fourteen stanzas are comprised largely of her narration of the murder of her child, it seems that while the slave hoped that the pilgrim-souls would support her act and be an empathetic audience, she receives no such assurance from them. I would suggest that the first hint of strife emerges when the runaway describes the burial of her child:

> He could not see the sun, I swear,
> More, then, alive, than now he does

> From between the roots of the mango … where?
> . . I know where. Close! … (1: 135-138)[21]

I read the moment above as one in which the pilgrim-souls transform from "potentially responsive," in Culler's language, to *actually* responsive, whether their response is "spoken" directly by them (though not recorded on the page) or sensed by the runaway. When the runaway reveals that her dead child is buried "between the roots of the mango," the ellipsis that follows supplies the pause in which the pilgrim-souls effectively ask her for more specific information about this location. She then repeats their question—"where?"—but rather than answer it, she flaunts her refusal to answer, saying only, "I know where."

This desire to keep quiet the detailed information about her dead child's whereabouts does not, however, play by the rules of communication and consequently marks a rupture between the slave and her auditors. As Loy D. Martin contends in his analysis of dramatic monologues, "Questions are … one of the devices of reciprocity and subjective exchange " that "concentrate poetic energy on the fragility and potential contradictions of communication. They ask whether, in a given set of circumstances, networks of understanding and cooperation can be created or repaired" (27-28). In this moment, though, the slave plays coy and keeps desired information private. This pointed refusal to honor unspoken rules of communication means that a network of "understanding

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[21] Some of Barrett Browning's imagery is likely drawn from Caribbean contexts with which she would have been familiar through her family's slave-holding history in Jamaica. Interestingly, the "roots of the mango" was originally "roots of the mangles," which according to Donaldson, Stone, and Taylor, "suggests EBB may have had in mind the mangrove tree, also referred to in Caribbean contexts as the 'mangle-tree'" (1: 430n15). They also note, "One source of knowledge about Jamaican slavery and the island's influence on the poem's imagery (e.g., the hummingbird of l. 161) was her closest brother Edward Moulton Barrett…" (1: 410). The plot of the poem has also often been attributed to "a story about a fugitive slave given to EBB by a family cousin, Richard Barrett, Speaker of the Jamaican House of Assembly" (Stone "EBB and the Garrisonians" 37), but Marjorie Stone argues that "if one examines the story that the poet seems to have been referring to—identified, on good authority, as the 'Jamaican Story' reprinted in 1983 in *Richard Barrett's Journal*—one finds that it bears little or no resemblance to EBB's anti-slavery poem" (37). Thus, while Barrett Browning's family's Jamaican ties may help to explain aspects of the poem, Stone turns to previous volumes of *Liberty Bell* (especially the 1844 and 1845 volumes, of which EBB received autographed copies) in order to more accurately explicate the origins of the monologue (39).

and cooperation" such as Martin describes is not being created, and thus it is here that their communicative breakdown begins.

While the reason for the slave's refusal is also not entirely transparent, I would contend that she avoids answering their question because, in her eyes, it's the wrong one. The runaway, after all, has just narrated the heart-rending fact that after having her child, she "could not bear / To look in his face, it was so white" (1: 120-121). Even though she decides that she needs to take her baby's life, her emotional distress is plain. After he begins to kick his legs upon being covered with a kerchief, the runaway laments that "[h]e struck them out, as it was meet, / Against my heart to break it through" (1: 129-130). The slave may intend to stop her child's heart, but her own is also wounded. Saddled with the impossibility of having a baby who was her "own, own child!" (1: 120) and yet who was also "far too white . . too white" (1: 116) for her, the runaway's choice to kill her child cannot be performed without exacting an exorbitant emotional price. Thus, for the pilgrim-souls to wonder about the physical location of her dead child on the heels of the narration of this torturous moment—as opposed to the emotional hardships she has suffered—is an affront.

This breakdown is perpetuated over the next several stanzas, most likely because the pilgrim-souls grow offended by the deception the slave practiced upon their angelic counterparts. Suggesting that upon death, white angels free the souls of white people, the slave divulges how she let the angels mistakenly free the soul of her child as well, who appeared to be white. The slave explains:

> … ha, ha! – there, had been
> (I laugh to think on't at this hour!)
> Your fine white angels (who have seen
> Nearest the secret of God's power)
> And plucked my fruit to make them wine,
> And sucked the soul of that child of mine,
> As the humming-bird sucks the soul of the flower. (1: 155-161)

Although the syntax of this passage is convoluted, the runaway seems to be describing how, upon her child's death, the "white angels" flocked to him in order to "pluck" and "suck" his soul. Disagreeable though this sounds, the runaway apparently desires it, wanting as she does the white angels to liberate the spirit of her child. As she recounts in the following stanza, "Ha, ha, the trick of the angels white! / They freed the white child's spirit so. / I said not a word" (1: 162-164). The slave's decision to keep quiet and her refusal to undeceive the angels indicate that she assumes they would not otherwise have liberated the baby's soul. Through this passage, then, the runaway reveals to the pilgrim-souls how she took advantage of her child's skin color to gain for him a freedom and liberty in death that would not have been granted had he had black skin.

The racial lines that the slave draws in this moment are further emphasized in the following stanzas and solidify the rift that has opened up between the slave and her auditors. Digging the hole for her baby, the slave recounts that "[t]hrough the forest-tops the angels far, / With a white sharp finger from every star, / Did point and mock at what was done" (1: 180-182). Why the angels that freed her child's spirit are now mocking the act of burial is unclear, but for the slave, burying her child finally allows for racial reconciliation. With the "Earth, 'twixt me and my baby, strewed, . . / All, changed to black earth, . . nothing white, . . / A dark child in the dark!" (1: 184-186), the child's whiteness is symbolically erased, and mother and child are finally able to be properly united. As she sits on his grave to sing "[t]he song I learnt in my maidenhood" (1: 189), the "same song" emanated "… from the grave whereon I sate. / It was the dead child singing that, / To join the souls of both of us" (1: 193-196). What specifically the pilgrim-souls take issue with throughout the slave's narration of her murder of her child is never explicitly spelled out, but I would suggest that they grow offended by her deception of and hostility toward the white race. While they seemed willing to be summoned by her in the beginning, if helping her requires turning on their angels, their God, or their descendants, she asks, perhaps, too much. The utterance she began so

optimistically has broken down, and the slave has realized that, at least through language alone, she cannot turn these fathers into her own.

Poet and Reader: The Negotiations of Communication

The disappointing failure of communication that occurs between the slave and the pilgrim-souls she summons demonstrates the hazards involved in trusting an audience. The slave desires that her auditors recognize the likeness and like-mindedness between them, but speaking honestly with the pilgrim-fathers simply does not yield this result. Curiously enough, the situation depicted in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is not entirely unlike that which Barrett Browning found herself in while composing the poem. An outsider with an abolitionist message for an American population still passionately divided on the slavery question, Barrett Browning found her position required careful and shrewd rhetoric if she hoped that her poem would persuade readers to push more forcefully for the emancipation of slaves, and in fact, she was well aware of the controversial nature of her poem. As has been widely acknowledged in criticism, Barrett Browning declared to Mary Russell Mitford in February of 1847 that she "just finished my rough sketch of an antislavery ballad & sent it off to America, where nobody will print it, I am certain, because I could not help making it bitter" (qtd. in Stauffer 31). Her understanding of the sensitivity of her own position in writing a poem on a deeply politically-divisive issue is crucial, and I would suggest that we can only fully understand the relationships she creates in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" between the slave and her auditors in light of it.

The slave's relationship with her male auditors provides an entry point for exploring the political considerations Barrett Browning may have had to take into account in writing this particular poem. While various analyses of individual dramatic monologues examine speaker-auditor relationships, in the existing criticism on "The Runaway Slave," only Sarah Brophy has emphasized the necessity of attending to "how the relations between speaker,

auditors, audience, and author are structured" (280). The constellation of Brophy's interests so closely resembles my own, in fact, that my argument must directly engage with her analysis in order to more clearly distinguish our interpretations. While I do find her emphasis on certain overlooked facets of the poem to be extremely valuable, my own reading of the poem differs in fundamental ways.

Rather than pin down where Barrett Browning falls on a political spectrum, as Brophy attempts to do, I illustrate instead what political considerations Barrett Browning might have been juggling in her creation of "The Runaway Slave." While scholars like Isobel Armstrong and Ann Parry have discussed "The Runaway Slave" as radically feminist, Brophy's analysis provides a constructive counterpoint, contending as she does that Barrett Browning situates "the slave's utterances within a 'conservative, androcentic' framework" (275), confining her agency and authority "to the emotional effect her predicament might have upon her male auditors" (275). Ultimately, Brophy contends that "by inscribing a melodramatic feminine voice within a patriarchal framework of reception," Barrett Browning suggests in the poem "that change can only *rightly* be effected by male authority figures and that the moral and political role of women (the poem's female speaker but *also Barrett Browning as author*) is to exercise an emotional influence over men" (277, my emphasis). By making assertions not only about the slave but also about Barrett Browning personally, Brophy's argument mistakenly rests on the assumption that this or any poem is a clear espousal of an author's political ideologies. I would suggest instead that particularly in a genre that highlights the act of communication itself—the complex nexus of speaker, auditors, and the sometimes competing desires to speak honestly and to speak effectually—ideology cannot be so simply distilled. A poet dealing with the messy business of communication in the dramatic monologue is also necessarily dealing with the tensions between ideology (or what she wishes were possible) and pragmatism (or what is realistically likely) that so often make the act of communication a negotiation.

Thus, rather than determine the degree of Barrett Browning's radicalism according to twenty-first-century ideals, I'd like to focus on how Barrett Browning had to navigate historical contexts in order for her poem to influence her nineteenth-century readers. As E. Warwick Slinn reminds us, the arguments that make claims about degrees of agency and independence in Barrett Browning's work "presuppose the possibility of acting 'as an independent subject', whereas much theoretical effort has gone into analyses which show that being a subject, like being an agent, is always to be subject to (an external authority) as well as being the subject of (individual action)" ("EBB and the Problem" 44). Slinn's awareness of the impossibility of being "an independent subject"—of the inevitable fact that speech and action are always inflected by the forces we are both subjected to and subjects of—is key. While it may never be possible to accurately label Elizabeth Barrett Browning according to how her work holds up against our current definitions of feminism, it is viable, I think, to explore what possibilities her poems imagine for marginalized individuals whose authority is always and inextricably tied to a community that has the power to decide whether or not to confirm a speaker's voice.

Attention to audiences—both within the poem and without—is essential, and yet an acknowledgment of the demographic make-up of the audience cannot itself act as a yardstick of a poet's intentions or politics, a move that Sarah Brophy makes in her analysis. Brophy's observation that the slave speaks within a "patriarchal framework of reception" is entirely accurate, but her conclusion that the poem thus indicates that "the moral and political role of women … is to exercise an emotional influence over men" (277) does not follow. Such a reading leaves no room for the distinct possibility that Barrett Browning is making a social critique, and furthermore, the female slave fails to exercise such an influence over the male pilgrim-souls, as I've established. Since the slaveholders at the end presumably kill her, the runaway's final utterance as far as her auditors are concerned is not at all an influential or persuasive one—or not, at least, in the way that Brophy means. Rather, I would contend that despite the fact that the runaway is unable to "exercise an emotional influence" and

"persuad[e] [male authorities] to do good" (279), she is nonetheless able to claim agency and authority for herself entirely without their aid.

A more accurate examination of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of silent auditors within the poem, however, also requires closer consideration of the intended audience for "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," as critics have widely established that the poem owes its genesis not solely to creative inspiration. Commissioned by a group of female abolitionists, "The Runaway Slave" was originally published in the annual gift-book, the *Liberty Bell*, late in 1847 for the 1848 edition.[22] The *Liberty Bell* was sold in Boston at the National Anti-Slavery Bazaar, which was a fundraiser "to support the distribution of anti-slavery propaganda, particularly the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*" (Stauffer 29). This American—and specifically Northern—audience with abolitionist sympathies is essential to take into account, for whatever her personal attitude toward her family's ownership of slaves in their West Indian plantation,[23] Barrett Browning also had to remain sensitive to the tensions involved in joining the American debate over abolition from a removed, British perspective. Both Ann Parry and Sarah Brophy point out that the setting of Massachusetts was intentionally chosen in order to illustrate that slavery, though located in the South, was figuratively occurring on Northern soil as well due to the ways in which they were complicit with or tolerant of the institution (Parry 119, Brophy 276). Parry argues that by setting the

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[22] Although most critics of the poem refer to the publication details of "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," there has been some confusion in scholarship about the circumstances of its publication. Some critics have taken the 1848 date on the gift-book as its actual date of publication, though as Andrew M. Stauffer has helpfully clarified, the gift-book is post-dated for the coming year. Thus, the assumption that there was a delay in publication—which in criticism has been attributed to the poem's radical and controversial content—is unfounded.

[23] Statements in criticism about Barrett Browning's attitude toward slavery differ somewhat substantially. While Sarah Brophy claims that "Barrett Browning "had for a long time taken a consistently anti-slavery stance" (267), Marjorie Stone states that Barrett Browning had "little or no history of anti-slavery activism" ("EBB and the Garrisonians" 35) and notes that "she did not always burn with ardour for the abolitionist cause" (55). To account for the poem's content given this biographical context, Stone examines how the 1844 and 1845 issues of the *Liberty Bell* and the *topoi* present within them may have influenced the more radical nature of "The Runaway Slave" compared to Barrett Browning's other 1840s works.

poem in this way, Barrett Browning emphasized the necessity for the North to make "a moral choice that paid no heed even to the state of the Union" (Parry 119). While I agree with this perspective, it demands careful consideration of the poem's rhetoric, for any time an outsider presumes to tell insiders what to do, the outsider must be linguistically savvy if she hopes her perspective will be adopted.

The complications attendant upon such distant moralizing are laid bare in Barrett Browning's other anti-slavery poem, "A Curse for a Nation." The poem exhibits a sensitivity toward the complexities involved in speaking to a potentially hostile audience, ultimately offering a solution that will ideally allow for the curse to be taken to heart rather than rejected. In the Prologue of that poem, an angel requests that the female speaker "'[w]rite a Nation's curse for me, / And send it over the Western Sea'" (4: 3-4), but the speaker is reluctant. She demurs, explaining that she is "'bound by gratitude, / By love and blood, / To brothers of mine across the sea, / Who stretch out kindly hands to me'" (4: 9-12). Adding that the sins of her own land discount her from leveling any criticism at others, the speaker exhibits an awareness that passing judgment on people and events from which she is removed could be seen as at once presumptuous and hypocritical. And yet, when pressed, she "wrote, and mourned indeed, / What all may read. / And thus, as was enjoined on me, / I send it over the Western Sea" (4: 49-52). While the curse comes from the *voice* of the female speaker of the poem and is literally written by her hand, Barrett Browning is careful to emphasize throughout the Prologue that the curse is the male angel's, while the speaker merely carries out his wishes. As Marjorie Stone observes, the Prologue "… invests [the speaker's] words with all the authority of patriarchal Christianity. …In fact, the right becomes an obligation, and she becomes no more than the mouthpiece of the host" ("Cursing" 195). Even though the speaker might genuinely feel the curse she writes, the fact that it grows out of the directive of a patriarchal and religious authority is meant to give the speaker's curse more weight than it would have had if the speaker's distant, subjective—and importantly, female—perspective had been presented by itself. I read this—as do Marjorie

Stone and E. Warwick Slinn—as a strategic tactic through which the speaker can issue her political curse without being automatically dismissed.[24] "A Curse for a Nation," then, attempts neither to toe the line nor overstep it, making a rhetorical compromise that would perhaps be less easily dismissed and best poised to yield actual change.

"The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is equally conscious of the necessary negotiations in effective communication, though perhaps in slightly subtler ways. Indeed, while Brophy points to the poem's "presentation of the Pilgrim Fathers and God as stable authorities" as proof that Barrett Browning's politics are conservative (278), "The Runaway Slave" does challenge that authority in significant ways. The fact that it is the runaway who lays claim upon the authority of the Pilgrim Fathers and God even though they do not grant it to her illustrates how the poem attempts to walk a line somewhere between radical and conservative politics. In this way, "Runaway Slave" was a negotiation meant to gain American, Northern readers' empathy—readers, of course, who were white, who were primarily Christian, and who would not likely have been eager to invalidate the power and authority attached to their race and religion. Thus, rather than alienate the very audience that would have such powerful influence in bringing about the abolition of slavery by defiling their authority figures, Barrett Browning's protagonist claims authority for herself while also validating the structures of authority in place.

When the slave's attempt to redefine what constitutes a lineage by addressing the pilgrim-souls fails, as I previously argued, the slave can only approximate success by surrendering to the power of blood she had been opposing. It is precisely the slave's hope that her connection to the pilgrim-souls can still be forged that prompts her, when the

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[24] Marjorie Stone argues of this poem that "Barrett Browning appears to surrender her freedom from the authority of the patriarchal tradition, but only in order to gain the freedom to pronounce the sort of curse women were conventionally not permitted to utter" ("Cursing" 195). Similarly, E. Warwick Slinn contends, "It is necessary… for Barrett Browning to seek the authorizing force of divine influence in order that her curse may gain cultural validity—in order, in other words, not to be written off as the merely incidental invective of some disaffected harridan" ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 47).

slaveholders in pursuit of her arrive, to invite them to spill her blood at Pilgrim's Point. Because of the undeniable influence of ancestral blood in determining the circumstances of one's life, shedding her blood on the "mark" left by the pilgrims symbolically generates the new lineage she hopes to create between the pilgrims and herself in lieu of the lineage of pilgrims and slaveholders that the runaway believes has gone so tragically astray. While in an ideal world, the dictates of blood might be eliminated altogether, in her present moment, the slave can only navigate the cultural constraints as they exist. She must make do, in other words, with the cultural realities that place limitations upon what is pragmatically possible for her rather than achieve what is ideologically preferable. Thus, her death at Pilgrim's Point becomes a figurative and symbolic claim upon the pilgrim-souls as *her* ancestors rather than the ancestors of the white men who have so grossly neglected the ideal of liberty championed by those forefathers.

The fact that the slave is satisfied by this symbolic action is clear in that she is able to revoke the curses she earlier leveled at the slaveholders—curses which could not be more plainly stated throughout the monologue. In the third stanza of the poem, the slave reveals that she has run to Pilgrim's Point so that she can, in the pilgrims' names, "curse this land / Ye blessed in freedom's evermore" (1: 20-21). Although the land is the object of her curse at this moment, as the monologue continues, that curse becomes more pointedly directed at the white men who have accepted and perpetuated the institution of slavery in America. Of an earlier flogging, for instance, the slave recalls that she "only cursed" her abusers "all around / As softly as I might have done / My very own child" (1: 227-229). While such a curse may not seem too menacing when cast in this light, the runaway goes on to implore, "lift your hands, / O slaves, and end what I begun! // Whips, curses; these must answer those!" (1: 230-232), ostensibly encouraging other slaves to band together in order to lodge the most powerful curse they can level at their masters. Considering these moments, the runaway seems understandably adamant to damn these men, even wishing:

> you who stand there five a-breast,
> Each, for his own wife's joy and gift,
> A little corpse as safely at rest
> As mine in the mangos!" (1: 212-215)

What she curses them with, importantly, is equality—and, by extension, sympathy. If she must suffer to bury her child, she wishes they will have to suffer in precisely the same way, believing that only experiencing similar grief would prompt them to alter their behavior. This desire for the slaveholders to experience the same kind of suffering she has—or an approximation of it—is indisputably present throughout the monologue, though most particularly at the end when she turns to directly address the men.

The conviction behind these unmistakable moments of cursing, however, is called into question as the poem nears its end and the slave begins to suffer the physical blows from the slaveholders. Instead of letting her curse hang in the air after her death, a perplexing thing happens: the runaway revokes her curse. The final stanza of the monologue which marks this moment reads as follows:

> I fall, I swoon! I look at the sky.
> The clouds are breaking on my brain.
> I am floated along, as if I should die
> Of liberty's exquisite pain.
> In the name of the white child waiting for me
> In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,
> White men, I leave you all curse-free
> In my broken heart's disdain! (1: 246-253)

As Marjorie Stone contends of this unexpected turn in the poem, "However much one might wish to see the slave as adopting a doctrine of Christian forgiveness here, her last words are surely a case of reiterating her curse and absolving herself of it too" ("Cursing" 192). While I also don't read this moment as one in which "Christian forgiveness" holds sway, I do read her revocation of her curse in the final stanza as genuine because of what she simultaneously gains at this juncture. She is not forgiving them so much as getting even, as what allows her to revoke the curse at this definitive moment, I would argue, is the fact that

she is finally spilling her blood in this critical location. It is the simultaneous liberation from her marked body and the power and authority she gains from the symbolic lineage forged in this moment of death that allows her to feel not that she's dying of physical blows but instead of "liberty's exquisite pain." The liberty she feels at this instant is also echoed in the alteration of the refrain that has been a constant through the poem. Four times over the course of her monologue, the runaway repeats variations of, "I look on the sky and the sea" (stanzas 1, 9, 13, 29).[25] In this stanza, though, she says, simply, "I look at the sky." What the sky and sea represent throughout the poem are the two possible outcomes of her final monologue—she could symbolically drown in the threatening sea (aligning with her earlier observation of the "ocean's roar"), or she could be released into the sky, where God waits for her. It is the more positive of these two possibilities that occurs in this final stanza, as the runaway, despite the severe physical pain she presumably endures, is "floated along" as she looks skyward.[26]

While the slave gains liberation in this moment through an identification with the pilgrim-fathers and with God, I see this as an exercise of the speaker's agency in the context of the historical circumstances. The slave ultimately claims the blessing of both of these

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[25] In stanza 9, this changes to "I look at the sky and the sea" and in stanza 29, "I look on the sea and the sky!"

[26] While the slave is achieving her goal in leaving her own "blood's mark" at Pilgrim's Point, she also indicates that her death will allow her to re-establish the lineage with her child that she had recently severed through infanticide. This desire to reunite with her baby emphasizes that her murder of him resulted not from her unwillingness to mother a child but rather from the impossibility of doing so in a world where blood determined one's life course. E. Warwick Slinn points out that this implication that the baby of bi-racial descent would be granted the "master right" because of the whiteness of his skin is a Jamaican context—not an American one, in which the presence of "black blood," despite the child's appearance, would prohibit the child from living as a free man. In both contexts, however, in order to inhabit any social position, the only recourse a child of mixed blood would have had was to hide or ignore part of his heritage, consequently putting a child in an impossible subject position. Because the inherited social positions based on white and black blood were diametrically opposed, a child of mixed race in such contexts could only be a contradiction. It is this reality that allegedly necessitates the murder of the child, and the slave makes clear that she will be able to reunite with the baby once those real-world contexts are removed.

fathers for herself, even though their blessing hasn't been given to her. In this way, my argument differs both from Armstrong's claim that the poem is radically feminist and from Brophy's contention that the poem "inscrib[es] a melodramatic feminine voice within a patriarchal framework of reception" (277). Certainly the poem is not as radically feminist as it might be in that the slave does, as Brophy points out, appeal to an audience of men and, as I suggest, gains her power by association with them. And yet Brophy's argument is also insufficient in its suggestion that the slave's authority is dependent upon her white male auditors' judgment. The pilgrim-souls, after all, retreat, and the slaveholders kill her—neither reaction on their part validates the slave's utterance or yields authority to her. This does not mean, however, that the slave is without authority at the end. Rather, the runaway claims power and authority from the pilgrim-fathers by aligning herself with them through metaphoric means. By addressing them at Pilgrim's Point and shedding her blood on this ideologically-charged mark, the slave claims authority for herself despite their refusal to bestow it upon her.

A more contemporary feminist perspective might take issue with this argument, instead wanting to claim, based on ideologies upheld in our own time, that the slave renounces the authority of the white men and their Christian God, consequently liberating herself in that process of renunciation. However, this impulse falls subject to the same misstep I earlier suggested that Brophy makes. Rather than project our own political ideologies onto the text—or make confident claims about Barrett Browning's—it is essential to account for the historical realities that surround this or any work. Literature, if meant to encourage specific social reforms, must negotiate the social and cultural contexts it encounters rather than promote political ideologies that would not be immediately plausible in light of those contexts. While Brophy is right to acknowledge the patriarchal, Christian male auditors to whom Barrett Browning's runaway slave appeals, it is an audience Barrett Browning could hardly have neglected. Yet rather than convey a submission to or promotion of those structures of authority, Barrett Browning's choice of auditors suggests

that "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" was a negotiation meant to gain the sympathy of American Northerners—and ideally, their efforts in bringing the institution of slavery to an end.

In examining both Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Bertha in the Lane" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," I have argued that the elder sister's and the runaway's deaths are not the essential trajectories of the poems. Instead, it is because of the faith they exhibit in the possibilities of communication by opening up to silent auditors within the poem—a faith that is disappointed over the course of their utterances—that the speakers meet their deaths. While the elder sister and the runaway slave are able to make some personal gains in spite of their auditors' lack of responsiveness, they still suffer the consequences for making themselves vulnerable to those auditors. Barrett Browning's illustration of communicative failures in these two dramatic monologues, however, is not necessarily—or only—tragic, as the fictional speaker and her auditors are not the only parties involved in the communicative exchange. While listening to the silent auditors within these poems, we must listen, too, to that other mysterious presence—the reader holding the book. The reader's role in the dramatic monologue has certainly not been ignored in formulations of the genre, though all have treated the reader as another kind of auditor—either akin to those inscribed in the poem or, due to the reader's ability to witness the exchange, distinct from those auditors.

Dorothy Mermin proposes, for instance, that silent auditors stand in for the reader the poet fantasizes or anticipates. "[T]he speaker turns his back to the reader," she suggests, "and enacts an attempt to communicate with someone whose responses he can immediately perceive and try to counter or control. Thus the poet can incorporate into the poem the reader he wants or fears, and try out ways of talking to him" (9). Rather than see auditors and readers as interchangeable in the poet's eyes, other critics like Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor and John Maynard argue that the poets create auditors whose responses are incomplete or

disappointing specifically so that the once-removed auditor—the reader—will respond more generously to similarly marginalized figures in his or her actual society. As Wagner-Lawlor asserts in her discussion of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, "While the implied auditor of the poem, the 'you,' remains generically imprisoned within the situation parameters defined by the speaker, and thus remains passively mute, the reader, though aligned with that auditor, is not so compelled" (292). Maynard similarly observes, "We read a dramatic monologue by reacting to the (failed or inadequate) response of the listener in the poem to the speaker, then are directed to a third position that is neither that of speaker or listener" (75). This "third position," then, is one that is informed by witnessing the failure of the utterance and utilizing it as a teaching tool that can guide readers toward a more humane response.

Yet because these dramatic monologues pointedly illustrate the obstacles that interfere with communication, interpretations that depend upon the reader to respond "correctly" where internal auditors fail necessarily repeat the mistake from which the speakers of these monologues suffer. Communicating to others—readers included—might not result in empathy or understanding but instead in hostility, alienation, and in the examples Barrett Browning offers, death. The reader, however, need neither present the same threat to these powerless speakers as the auditors pose in Barrett Browning's monologues, nor be barred from identification with the speakers, as the auditors are in the monologues I will next explore. Empathetic identification might fail epically in "Bertha" and "The Runaway Slave," but identification can alternately occur sympathetically as well. Such a possibility is provocatively embedded into the fragment with which I opened: "Give me your ear & heart—Grant me yr voice / Do confirm my voice—lest it speak in vain." Barrett Browning's appeal to her "English sisters" acknowledges her dependence upon an audience to legitimate her as an author, but in specifically pleading, "Grant me yr voice," her request points compellingly toward what I argue the dramatic monologue allows between speakers and readers. As the reader inhabits the "I" of the poem, speaker's and reader's voices

collapse into one, enabling a sympathetic identification that can sidestep the complications inherent in communication from self to other.

CHAPTER II:
"MOST WELCOME, DEAR: ONE GETS SO MOPED ALONE": AVOIDING AUDITORS IN AUGUSTA WEBSTER'S "SISTER ANNUNCIATA" AND "A CASTAWAY"

In Augusta Webster's *Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute*, an extended poem that followed her three collections that included dramatic monologues—*Dramatic Studies* (1866), *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* (1867), and *Portraits* (1870; 1893)—the father of Yu-Pe-Ya's late friend offers a sobering statement on communication to Yu-Pe-Ya, whose grief driven lute-playing fails to have the desired effect upon his listeners, as they "leap / With boisterous antics as though" he "had rung / Some jig to tug their heels" (1147-1149). "No words," Lao-Pay declares, "whate'er their wisdom, more can tell / Than what the hearer's wisdoms understand" (1159-1160). Although buried in a poem ostensibly much different from the body of dramatic monologues that preceded it, this statement nevertheless offers a lens through which one might see the philosophical bridge that leads from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's monologues, "Bertha in the Lane" and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," to the seemingly different dramatic monologues written by Augusta Webster.

In Barrett Browning's dramatic monologues, speaking is a much more threatening endeavor than we conventionally take it to be. Auditors can be hostile toward a speaker and can remain so despite having heard a desperate plea for understanding. In Lao-Pay's terms, Barrett Browning's speakers' addresses cannot "tell" more "[t]han what [their] hearer's wisdoms understand," and it is this lack of understanding between the speakers and auditors—despite attempts made at communication—that ultimately pushes Barrett Browning's speakers in "Bertha" and "Runaway Slave" toward their untimely deaths. Augusta Webster's use of silent minor characters in her dramatic monologues, however, forms a striking contrast to Barrett Browning's—a contrast that is perhaps explained by Lao-

Pay's warning. What the elder sister and the runaway slave come to realize during the course of their utterances—that communicating something not already understood by their auditors is impossible—Webster's speakers seem to suspect from the outset. Consequently, rather than open themselves up to a hazard so extreme as to be potentially fatal, Webster's speakers speak to no one, even though minor characters do exist on the fringes of the poems.

Because the internal auditor was historically a defining criterion of the dramatic monologue, the absence of such figures in Webster's poetry has made generic categorization of her work contentious.[27] Patricia Rigg points to Webster's lack of internal auditors, among other things, as justification for calling Webster's preferred genre from *Dramatic Studies* to *Portraits* "monodrama" rather than dramatic monologue.[28] Observing that "[i]n the tradition of monodrama, there is no listener…" ("Augusta" 90), Rigg claims that Webster's "monodramas are private rather than public speech, for the speakers in *Portraits* speak primarily to themselves, for themselves, about themselves" (89). Christine Sutphin

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[27] Early discussions of the dramatic monologue noted the centrality of internal auditors to the genre: S. S. Curry cited "audience" as a necessary element of Browning's dramatic monologues in 1908, and Ina Beth Sessions added, in 1947, "interplay between speaker and audience" as a criterion of the genre (508). Many critics since have advocated for more flexible categories given that many poems lacking an audience still seem to embody the form: Robert Langbaum famously steered away from these earlier, more technical definitions in favor of "sympathy versus moral judgment" as the ultimate test of a dramatic monologue, and critics since (like Dorothy Mermin, Loy D. Martin, E. Warwick Slinn, W. David Shaw, and Cornelia Pearsall, to name a small sampling) have also opted not to limit the dramatic monologue to only those containing internal audiences, though some like Mermin have chosen to focus on poems with auditors as a subset. Despite the more inclusive definitions, the absence of auditor figures can make generic categorization slippery.

[28] Rigg also points to Langbaum's seminal definition of the dramatic monologue as exhibiting a tension between sympathy and judgment as insufficient in describing Webster's work, citing Cynthia Scheinberg's objection that Langbaum's sympathy with the Duke of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" is tied to his subject position as a white male. While Rigg uses this to advance her argument that Webster's monologues take up the "social politics of reading" (78) rather than the question of sympathy or judgment for one character, it's important to imagine an average nineteenth-century reader, for whom judgment of the figures of Medea and Circe, prostitutes, and girls questioning marriage would be an expected reaction. While, as contemporary readers, we might naturally feel much more immediate sympathy for marginalized figures like these—as Scheinberg does with the Duchess—we can assume that Victorian readers would have been more comfortable judging these characters, making Langbaum's dominant criteria of sympathy versus judgment still viable.

echoes Rigg's dissatisfaction with the label of the dramatic monologue, though somewhat more ambivalently. "Since Webster's dramatic poems often do not include a listener," Sutphin notes, "they could perhaps be classified as interior monologues. However, the speakers do seem to be speaking aloud, as if to an audience" ("Introduction" 15).

While Rigg and Sutphin's observation that Webster's poems generally do not include internal auditors is correct, neither of them account for the fact that, though there might be no actual listener, there are plenty of *potential* listeners that populate Webster's dramatic poems—a unique and unconventional use of textually silent minor characters that I take to be in direct dialogue with other uses of the dramatic monologue.[29] Webster generally does not create fictional worlds in which one and only one character holds sway; however, the minor characters she typically writes into the poem—though often textually silent—are also not auditors. Instead of being present for the speaker's utterance, these minor characters exist on the periphery of the poems, leaving at the beginning or arriving at the end, and thereby punctuating the utterance rather than sustaining it. By peopling her fictional worlds with characters who are not privy to each speaker's turbulent, soul-searching utterances, what Webster quite deliberately emphasizes in her dramatic monologues is the speaker's need for isolation.

Not all critics have disregarded these uncommon characters: Helen Luu has found similar significance in Webster's generically unusual technique. Luu contends—here of "A Castaway," though her argument applies to Webster's dramatic monologues more broadly—that Eulalie's isolation "foreground[s] 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

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[29] There are a few exceptions to this in which Webster's speakers do speak directly to a silent auditor and that thus would even more completely "qualify" as dramatic monologue. "A Dilettante" and the second part of "Sister Annunciata"—"Abbess Ursula's Lecture"—are two exceptions I will take up in the chapter, as well as a small portion of "A Painter" in which the painter's wife, Ruth, enters his studio and is privy to some of his utterance.

her speech is already foreclosed" (133, my emphasis). Eulalie's utterance, in other words, could not remain the same were she actually speaking to someone. Taking this further, Luu continues that Webster's technique

> expose[s] 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. (134, my emphasis)

Luu characterizes Eulalie's relationship with auditors as a matter of nothing less than linguistic life or death. Had Eulalie spoken to an auditor with power, she could not have said what she does, yet without an auditor, her speech is as good as unspoken. Thus, figures like Eulalie are, as Luu argues of female speakers in dramatic monologues by Hemans, Webster, and Levy, "impossible subjects." The notion that the speakers' linguistic survival is at risk in these communicative scenarios is undoubtedly true; in fact, their *bodily* survival is at risk, as I've established in the examples from Barrett Browning. While the elder sister and the runaway slave attempt to speak to auditors with some cultural power, they risk—and lose—their very lives in order to do it.

In tying Eulalie and Annunciata's linguistic freedom to the absence of auditors who would otherwise invalidate them, Luu wishes to distinguish actual, physically present auditors from the other ways in which auditors have been conceived of in Webster's monologues—in other words, from the self, the reader, and the reading public (Luu 108). However, acknowledging that Webster's speakers largely address themselves, acting simultaneously as defendant and judge, in no way diminishes the point that their subjecthood is in limbo and their identity dependent upon a recognition that will not come. On the contrary, debates in both narratology and feminist ethics have established the interrelationship of narrative and identity formation, indicating that fragmented and incoherent narratives like those depicted in "Sister Annunciata" and "A Castaway" stem

from a similarly split or incoherent subjectivity. Speaking to the self, then, proves to be as tricky and traumatic an exercise as speaking to a hostile audience: though their bodies are safe—temporarily at least—Annunciata and Eulalie's utterances unloose the voices of former selves and expose the fragile, disjointed nature of past and present that leaves them little understanding of their authentic selves.

The distance separating an average reader of the nineteenth century from the experiences of the eponymous Sister Annunciata and of the prostitute, Eulalie, in "A Castaway" is precisely why it is fruitful to consider these particular characters' attitudes toward communication and intersubjectivity. In simple terms, Sister Annunciata is a saint while Eulalie is a sinner, but the object of their meditations is strikingly similar. They reflect overarchingly on female sexuality and on the culture's oxymoronic understanding of it, which makes sin nearly an inevitable consequence of acknowledging oneself as a sexual being outside of the safe confines of marriage. Convinced that society, with its strict definitions of purity and sin and the valorization or castigation respectively attendant upon them, would not understand the nuances of their positions, Annunciata and Eulalie speak alone, where they are best at liberty to interrogate the nature of sin. And yet, dogged as they are by their awareness of the strict moral and religious dictates that encompass the social world, they have internalized those dictates to the point that as subjects, they ultimately serve as both their own defendant and their own auditor and judge, experiencing a problematic psychic split.

While these moves may seem to suggest that Webster had a rather bleak perspective on the benefits of dialogue, I argue that she retains optimism in the idea of communication. Instead of crediting dialogue as the most effective method of communication, however, Webster turns to drama and role-play as the vehicles toward greater understanding of perspectives and positions far removed from one's own. Rather than treat the reader as another auditor who will observe from a distance, Webster privileges the reader's active inhabitation of a role by gravitating toward theatrical—and yet private—genres like dramatic

monologue and literary drama. By inducing the reader to embody a present-speaking first-person voice, the dramatic monologue treats the reader not as an auditor but as an actor, prompting speaker and reader to momentarily collapse into one body and one voice. Such a physical alliance between speaker and reader foregrounds sympathetic identification as a more powerful means of connection than empathy and the distance between bodies and voices it necessitates.

The Silent Non-Auditors

Although the lack of auditors in Webster's case has sparked debate about precisely how to categorize her dramatic poems, there are many monologues we commonly speak of as dramatic that lack a built-in audience. Amy Levy's "A Minor Poet," for instance, is not spoken to a physical presence; nor is Charlotte Mew's "Madeleine in Church"—both of which I'll be examining in detail later. Moreover, Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" are also spoken without silent auditors, as is Tennyson's "Oenone." Thus, although Curry and Sessions have claimed that a silent auditor is a necessary criterion for classification as a dramatic monologue, many of the most prolific monologists wrote poems that resembled their other dramatic monologues in all other ways, except that they simply didn't write auditors into the picture.

Since leaving auditors entirely out of the dramatic monologue was a relatively common occurrence in the Victorian period, Augusta Webster's curious and entirely uncommon practice of omitting auditors but including other minor characters takes on a greater significance by comparison. Webster's decision to include silent figures who might potentially be able to act as auditors, yet whom her speakers opt not to summon is telling, for it signals that while the speakers of Webster's monologues have access to other characters who could act as their auditors, they deliberately isolate themselves and seemingly inhibit their utterances from having any outward effect.

Webster employs this technique in the majority of her monologues.[30] In "By the Looking Glass," the speaker has apparently just left "the glitter and the din" (2)[31] of the ballroom so that she is "[a]lone at last in [her] room" (1)—and the implication is that it is here she can finally release her despair about her lack of beauty. Similarly, in "Tired," the male speaker waits for his wife to leave his room and get herself ready for an engagement before meditating upon the empty social norms and rules that govern their lives. His meditation ends abruptly when his wife re-enters, ready to go, and he realizes her preference for her "muslin roses" over "those that wear the natural dew of heaven" (398-399).

A number of Webster's other monologues are similarly interrupted at the end. Circe's contemplation of her boredom and her physical and emotional desire for change and love ends with the arrival of Odysseus and his storm-battered crew. Likewise, "The Happiest Girl in the World" is spoken by a newly engaged girl whose attempts to convince

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[30] Helen Luu tallies this differently than I do, so an explanation of my claim here is necessary. Luu contends that "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'" (108). Because Webster's minor characters, with very few exceptions, do not become actual auditors, I take a slightly broader view of how to count figures that function as potential auditor figures and that exist on the fringes of the poem. Rather than limit my definition to individual bodies that enter or exit during the poem—which happens in the cases Luu mentions ("A Preacher," "A Painter," "A Castaway," "Tired," and "In an Almshouse") as well as in "Pilate" (although this opens as a dialogue with his wife, Procla, Pilate can only speak in earnest once she has left and the poem morphs into a dramatic monologue)—I also include poems with speakers who have just deliberately departed from the company of others (as in "By the Looking Glass"); who observe or hear the arrival of others (as in "Circe" and "The Happiest Girl in the World"); or who anticipate an immediate return to the company of others (as in "Faded"). I also include the unique dramatic monologue, "Sister Annunciata," in which the eponymous nun's utterance responds to a directive from the Abbess Ursula—another character, though absent for the utterance—and in which the Abbess Ursula does enter the poem in a second part, though here she has an auditor of her own. For my purposes, then, I count 11 of the 18 monologues as exhibiting this pattern.

[31] All quotations are taken from the 1866 edition of Augusta Webster's *Dramatic Studies* and, because of changes made in capitalization, the 1893 expanded edition of *Portraits* (rather than the 1870 edition). For ease of reference, however, all line numbers are taken from Christine Sutphin's Broadview edition of *Portraits and Other Poems*.

herself that she is in love with her betrothed and that she fulfills the title's (and society's) expectation of what an engaged woman should be are interrupted at the poem's end by the approach of her fiancée himself. The frequency with which Webster uses this technique illustrates that she pointedly wants to emphasize the isolation of characters in spite of other people in and around their world. Webster creates fictional scenarios in which human connection seems within physical reach, and yet rather than attempt to forge such a connection, her characters time and again wait patiently for solitude.

If minor characters are not directly entering or exiting the room in which the speaker soliloquizes, they still exist elsewhere within the bounds of the poem. In "Sister Annunciata," the nun reveals that she has been asked by the Abbess Ursula to spend the night of her anniversary of becoming the "bride of Christ" (18) reflecting upon her "'ancient life / With all its sins and follies"' (47-48), which she does in complete solitude for her monologue's duration. In addition to mentioning the Abbess Ursula, Sister Annunciata later refers to several fellow sisters who presumably would be in close proximity to her room in the convent. The reader does, however, get a more extended glimpse of other characters in the poem in Part II of the text: "Abbess Ursula's Lecture." While the reader might immediately assume that Abbess Ursula is speaking, after the night of meditations is over, to Annunciata, it quickly becomes clear that the Abbess's auditor is not Annunciata at all but instead a "new-come novice" (1279) to the convent to whom the Abbess narrates Annunciata's exemplary and untainted commitment to Christ as well as—to the reader's surprise—her saintly death. Thus, because Part II of "Sister Annunciata" presents both speaker and auditor, the juxtaposition of this monologue with Annunciata's lengthy and turbulent night of questioning the nature of sin and grappling with her own despair underscores the fact that Annunciata had no auditor of her own. Furthermore, the vast distance between what Eva reveals about herself through her night of reflection and what the Abbess constructs about Annunciata's life for the novice's instruction exposes Annunciata's emotional and spiritual isolation, though surrounded by a community with

whom she ostensibly had much in common. Although an absence of auditors during Annunciata's monologue means that no breakdown in human communication occurs on the page, the gulf between Annunciata's self-examination and the Abbess's perceptions of her illustrates how extremely alone Annunciata is.

In "A Castaway," Eulalie too is surrounded by potential listeners. The reader doesn't know this at the beginning of the poem, since it opens with Eulalie rereading and disparaging a diary she kept in her girlhood. However, after a long period of reflection upon her youth, her current life as a prostitute, and the variety of causes that landed her in this position, Eulalie's line of thought is interrupted. She asks:

> Was that the bell?
> Someone at last, thank goodness. There's a voice,
> And that's a pleasure. Whose though? Ah, I know.
> Why did she come alone, the cackling goose?
> Why not have brought her sister? – she tells more
> And titters less. No matter; half a loaf
> Is better than no bread.
>
> Oh, is it you?
> Most welcome, dear: one gets so moped alone. (623-630)

As Eulalie realizes that she has company, her attitude toward others becomes clear. Eulalie does wish that the sister of the "cackling goose" came along, but she is grateful for an interruption to her thoughts, acknowledging that any voice other than her own is welcome. The kind of distraction she wants is not necessarily jovial and carefree, as she prefers the absent sister because she "tells more / and titters less." Yet she does want, at base, an excuse to get outside of herself, saying to her visitor that "one gets so moped alone." If it is a mistake, as Barrett Browning's "Bertha" and "Runaway Slave" suggest, to entrust one's most urgent desires, regrets, and hopes to others, Webster's speakers do not err, using others not as sounding boards upon whom their happiness depends but rather as momentary relief from a battle that can only involve the self.

Annunciata and Eulalie's separation from auditors is perhaps even more poignant given the sensitivity they both exhibit toward the human voice. Shortly after coming to the convent, for instance, in the midst of despair and isolation, Annunciata is approached by the Abbess Ursula, who says merely, "'God bless you daughter,' /… her usual greeting" (118-119). "[B]ut it came," Annunciata continues, "With the kind of sound one likes to dwell upon— / A little trivial phrase in the right tone / Makes music for so long" (119-122). At this moment, it is not even the substance of the Abbess's greeting that is important to her. Annunciata recalls that the Abbess probably "ran / Her whole small simple round of eloquence" (165-166) at the time; she continues, "I have heard it all since then, I think; but then / I did not hear—a murmur in my ears / That hummed on, soothing, like a lullaby" (165-169). The voice has the capacity, even divorced entirely from content, to comfort and soothe, so much so that Annunciata is able to fight her way out of this depth of extreme anguish all because of the sound of the Abbess's voice.

This is not the only moment at which Annunciata is struck by the strength of a human voice. The Abbess's "right tone" may lift Annunciata out of her despair, but it is the sound of Angelo's voice that had the power of keeping her there in the first place. In remembering those early days in the convent, Annunciata admits:

> How long that wild rapt promise hindered me
> In my first struggles for the Saints' cold peace,
> Because he spoke it in a certain tone—
> Sometimes he used it—that had a strange power
> To thrill me with strange pleasure through and through
> And leave long after echoes still possessed
> Of something more than most tones, even his,
> And easier to recall at will… (279-287)

In recalling the power of Angelo's voice, Annunciata's voice takes on a music of its own. Significantly, it is not metrical regularity that defines her meditation on the memorability of voice but subtle uses of sound that create echoes throughout the passage. From the repetition of specific words like "strange" and "through" to the buried internal rhyme of

"thrill" and "still" with "will" to the liquid l, r, and s sounds that wind their way through the lines, Annunciata's language here perhaps echoes what can be so arresting about the human voice: its ability to become, at times, pure sound that lingers as music.

Eulalie seems equally affected by the voice of her former self, albeit unwillingly so. After chastising herself for reading her girlhood diary, Eulalie reveals its force: "Now, sing-song, ding-dong, / Come the old vexing echoes back again, / Church bells and nursery good-books, back again / upon my shrinking ears that had forgotten—" (189-192). Rather than feel pleasantly seduced by the sounds of her former self, as Annunciata is by memories of Angelo and the Abbess's voices, Eulalie criticizes those sounds of "[c]hurch bells" and "nursery good-books." Unlike the irregular rhythms held together by the subtle weaving of sound that Annunciata exhibits in her meditation on Angelo's tone, the "sing-song" and "ding-dong" of church bells and nursery rhymes is so regular, it becomes easily predictable—a predictability that made for an easier life than what Eulalie lives currently, and yet one without stimulation or change. Attempting to ignore that sing-song completely, however, does not satisfy Eulalie either. As she later laments, "Quiet is hell, I say—as if a woman / Could bear to sit alone, quiet all day, / And loathe herself and sicken on her thoughts" (236-238). Like Annunciata, Eulalie also longs for the sound of a human voice—just not the voice of her girlhood. The sensitivity that both Annunciata and Eulalie exhibit to the human voice is telling, for it makes the lack of auditors for their utterances even more palpable.

Consequently, in Webster's oeuvre and particularly the two dramatic monologues I will be examining, the absence of auditor figures—in spite of both the presence of minor characters who might have fulfilled that role and the power the human voice has for them—emphasizes the extreme isolation of Webster's speakers. When companionship is within reach for both of these characters, their resignation to analyze themselves without reference to or response from others is telling: others are not necessary. Because neither Annunciata nor Eulalie exhibit coherent subjectivities, they must speak to themselves across a risky

psychic chasm. Occupying contradictory positions, Annunciata and Eulalie act at once as their own defendant and judge as they attempt to arrive at some understanding of how to narrate and evaluate their own histories amid contexts that have severely limited who they were able to become.

The Split Subject

The hazards involved in speaking to an audience that Barrett Browning stages in her dramatic monologues, "Bertha" and "Runaway Slave," explain, in part, why a speaker might refrain altogether from gathering an audience. For Webster's speakers, however, their decision to speak to no one is not exactly an avoidance of encountering others' perspectives. In fact, the speakers themselves exhibit split subjectivities to the extent that in speaking to themselves, they are at once speaking to an other—a former self no longer within easy reach—and the significant others who were a part of that past. While listening ears are ostensibly available to both speakers if they would wish to have an audience, both Sister Annunciata and Eulalie most desire to speak, in an attempt to arrive at some more coherent identity, to a prior self they once abandoned and the others of that past, now beyond reach.

Consequently, Annunciata in "Sister Annunciata" and Eulalie in "A Castaway" offer monologues that contain their own dialogism as they supply both their own points and counterpoints in debates with their former selves that ultimately remain unresolved. As Angela Leighton has observed about the dramatic monologue generally (though in a chapter on Webster specifically), "The modernity of the form derives from its exploitation of a discrepancy which lies at the very core of subjectivity. Instead of being self-consistent, the self is a thing of inner strata and differences, of overlaid repressions and deceptions" (*Victorian Women* 177). Leighton's point is widely applicable; even the dying sister and the runaway slave in Barrett Browning's monologues exhibit inconsistencies and fluctuations in their lines of thought. Webster, however, takes this split in subjectivity to an extreme, as she

stages internal debates that pit self against self, leaving auditors out entirely even though they're within reach.

In trying to reconcile religious doctrine and personal experience—understandings of sexuality and sin that are, in their cases, diametrically opposed—both Annunciata and Eulalie fail to forge a singular, coherent narrative of the self, making their existences as fragile as those of Barrett Browning's elder sister and runaway slave. Victorian culture's limited options for women who discover bodily desire outside of the safe confines of marriage has led Annunciata and Eulalie on radically different trajectories. Eva, thwarted by her mother and uncle from pursuing a relationship with her love Angelo, has been sent to the convent, where she has been taught to privilege the spiritual life at the expense of her body. Eulalie, on the other hand, has been forced through economic circumstances to pursue the bodily existence of prostitution, which the culture perceives as incompatible with a spiritual existence. However, while the church's (and by extension, the culture's) understanding of sin has gained a powerful foothold in both Annunciata and Eulalie's psyches, each woman also has to account for her own experiences—experiences that don't fit into standard notions of virtue and yet also don't seem inherently sinful.

Annunciata's split in subjectivity arises, then, out of her attempt on one hand to validate the desires of her younger self, which would have led to a different future entirely, and on the other to justify the life she is living. This is clear from the controversial opening to "Sister Annunciata": a wife, Annunciata reasons, loving her husband as she does, might still be able to love Christ just as much as Annunciata, who has wholly devoted herself to him. Yet Annunciata instantly retracts, asking herself, "Am I sinning now / To think it?" (16-17). Apparently so, she believes, as "[t]hey have their happiness, I mine; but mine / Is it not of Heaven heavenly, theirs of earth, / And therefore tainted with earth's curse of sin?" (20-22). Annunciata's momentary attempt to erase any difference between her own commitment to God and what a married woman's commitment would be signals her desire to have it both ways—or her belief, rather, that it *could* have been both ways.

Furthermore, although Annunciata's project is to reflect upon her "ancient sins and follies," her own history has made her skeptical about doctrinal definitions of sin. In the monologue, Annunciata begins to reason for herself, treating what the convent might call sin in a more forgiving way. Of her awareness that her fantasies of the romantic love of her youth still remain a part of her, Annunciata reasons, "I do not think / There can be sin in that, in knowing it" (210-211). Similarly, after recalling her thwarted love for Angelo, Annunciata tells herself, "It is no sin that I should yearn for thee / That thou mightst also rise and lift thyself / Out from the world…" (317-319). These moments poignantly depart from her other mentions of sin in that instead of questioning herself and reasserting the church's way of thinking, Annunciata simply states her opinion of what should—or should not, rather—be considered transgressive.

The more liberal and relative understanding of sin toward which Annunciata's own experience has led her is also reflected in her impulse to question the entire undertaking she's been asked to perform. The project of separating sin from our other actions, she indicates, is suspect:

> But how to say 'In this and this I sinned—
> Here evil dashed the good—there all was evil,'
> Seems as if, coming from a woodland path,
> One should essay to chronicle the thorns
> Set on the briar rose-trees, count the size
> And order of the flint-stones by the way
> Upon the moss-banks and the grassy rims.
> They were there, one saw them, one remembers that,
> But one thinks more of the roses. (1053-1061)

Annunciata reveals in this passage an attitude toward sin that is perhaps incompatible with repentance. By likening her past, full of both evil and good, to a woodland path where one encounters both "thorns" and "briar rose-trees," Annunciata naturalizes sin, suggesting that it co-exists, organically, in both woodland path and girlhood past. While she can look back on her youth and recognize sin's presence, it is difficult, she realizes, to cleanly extract it

from its context—particularly when its presence is overshadowed. After all, as she muses, "one thinks more of the roses."

While Annunciata seems to want to rescue the possibility of a simultaneous commitment to both Eros and Agape and to question the normative conceptions of sin that she has learned through the church, she is also left with the reality that a future with Angelo is no longer an option for her and consequently must affirm the unique benefits of the life she is living. Yet Annunciata is aware that to successfully uphold her convent life without question or regret will require repression. Her recognition that the "dulled memories" (39) and "forbidden dreams" (43) of her past threaten to snare her still prompts her to question the Abbess's wisdom. Annunciata reasons:

> She has forgotten doubtless, 'tis so long
> Since she came here, how, trying to recall
> Girl sins and follies, some things of the past
> Might be recalled too tenderly, and so
> The poisonous sad sweet sin of looking back
> Steal [sic] on one unawares. (51-56)

Acknowledging that memory might allow sin to "[s]teal on one unawares," Annunciata momentarily renders herself a potentially passive victim of sin and insinuates that the Abbess may be misguided in exposing Annunciata to such a danger. "[T]hings of the past" that "[m]ight be recalled too tenderly," in other words, are better left there. The syntactic deferral over the initial intruding clauses suspends the object of her forgetfulness, illustrating Annunciata's frustration at being made to remember—illustrating, in fact, her outright avoidance of it. Such discomfort with past recollections reveals how Annunciata has been able to function successfully at the convent thus far: by shutting her former life from memory, breaking her self in half.

This split is reflected even in the imagery and meter that form Annunciata's thoughts. Recalling her early days in the convent, Annunciata likens herself to a "… poor plant brought from the fresh free air / And natural dewings of the skyward soil, / Where its

wild growth took bent at the wind's will" (133-135) that, in coming to the convent, had "[t]o learn indoors an artificial bloom / Or die" (136-137). Just as the imagery of a plant growing in nature is juxtaposed with the "artificial" indoor life to signal the subjective split Annunciata suffered, so too does the meter in this moment echo that split between her former and present states. "To learn indoors an artificial bloom / Or die" is perfect iambic pentameter and forms a stark contrast to the spondaic, trochaic, and pyrrhic feet of the previous three lines. Furthermore, while a perfect iambic pentameter contains ten syllables per line, two of the lines depicting a plant in its natural setting contain an extra, imperfect syllable, the meter here echoing the not-quite metronomic rhythms of the "fresh free air" and the "wild growth" that once comprised her life.

Yet the chasm between Annunciata's former earthly and present spiritual selves need not only be detected in the imagery and meter of the poem, as she straightforwardly acknowledges this gulf, calling the exertion she made upon entering the convent, quite simply, "… the effort / To be another self" (191-192)—an effort perhaps made easier by that other symbolic shift in identity, as her name changes from Eva to Sister Annunciata.[32] While this effort to be "another self" has been relatively successful, Annunciata confesses that she cannot entirely erase this other part of her, musing:

> Even if I would, how could I now recall
> To their long-faded forms those phantasies
> Of a far, other, consciousness which now
> Beneath the ashes of their former selves
> Lie a dead part of me, but still a part,
> Oh evermore a part. (204-210)

The unexpected shift across the enjambment of the first line thematically sets up the rotations of this passage—Annunicata desires not simply to "recall" memories but to more

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[32] The importance of her old name to Sister Annunciata becomes evident as Annunciata remembers her sister, Leonora. "[S]he alone," she says, "Remembers my old name-day, comes to me, / As if it still were festival to me, / With flowers, and calls me Eva" (1200-1203).

actively "re-call" to life her prior hopes for herself that died with her entrance to the convent. Annunciata's language reinforces this hope; from the internal rhyme of "would" and "could" to the alliteration of "faded forms," "phantasies," "far," and "former" to the triple repetition of "part," Annunciata's language circles upon itself, echoing sounds that came before to capture, sonically, what Annunciata realizes in this moment: that even if her past is "dead," she cannot sever herself from it. This idea is enacted even microcosmically in pun, as Annunciata's former self remains at once a component of her being—"a part"—and yet also removed from who she is now—"apart," the meaning of the word hovering in the space that separates its syllables from one another, a space, of course, that disappears aurally.

This acknowledgment of a former self that is simultaneously a part of and apart from her is clearly no unification of those selves, no happy fusion of past and present. Rather, it is an admission that her dual existence will never be reconcilable. As Annunciata later proclaims:

> I do but recognize
> A simple truth, that that which has been lived,
> Lived down to the deeps of the true being, *is*
> Even when past for ever, has become
> Inseparable from the lifelong self:
> But yet it lives not with the *present* life.
> So, in this wise, I may unashamed perceive
> That the dead life, that the dead love, are still
> A part of me. (221-229, original emphasis)

Annunciata exposes, here, the contradictions that now riddle her being. "[T]hat which has been lived… *is*"—the present-ness of this verb exacerbated both typographically and as an eleventh syllable that hangs in the air—even though "it lives not with the *present* life," making her former self both present and not-present at once. Likewise, though "past for ever" and "dead," her former life is yet "[i]nseparable" from her current life. Thus, Annunciata's history is not only split in terms of her experience, but she is also psychically split in her

attempt to make sense of those histories, her former self simultaneously present in and absent from the life she's living.

If, from the perspective of speech-act theory, certain uses of language create action, what Annunciata seems to desire through her utterance is a retrieval of a past self lost to her. Although Annunciata can acknowledge the gulf between her past and present lives, however, such an acknowledgment cannot fully access and rescue that other self. As this failure becomes evident over the course of the monologue, it begins to manifest itself as ruptures in narrative. The current debate in feminist ethics surrounding narrative and subject formation offers two distinct ways of interpreting such ruptures. Seyla Benhabib's approach, which prioritizes the role of narrative in creating a coherent identity, would logically lead one to see narrative ruptures as indicative of an unstable or incoherent identity. Lois McNay, however, sees fragmentation and coherence as able to "coexist within the same self" (McNay 110).[33] While McNay's assessment may be true in the pragmatic sense, as a subject is such over time, the presence of fragmentation in the subject is problematic for identity formation, as Webster's monologues deftly illustrate. When Annunciata's night of meditations on her former life initiates her swift descent toward death and Eulalie waits desperately for distraction from her contemplation on her youth and present life, neither character can offer a test case for a subjectivity that successfully contains both fragmentation and coherence. Rather, the nature of the ruptures in narrative that occur for these characters suggest a deep

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[33] Feminist theorists like Seyla Benhabib have recently attempted to return to Jürgen Habermas's "communitarian" model of subject formation—a model that accounts for the integral role of reflexivity and intersubjectivity in shaping one's identity. Because Habermas's theory deals with general and abstract beings, however, feminist ethicists have attempted to reconcile his communitarian model with a more embodied and situated concept of the subject. Thus, Benhabib has begun to argue for the centrality of narrative to identity—both because of its aim to communicate and because it allows for the notion that identity is linguistically constructed. Lois McNay has objected, though, that Benhabib's approach "underestimates the blocks, both psychic and social, to the formation of a coherent sense of self" (7) and that it sets up "a misleading opposition between fragmentation and coherence of the self rather than exploring how these moments might coexist within the same self" (9).

and troubling inability to construct for themselves, through narrative, a sustainable subjectivity.

Annunciata may be fully aware that her former earthly desires are neither separable from her present self nor something to be ashamed of, but a division is a division, and as the monologue continues, this fragmentation of her subjectivity becomes increasingly evident in the fragmentation of her language. Addressing her love, Angelo, Annunciata's breakdown begins:

> Oh Angelo
> Why am I here in the ceaseless formal calm
> That makes the soul swell to one bursting self
> And seem the whole great universe, the while
> It only sees itself, learns of itself,
> Hopes for itself, feeds, preys upon itself
> And not one call comes to it from without
> 'Think of me too, a little live for me,
> Take me with thee in growing nearer God'?
> Why am I—?
> 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! (537-551)

In this extended passage, the fissure in Annunciata's subjectivity begins to manifest itself. At the moment she describes how her "soul swell[s] to one bursting self," the "formal calm" of the poem simultaneously bursts into fragmented, interrupted syntax, laying bare her psychic split. Despite Annunciata's attempt to hang on to a stable sense of identity, despite her grasping repetition of "self" throughout the initial stanza, her self will not hold, preventing her at the end of the stanza from connecting an adjective to her own subject, turning Annunciata's question, "Why am I—?" from one innocently waiting to link to the right predicate to a question in its own right: "Why am I?" Unable to select a word to describe herself, Annunciata instead questions the purpose of her existence altogether.

What follows this crucial moment of absence is Annunciata's attempt to re-stabilize herself, attributing her "blasphemy" to something "not of myself!" "Those were not my thoughts / …not my thoughts, not mine!", Annunciata insists too desperately, wondering instead if there was "a demon here just now / By me, within me?" Although her allowance that a demon could be "within her" broaches the possibility of a dividedness, her need to attribute her longing for a "call … from without" to an entity other than herself suggests her frantic fear of being subjectively bisected. And yet her impaired perception of this moment conveys anything but a stable and coherent subject. Annunciata's fear of madness, her inability to distinguish what is outside versus within her, and her incapacity to know whether she was thinking or speaking aloud all point to her agitation and distraction following that harrowing question: "Why am I?"

Annunciata's inability to attach a predicate to subject and verb grows even more alarming, as she later cannot even supply the verb. Toward the end of her monologue, Annunciata is visited by a vision of Angelo rather than the vision of Christ she had hoped to see (and appropriately so, given his name). Sailing peacefully with Angelo in a boat when the waters grow turbulent, Annunciata suddenly finds herself ashore where she must watch Angelo drown. After snapping out of the vision, Annunciata asks herself:

> Whence came such a dream?
> He is with Giulia happy. I ————
> Am here
> Vowed to the convent, vowed to Heaven's service. (1250-1252)

One look at the page in this moment of the poem reveals the formal fragmentation that is occurring, as regular iambic pentameter lines give way to incomplete, irregular lines that mimic the mind of the speaker delivering them. The finer details of this formally fragmented moment are crucial, though, as they underscore the psychic collapse Annunciata is experiencing. The extended dash and the pregnant white space that delays the verb signal Annunciata's incapacity to establish, through language, who, what, or why she is. After an

excessive delay groping for words, Annunciata finally reaches for the easiest thing to provide about herself—her physical location. While that location allows Annunciata to gain a small foothold and remember why she is "here," the description of her purpose in being at the convent is far too pat and rote to be genuine. Her reason for being there, "[v]owed to the convent, vowed to Heaven's service," is also, in its past-tense construction, a reminder that her vow is not ever renewed, but once made, a binding obligation.

Consequently, Sister Annunciata exhibits such an extreme split within herself that in speaking only to herself, she is at once speaking to another. Only unlike the minor characters referred to and planted throughout the poem, the other inside Sister Annunciata is beyond reach. From the split in her physical residence—maternal home to the convent—to the split in name from Eva to Sister Annunciata to the split in her devotion from Angelo to God, Sister Annunciata contains a ghostly double that, speak to it as she might, can neither reemerge nor merge with her present self to create a coherent, singular identity. Struggling with a similar gulf between former and present states, Eulalie in "A Castaway" also ambivalently—and unsuccessfully—attempts to invoke her former self rather than initiate a dialogue with the fellow prostitute for whom she is waiting.

In many ways, Eulalie in "A Castaway" seems to have a much more coherent sense of herself than Annunciata does, perhaps because she has spent far more time meditating on her apparent sin while Annunciata has repressed it. Indeed, instead of exploring her own interiority, Eulalie has far more to say on the society of which she is a part, finding fault with hypocrisy and corruption all around her. Eulalie's defense of her position is pointed, articulate and manifold, conveying a confidence that does not seem subject to the same kind of self-doubt with which Annunciata seems to be wracked. While others might label prostitution a sin, Eulalie contends, "I know of worse that are called honourable" (80). Pointing toward lawyers, preachers, doctors, journalists, and tradesmen, Eulalie argues that they "do their businesses of lies and shams / Honestly, reputably, while the world / Claps hands and cries 'good luck'" (94-96). Regardless of the respectable front these other

occupations have, Eulalie wonders which of "[t]heir honourable trades, barefaced like mine, / All secrets brazened out, would shew more white?" (97-98).

This argument that blame and judgment could be leveled in many seemingly respectable directions is echoed later in the monologue. As Eulalie declares:

> Oh, I'll endorse
> The shamefullest revilings mouthed at me,
> Cry "True! O perfect picture! Yes, that's I!"
> And add a telling blackness here and there,
> And then dare swear you, every nine of ten,
> My judges and accusers, I'd not change
> My conscience against yours, you who tread out
> Your devil's pilgrimage along the roads
> That take in church and chapel, and arrange
> A roundabout and decent way to hell. (137-146)

Unlike Annunciata, Eulalie's impulse is not to question the boundaries of sin but rather to question those who so forcefully uphold them. Many of her "judges and accusers," she suggests, have sinned just as she has—the only difference between them is that she publicly owns those sins while others "take in church and chapel" on their way to the devil.

In addition to exposing the hypocrisy that pervades Victorian society, Eulalie takes issue with the fact that many people only blame prostitutes for their morally repugnant position in life without also judging the clientele who make their profession possible, an attitude espoused by pamphlets on prostitution like the one she reflects upon in this moment. Responding to its list of accusations, Eulalie muses:

> … *'I prey on souls'* –
> Only my men have oftenest none I think:
> *'I snare the simple ones'* – but in these days
> There seem to be none simple and none snared
> And most men have their favourite sinnings planned
> To do them civilly and sensibly… (154-159)

Eulalie protests the notion that she "prey[s] on souls" and suggests that, despite the belief that she uses her powers of attraction to trap otherwise unsuspecting men, they actually have

"their favourite sinnings planned." While prostitutes are convenient scapegoats, Eulalie points out that men are not the victims they are made out to be. Nor, for that matter, are their wives who, Eulalie notes, "rail at us / With such a spiteful scorn and rancorousness, / (Which maybe is half envy at the heart) / And boast themselves so measurelessly good / And us so measurelessly unlike them" (115-119). Objecting that their judgment is unfair, Eulalie insists that their virtue has never been challenged, asking, "What right have they to scorn us—glass-case saints, / Dianas under lock and key—what right / More than the well-fed helpless barn-door fowl / To scorn the larcenous wild-birds?" (128-131). Their judgment, Eulalie suggests, is not founded on any hard-won moral struggle. Rather, it has been preserved in a "glass-case… under lock and key." Her analogy, furthermore, defends her actions by removing morality from the equation; as E. Warwick Slinn observes, "The imagery of wild birds located Eulalie on the social margin as always, but it also naturalizes her behavior, rupturing the moral boundary between wife and mistress" (172).

Eulalie's ability to confidently skewer other members of society establishes herself, throughout most of the monologue, as an incisive social commentator who has surpassed any uncertainty about her own subjectivity or its place in the larger society. Her plain acknowledgment at one point in the monologue suggests as much: "I have looked coolly on my what and why," Eulalie says, "And I accept myself" (136-137). And yet, despite the confident dismissal Eulalie gives to the society around her, there are a handful of moments which expose a psychic split similar to Annunciata's.

Reading her girlhood diary, Eulalie balks at who she used to be, saying, "So long since: / And now it seems a jest to talk of me / As if I could be one with her, of me / Who am … me" (23-26). As Annunciata experienced, the unbridgeable rift between Eulalie's former and present selves leads to a breakdown of grammar itself. As Leighton notes, much like the speaker's repetition of "I, I, I" in "By the Looking-Glass," "the Castaway's 'me' and 'me', suggests that the self is not an inviolable inner sanctuary, closed to the outer world, but a staggered reflection of history, opinions, moralities and prejudices. The ironic gap in the

monologue is thus not one between reader and speaker, but rather between the speaker and her broken other selves" (*Victorian Women* 187). The fragmented, broken thoughts continue, leaving gaps and silences in Eulalie's monologue that betray the unspoken despair that lies beneath. After mocking her own claim that she's a "modest" prostitute, Eulalie remarks, "Well, I flout myself: / But yet, but yet ——" (58-59). Again, the broken line, extended dash, and line and a half of white space that follow all exhibit a fragmentation of narrative that echoes a fragmentation of self. Eulalie has apparently become deft at righting herself, though, as she quickly recovers in this instance, asking herself, "Where should be my 'But yet'? I am that thing / Called half a dozen dainty names" (62-63). Although here she rescues herself through language, it is tellingly not to assert herself as a subject, as she can only treat herself, as society does, as an object—"that thing"—and a separate one, as "that" cannot be here.

Furthermore, although Eulalie seems able to confront her position in society with an honesty and confidence that betray little psychic repression, there is one topic which causes her obvious discomfort. When meditating on the process of aging that awaits her, Eulalie declares:

> No, no, I could not bear it: death itself
> Shows kinder promise… even death itself,
> Since it must come one day—
>
> Oh this grey gloom!
> This rain, rain, rain, what wretched thoughts it brings!
> Death: I'll not think of it.
>
> Will no one come?
> 'Tis dreary work alone. (183-188)

Although Eulalie claims a preference for death over aging, the formal breaks and silences that invade her thoughts here disclose how distressing the idea of death actually is to her. Eulalie's acknowledgment that death "must come one day—" causes her to abruptly break off into an extended silence. Eulalie may attribute these "wretched thoughts" of death to

the "grey gloom" and rain outside, but when she has exhibited such a facility for thought and reflection throughout her utterance, Eulalie's sudden inability to meditate on death illustrates that her sense of herself as a subject is not quite as confident and complete as she has attempted to assert during the monologue. Tellingly, she looks to others as a potential escape from these disconcerting thoughts, exposing herself as much more psychically unsettled than she has tried to let on.

These moments of fragmentation that occur in both Annunciata and Eulalie's monologues point toward narrative's vexed relationship to identity. Although both characters attempt to use narrative to access their former selves as well as the others from their pasts, narrative cannot provide such access. While narrative's retrospective nature can allow some movement into the past, the form of the dramatic monologue highlights what is so problematic for these characters: just as the speaking voice keeps the dramatic monologue locked in a perpetual present, Annunciata and Eulalie are likewise trapped in a present that will never permit them to reunite with others lost to time—both the "others" of their former selves and those others—Angelo, Eulalie's mother, Eulalie's child—no longer within reach. Despite their efforts, the subjective split Sister Annunicata and Eulalie experience cannot be healed through narrative.

Others and the Ends of Narrative

Both Annunciata and Eulalie exhibit split subjectivities since they are haunted by the former selves that remain a part of them and yet that cannot be fully retrieved. This desire to dwell on the past, coupled with the fact that both speakers need to shut out others in close proximity as they replay their histories, suggests that rather than retain a faith in what communication might accomplish in the present, Sister Annunicata and Eulalie both strive to rewrite their pasts. Both characters point to specific moments in their histories in which their narratives might have taken a different turn had others behaved more compassionately

toward them. This impulse to review the past and assess the moments when others' actions or words affected the course of their lives cuts to a philosophical question at the heart of dramatic monologues by women poets: what are the ethical obligations between self and other? Are gestures of kindness and charity always altruistic, or are we ethically obligated to offer such gestures by virtue of being a part of a human community? While both Annunciata and Eulalie, at times, accept the blame for the wrong turns that their lives took, their monologues also openly wonder what could have been had others—like a mother, an uncle, a brother, or even a charitable stranger—helped at pivotal moments.

Determining the attitude that Annunciata and Eulalie have toward others is illuminating, particularly since Webster at once evokes the interplay of self and other by planting minor characters within the bounds of the poem and yet highlights the speakers' alienation by having them avoid those potential auditors. In a genre structured around speakers and audiences, locating the attitudes promulgated by the poems about the responsibility of self to other and vice versa can help readers to understand the nuances of the debates about charity, philanthropy, and sympathy played out within the genre of the dramatic monologue.

In reflecting on what led her to the convent, Annunciata not only remembers her own "sins and follies" but those of others as well, positing in these moments that others' failures are as much to blame as her own. Annunciata is particularly haunted by her mother's inability to offer love and kindness, a failure that she believes is partially responsible for the course of her life. After it became clear that their families would not sanction Eva and Angelo's relationship, Eva's mother did not just leave well enough alone. Instead, she attempted to turn Eva more firmly against Angelo by telling Eva that he had fallen in love with another girl named Giulia. Remembering this, Annunciata apostrophizes to her mother:

> You did but anger me, proud mother mine
> With your pretended soothings. Was it worth,

> Having queened it for so many frigid years
> Over your daughters' lives and never once
> Stooped to a little pet word, or a kiss
> Beyond the formal seal that stamped receipt
> Of our daily homage paid, or just a look
> To shew you knew what mother-loving meant—
> Was it worth to come down from your pedestal
> At the last moment thus to play the part
> Of a mere common woman softening down
> Her girl's weak grief at fate inevitable? (443-454)

Annunciata reveals here how cold and unloving her mother was. Having spent her life at a reserved distance from her children, Annunciata's mother offered no evidence that she even "knew what mother-loving meant." And while Annunciata allows that her mother's attempt to push Eva past her love for Angelo may have been an ill-conceived show of kindness, Annunciata laments, "But, mother, had you known a little more / Of your child's heart, of any human heart, / You would have known what bitter death in life / Your words believed would bring me" (508-511).

More than faulting mere unkindness, though, Annunciata questions her mother and uncle's decisions as parents. Although it has taken her many years to reach this conclusion, Annunciata declares that "[t]he fault was theirs / Who thought it wise to rate as purposes / The fanciful longings of an almost child / Let fall at fluent moments" (929-932). When at age fifteen she expressed her intention to enter the convent, she was, she repeats, an "almost child" (945). Knowing this, Annunciata believes that "[t]hey were too prompt to take my girlish fits / of dream enthusiasm … and turn them to their will. / The fault was theirs" (982-987). Instead of keeping her best interests at heart three years later when she fell in love and allowing her, if not to marry Angelo, at least to reevaluate her desires, Eva's mother and uncle pushed her to enter the convent. In reviewing their motives and the pressure they exerted upon her, Annunciata realizes that not only did they simply neglect to express any interest in her own desires and happiness, but they also imposed their own self-interested desires upon her.

In "A Castaway," Eulalie similarly imagines what others might have done for her. Although Eulalie believes she didn't have much of a choice in becoming a prostitute, she acknowledges that there's a chance she might have avoided it with some help. "I think indeed," Eulalie ventures, "If some kind hand, a woman's—I hate men— / Had stretched itself to help me to firm ground, / Taken a chance and risked my falling back, / I could have gone my way not falling back" (257-261). Just as the language here does "fall back" upon itself in the repetition of that phrase, though, so too does Eulalie fall back upon her doubts. "But, let her be all brave, all charitable," Eulalie wonders, "How could she do it?" (262-263). Although Eulalie wants to hope that strangers can care about the welfare of others, she immediately checks that hope by noting its impracticality. If she were to be given a job as a seamstress or governess, Eulalie realizes that this would simply "oust some good girl so, who then perforce / Must come and snatch her chance among our crowd" (277-278). Even if she did get help, in other words, it would only be at someone else's expense.

Although Eulalie does seem to believe that "[t]here are some kindly people in the world," she cannot help but wonder, "But what can *they* do?" (465-466, original emphasis). In this extended passage, Eulalie resigns herself to the belief that any efforts borne from idealism will, in the end, be in vain:

> … If one hurls oneself
> Into a quicksand, what can be the end,
> But that one sinks and sinks? Cry out for help?
> Ah yes, and, if it came, who is so strong
> To strain from the firm ground and lift one out?
> And how, so firmly clutching the stretched hand
> As death's pursuing terror bids, even so,
> How can one reach firm land, having to foot
> The treacherous crumbling soil that slides and gives
> And sucks one in again? Impossible path!
> No, why waste struggles, I or any one?
> What is must be. What then? I where I am,
> Sinking and sinking; let the wise pass by
> And keep their wisdom for an apter use,
> Let me sink merrily as best I may. (466-480)

Eulalie grants that help could miraculously come at the right moment; what she continues to doubt is whether or not one person's charity is enough to save one's life. Even if given a helping hand, Eulalie concludes that climbing out of the "quicksand" she has found herself in is an "[i]mpossible path!" Thus, charity and altruism, while attractive in theory, seem to Eulalie to be unrealistic and ineffective, suggesting that her end is predetermined. "[W]hy waste struggles," she asks, "I or any one? / What is must be."

While Eulalie's momentary hope in the charity of strangers seems farfetched to her, she perhaps more realistically imagines what her own brother might have done to assist her. Not even claiming money or material goods, Eulalie merely wishes that "he had been just so much less good / As to remember mercy" (481-484)—particularly considering that, as a child, she had been "content to learn for him / The lesson girls with brothers all must learn, / To do without" (486-488). Her brother, Clement, though, is apparently so morally "good" that he would have expected a woman fallen like herself to remove her stain upon the earth by dying; as Eulalie puts it, Clement "knew me a too base and nerveless thing / To bear my first fault's sequel and just die" (534-535).[34]

Eulalie may imagine how her life might have differently turned out throughout her monologue, but she repeatedly counters these appeals to others' charity with an assertion that she is wholly responsible for the trajectory her life has taken. "I see clear now," Eulalie asserts, "and know one has one's life / In hand at first to spend or spare or give / Like any other coin" (553-555). Appropriately employing an economic metaphor here, Eulalie swings from feeling out the possibility of others' help in the face of determinism to the other extreme of believing herself her sole keeper. Consequently, "if you spend or give, that is your choice," Eulalie continues, "And if you let it slip, that's your choice too, / You should have held it firmer. Yours the blame, / And not another's, not the indifferent world's" (560-

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[34] As E. Warwick Slinn notes, Webster changed the brother's name from Edward to Clement in 1893, "perhaps to underscore the irony of his lack of clemency toward his sister" (173).

563). Eulalie's momentary acceptance of her responsibility for her position, though, does not last. Understanding all of the factors that have led her here—the lack of a real education, cultural expectations of women, a lack of compassion and charity from others, and her basic needs for food and shelter—Eulalie absolves everyone of responsibility for her life in prostitution. Eulalie states, simply, "Oh, I blame no one—scarcely even myself. / It was to be" (573-574).

Throughout "Sister Annunciata" and "A Castaway," Annunciata and Eulalie endeavor to justify their present positions by oscillating between blaming others for misbehavior or inaction and absolving others while holding themselves singularly responsible. In doing so, both speakers seem to be attempting to answer a question of philosophical ethics: what are the obligations between self and other? Is it appropriate to expect others to come to your aid and have your best interests at heart, or can one only justifiably depend upon herself? It is a question that the circumstances of the monologues themselves seem to lay to rest: when the speakers, as I've noted above, speak their monologues alone—despite the presence of others in the margins of the monologue who might have acted as auditors—both Annunciata and Eulalie seem to have lost faith in others, realizing that there simply is "No help! no help! no help!" ("A Castaway" 462). While they might welcome others as a momentary distraction from the despair they suffer, the despair itself can only be entrusted to God in Annunciata's case, and in Eulalie's, to no one.

Positioning the Reader

While there may be no fictional recipient of Annunciata and Eulalie's utterances, there is still the reader—an actual recipient who also has a role to play in this circuit of communication. As I earlier established, although many genre theorists have attempted to pin down how a reader responds to the dramatic monologue, the reader has always been treated as another kind of auditor, a witness at one further remove from the utterance.

However, I would like to offer an alternative to this approach—one that both validates the skepticism that women poets like Webster exhibited toward communication and depends by necessity upon the monologue as dramatic. Rather than react as a witness, I would suggest that the reader instead embodies the speaker of the monologue herself, revocalizing the speaker's utterance. Understanding the reader of the dramatic monologue in this way legitimates a very real concern that women poets of the Victorian era shared about the efficacy of speech and dialogue, and the genre of the dramatic monologue conveniently offers a way to sidestep a mode of communication riddled with obstacles. Allowing the reader effectively to "perform" the speaker's utterance, the dramatic monologue subsequently privileges sympathetic identification over dialogue as a means of conveying experience.

This process is not so different, after all, from what Webster has indicated the poet must undergo in order to effectively write a character into existence. In her essay "Poets and Personal Pronouns" that first appeared in the *Examiner*, Webster argues that "if the poet describes the sensations of an intending murderer he has to make one feel that he has found out just what one's sensations would be if one could have been capable of thinking about committing murder" (qtd. in Sutphin 367). In other words, the poet has to embody the mind of a murderer without going so far as to commit the act herself. Similarly, Webster argues that even if one is "impermeable to any more ecstatic love than goes to make a matrimonial choice in a comfortable way… the poet describing the passion of love must make one feel that one knows it all for a fact, that those are just one's own sentiments—or at least what one's own sentiments would be if one were of the sort to fall in love" (367-368). While Webster carefully hedges her language so as not to suggest that she entirely does understand what a murderer feels, or a lover for that matter, her subtext seems clear. [35]

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[35] This act of hedging was essential for Victorian poets who dramatized problematic characters. As Ekbert Faas argues, Victorian society wanted to maintain a sense of "normalcy" and thus would consume fictionalized portrayals of mental derangement but would not approve of more

Rather than simply hear about an individual's feelings and experiences that differ widely from the poet's, the poet must temporarily possess those feelings in order to adequately understand and render them. Webster's ability to convincingly do so was noted in reviews of her work. As a reviewer of *Dramatic Studies* claims in the *Nonconformist* in 1866, "…Miss Webster's 'Sister Annunciata' and 'With the Dead' exhibit, in a high degree, that power of going out of oneself and thinking the thoughts of others, which is, of course, the essential function of the dramatist" (qtd. in Sutphin 404). Later readers, such as Sutphin, confirm the dramatic effect Webster's dramatic monologues work upon her: "They beg to be read aloud," says Sutphin, "since their techniques, such as enjambment, evoke a conversation—as if the speaker were indeed talking—with another character or the reader" ("Introduction" 24).

Indeed, the fact that Webster was a dramatist is especially pertinent to the notion that she wanted the reader to perform a role, in essence, rather than to merely observe it. Webster followed the publication of *Portraits* with four dramas written between 1872 and 1887, and as Patricia Rigg notes, "[T]hese plays are… experiments in genre, for they are literary dramas rather than stage dramas" ("'Present'" 110). While *In a Day* was staged once in 1890, it was not well received, perhaps because it privileged intellectuality over action.[36] Historically, literary drama has been perceived as inherently anti-theatrical, as its absence from the stage seems to deliberately avoid the performance and role-play necessary to stage drama. I would contend, however, that literary drama does privilege a specific kind of performance—the *reader's* performance. Since stage drama requires professional actors to

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non-fictional representations of it, which accounts for the "failure" of poets like Swinburne who made no efforts at disguise.

[36] Patricia Rigg offers a detailed account of the staging of this play in "'Present in the Drama': The Literary Drama of Augusta Webster." Staged on May 30, 1890, the play was a "one time matinee at Terry's West End theatre with Margaret Davies Webster in the role of Klydone" (122), Rigg explains. She goes on to establish how Webster might have arranged for this performance and how it was received.

enact the roles involved, a theater audience remains just that: an audience. With literary drama, by contrast, the ability for any character to come "to life" depends solely upon the reader. Although Rigg puzzles over Webster's choice to write in this genre, in that she "would certainly have known that in writing literary drama she could not expect the professional acclaim or the financial gains of a successful stage play" (112), Rigg elsewhere offers a compelling argument about why Webster would make this choice: "Webster was intent on addressing her audience not through [the] performance [of her dramas] but through a textual exchange of ideas 'performed' by the reader on his or her own inner stage" (110). While this is merely a passing observation in an article more focused on the historical details of Webster's dramas, I want to take what Rigg suggests here as literally as possible and apply it to the dramatic monologue: the reader embodies a speaker and performs his or her utterance rather than witnessing the monologue as auditors would.

While this conception of the reader's role is unique within the context of dramatic monologue theory and criticism, it has precedent in discussions of another genre both private and dramatic: closet drama. "Before its associations with gay dramaturgy," Catherine Burroughs explains in *Closet Stages*, "the term 'closet drama' was used to refer to plays that were never intended to be performed on stage or to plays that, for whatever reason, were never acted" (16). In this way, closet drama very closely resembles the dramatic monologue in that, though written in the manner of drama, the dramatic monologue was not intended for public performance. For closet drama, Burroughs explains that this has meant that criticism from the Romantic period onward has typically conceived of the genre as inherently anti-theatrical. However, as Burroughs contends:

> [N]ot only does this dichotomy between reading and performance fail to describe a number of closet plays written and produced during the Romantic period, but it is precisely this opposition between 'literariness' and 'theatricality' that the genre itself deconstructs: written to resemble a play script and therefore implying a potential theatrical performance, the closet makes dramaturgically explicit the bifurcated character of all dramatic literature, tensed between script and live performance. (16)

Burroughs's resistance to the conventional impulse to draw a firm line between reading and performance is one that I share toward a genre that resembles a play script to an even lesser degree than closet drama.

My intention is not to conflate these genres, particularly as the closet was, as Burroughs notes, a specific "architectural feature of the floor plans of eighteenth-century British great houses" (9), the entrances of which were sometimes "even hung with curtains, a feature suggesting a little stage" (11). There is not the same kind of architectural evidence indicating that dramatic monologues were regularly performed in Victorian households, but the comparison is instructive nonetheless. For women who could choose from limited constructions of socially acceptable femininity, genres both private and dramatic allowed a kind of experimentation with identity that would not be possible in public settings. Burroughs explains that the closet provided female readers of the Romantic period "experimental theater in which dramas and gendered identities were conceived and rehearsed" (11), and I argue that the dramatic monologue offered its Victorian readers a similar kind of freedom to experiment, sometimes radically.

It is the particular effect of articulating the "I", which the reader of the dramatic monologue necessarily performs, that creates the potential for more radical experimentation as a reader. As Emile Benveniste has shown, "*I* cannot be defined except in terms of 'locution,' not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies 'the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*'" (218). In other words, because in saying "I," the speaker is always necessarily signifying him or herself, the dramatic monologue invites embodiment and identification in a way that a third-person narrative cannot. That self-signification is, for Charles Altieri, what is uniquely powerful about adopting a speaking voice. In advocating the necessity of students' "sounding" of poetry, Altieri argues:

> Students have to experience the reading of poetry as sensuous indulgence that overflows into the luscious delights of being able to stage ourselves as different identities or at least as having rich

> experiences not readily available for us without the texts. Sounding has to include voicing. (And New Critical talk about the speaker must become talk about the speaking.) For there is no better access to other identities, or to who we become because we can take on other identities, than giving ourselves over to a range of speaking voices. Then we are not watching characters on a screen or a stage; we are actually becoming the voices through which they live. (262)

While lyric poetry lends similar opportunities for the embodiment of other identities, lyric does not signal a voice that is actually meant to be speaking aloud. That is not to say that lyric does not also allow for identification through the adoption of the "I"; I agree with Altieri wholeheartedly. But it is to say that dramatic monologues remain distinctive in that when the reader speaks a dramatic monologue aloud—or "sounds" it in Altieri's usage—he or she is supplying what the genre gestures toward but ultimately lacks in its existence on the page: the audible voice.

Webster employs this specific feature of the dramatic monologue in order to allow and encourage average nineteenth-century readers to inhabit characters like Annunicata and Eulalie, whom they would otherwise be unlikely to intimately know. For Webster's readers, inhabiting the "I" of a nun would be experimental on its own, but Annunciata's monologue pushes the reader to depart from expected notions of what a nun would think and say. Embodying a nun, the reader is made to ask, "Why do I fever so thinking of him?" (230) and "Has God condemned all love except of Him?" (530). More, too, than just ask these dangerous questions, the reader must think longingly of her life prior to the convent, speak contradictions, and undergo troubling visions, all of which call into question society's easy valorization of those dedicating themselves to serving God.

Embodying a prostitute would be even more radical for a reader: as Sutphin observes, "If it was difficult to make a former prostitute the heroine, it was even more difficult to make her the narrator" ("Human Tigresses" 513). The statements that a reader vicariously makes by inhabiting Eulalie's voice pushes even further the reader's limits of identification. Immersed in a culture in which prostitution is "the great social evil," the

reader of "A Castaway" must nonetheless state, "I have looked coolly on my what and why, / And I accept myself" (136-137). Regardless of the reader's own feelings on the matter, the reader of "A Castaway," by inhabiting Eulalie's "I," was made to utter words of acceptance at once toward prostitutes and him or herself alike. Similarly, although prostitutes were regularly framed as being morally depraved in the Victorian period, the reader is made to ask, "Who says I had my choice?" (250). As Susan Brown points out in an examination of "A Castaway" and the Contagious Diseases Acts, Webster's "most powerful and subversive strategy is to merge her poetic voice with the prostitute's first-person speech" (89). Brown continues, "[B]y making Eulalie the speaking subject of her dramatic monologue, [Webster's poem] enacts aesthetically the basic feminist repeal strategy of identification with the prostitute" (92). Whether or not a reader agrees with the prostitute's perspective, the simple act of being made to sympathetically identify and speak words of self-exoneration establishes, if only in a temporary, fictional realm, the idea that a prostitute may not be to blame for her lifestyle.

While inhabiting the "I" necessarily places readers in a position of embodiment and role-play—a position from which sympathy might best be generated—the concrete, humanizing details provided about the characters allow for an even more nuanced experience of an identity other than the reader's own. There are certain habits that cannot be donned or shed easily, and those of a nun and a prostitute are no exceptions. Since to the average, middle-class nineteenth-century woman, those identities would exist at a remove—spatially, of course, but also, we might presume from their point of view, morally—imagining with detail the experiences of a nun or a prostitute beyond the simplifying stereotypes of moral perfection and moral depravity would be a challenge that many women might not even begin to attempt. Because of this, dramatic monologues like "Sister Annunciata" and "A Castaway" that allow a reader to embody and experiment with such distant and thus easily simplified identities do important work in helping readers to grant greater complexity to those identities. For instance, while one might assume that it is a

woman's decision to become a nun and devote herself to God, Sister Annunciata's monologue creates a much more complicated picture of how she ended up in this position. Although she did proclaim at too young an age that she might want to enter the convent, in retrospect, she claims that she "never framed / A set intention" (988-989) and faults her mother and uncle for thinking "it wise to rate as purposes / The fanciful longings of an almost child / Let fall at fluent moments" (930-932). Her monologue goes on to betray, furthermore, a number of doubts about her present position and regrets about having been forced to sacrifice her relationship to Angelo. Although the character is fictional, the concrete details offered in "Sister Annunciata" help to fill in the context of a life to the extent that it feels part of the realm of possibility.

For a Victorian to remain sensitive to the complexities of lived experience was perhaps far more difficult when that experience involved prostitution. Although there were groups during the period that were well aware of links between prostitution and poverty, prostitutes were also regularly and simplistically framed as being morally degenerate. Webster's "A Castaway," however, complicates the assumptions a Victorian audience might have of prostitutes, as Eulalie is a thoughtful, intelligent, and complex character whose narrative reveals a series of unfortunate circumstances that, combined, led her to her current life. Fully aware that "those who need not sin have safer souls" (167), Eulalie yet counters, "We know it, but we've bodies to save too; / And so we earn our living" (168-169). While Eulalie would have been happy to earn her living in a more respectable way, she is also aware of the factual obstacles that employable women must face, noting that "defter hands at white work than are mine / Drop starved at last: dressmakers, milliners, / Too many too they say" (267-269). Add to these economic realities the lack of a useful education, an ungenerous brother, and the loss of her place as a governess, and it is clear that there is a much more complex layer of causes and conditions that contributed to Eulalie's turn to prostitution.

Whether or not this experience of reading actually transformed real readers' attitudes toward prostitution is impossible to say. What can be said, though, is that dramatic

monologues by Webster and other women poets required—through the reader's inhabitation of the speaker's first-person, present voice—a kind of boundary-crossing that was progressive and profound.

The Role of the Artist

Almost all of Webster's dramatic monologues exhibit the pattern I've established, in that their speakers pointedly choose not to gather an audience and instead vocalize their narratives to no one. No statement on what Webster's dramatic monologues suggest about intersubjectivity and connection through communication would be complete, however, without a foray into a little known dramatic monologue from Webster's 1870 *Portraits*. "A Dilettante" depicts a debate between an aesthete and a social reformer that, instead of ending in disillusionment, despair, or tragedy, concludes with a peaceful resolution to live and let live. Because recognition and understanding tend to be the primary goals in other dramatic monologues by women poets, the inability to locate it—or the suspicion that they won't—generally leads to the speaker's unraveling. In this instance, however, Webster imagines a conclusion that is uncommon within the genre: while the speaker may not find recognition from his auditor, he does not take that as an invalidation of his perspective (whether the auditor feels the same is unclear). Rather, the speaker calmly accepts and understands that perfect, harmonious agreement may simply not be possible. Most readers would look to this poem as an exception within Webster's oeuvre—and it certainly is in the sense that the speaker addresses an internal auditor—but the statement this dramatic monologue makes on communication remains in line with Webster's other poems. Try as he might to explain his position, the aesthete realizes, in the end, that mutual understanding may not be achievable.

Published in Webster's *Portraits* in 1870, "A Dilettante" is the only of her monologues in which a character speaks directly to someone he or she disagrees with. The

dramatic monologue portrays two individuals at odds—an artistic dreamer and a social reformer. Although their perspectives remain irreconcilable at the poem's close, this is a unique dramatic monologue in that it ends with a more peaceful agreement to disagree—no crisis, no death. Rather, the artist acknowledges that we cannot know who's right or wrong and as a result should simply let people live how it best suits them. Judgment, at least on the speaker's part, is set aside in favor of a harmonious co-existence of difference.

Because "A Dilettante" has not yet been addressed in criticism on Augusta Webster, a more extended description of the poem is necessary. "A Dilettante" begins mid-debate just after the social reformer, the auditor in this case, has apparently grown upset. "Good friend, be patient," the speaker admonishes, "goes the world awry? / Well, can you grove it straight with all your pains?" (1-2). The speaker obviously thinks not, arguing that the auditor has "waste[d] your part of life / On impotent fool's battles with the winds, / That *will* blow as they list in spite of you" (4-6). Suggesting that "God has made a world that pleases Him" (15), the speaker advocates contentedly appreciating the beauty that surrounds them—a beauty, curiously enough, to which he attributes a voice. "[H]ush and look and listen," he says, "For this noon, / This summer noon, replies 'But be content,' / Speaking in voices of a hundred joys" (18-20). Since they have the opportunity to idly admire their pleasant surroundings, it is "more unreasoning," the speaker contends, "if we make moan / Of miseries and toils and barrenness / Than if we sitting at a feast told tales / Of famines and for the pity of them starved" (43-46). It is silly, he posits, to internalize suffering so much that you end up doubling its presence in the world. And in terms of "evil" that exists in the world, the speaker contends that while an individual might seem evil today, "[t]o-morrow they, or those who follow them, / Will seem another way; and are they changed / Or are the eyes that see them?" (88-90). "Let them be," he concludes, for "[a]re we divine that we should judge and rule?" (90-91).

In the space of the stanza break shortly following this, the auditor apparently protests, as the speaker responds, "Selfish, you call me? callous? Hear a tale" (107). He

proceeds to tell the unconvinced auditor about a small brook that nourished the home of a poor man and his children and allowed a handful of grasses and flowers to grow. When a passerby discovered this "wanton misdirected brook / Watering its useless weeds" (125-126), he was immediately reminded of an "arid waste" nearby that could grow corn, if only it had a supply of water. The man accordingly redirected the brook, but "its small waters could not feed that drought / … so the new bed / Lay dry, and dry the old" (128, 131-132). The point of the speaker's cautionary tale is simple: reforms and efforts, noble as they might initially seem, can often not only fail to help but also do real harm. As a result, the speaker asks the auditor to "let me, like a bird bred in a cage, / That singing its own self to gladness there / Makes some who hear it gladder, take what part / I have been born to and make joy of it" (152-155). Still unconvinced, the auditor accuses (or so the speaker suggests) the speaker of taking life "as a sea-gull takes the sea, / Mere skimmingly" (158-159), but the speaker stands by his desires. "Oh chiding friend, I am not of your kind," he says, "You strenuous souls who cannot think you live / Unless you feel your limbs, though 'twere by aches" (163-165). Instead, he explains, "I am only a small fluttering breeze / To coax the roses open: let me be; / Perhaps I have my use no less than you" (168-170).

Thus, the reader arrives at the last stanza of the poem and perhaps the most unexpected final stanza of a dramatic monologue in all the genre. The speaker closes:

> Ah well! How strange that you and I who tread
> So same a path perceive it so unlike.
> And which sees justly? Maybe both of us:
> Or maybe one of us is colour-blind,
> And sees the tintings blurred, or sees them false,
> Or does not see, so misses what they show.
> Or likelier each of us is colour-blind,
> And sees the world his own way, fit for him:
> Doubtless we afterwards shall understand
> The beauty and the pain are more alike. (171-180)

Forget a dramatic death, tragedy and despair—"A Dilettante" ends with, at least on the speaker's end, a peaceful acknowledgment of their difference and an awareness that perhaps

one or both of their perspectives is flawed. Rather than suggest that recognition and understanding are essential to the human experience, the poem indicates that debate need not always result in harmonious thinking or have a clear winner or loser. Sometimes, people simply disagree.

When Webster, though obviously a poet herself, wrote monologues that highlight social problems and implicitly advocate for social reforms, it is curious that she would choose to embody a dilettante whose arguments, so at odds with what we could assume her own would be, otherwise appear to be level-headed, well-supported, and in the end, fair. What's more, while one might assume upon a first read that the disparagingly labeled "dilettante" of the title refers to the speaker in the convention of most dramatic monologues, this is not necessarily the case.[37] Just as Webster toys with the convention of silent auditors in the genre, so too does she leave ambiguous precisely whom the dilettante is in this scenario. While her own affiliations and history would make the answer seem obvious, her decision to allow an aesthete to speak somewhat convincingly from his perspective is equally counterintuitive to what we would expect Webster to validate. Add to this that there was one precedent for entitling a dramatic monologue after an auditor—Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Bertha in the Lane"—and a reader has plenty of reason to puzzle over this rare and ambiguous specimen of the genre.

Consequently, it is difficult to argue with certainty whose perspective precisely Webster was attempting to support, if either. What is evident, however, is that as different as "A Dilettante" is from "A Castaway," "Sister Annunciata," and many of Webster's other dramatic monologues, there is a connective thread: communication still does not change any of the characters within the poem. Webster's other monologues either exhibit speakers like

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[37] This is, by and large, the overarching convention. Just to name a few examples, the runaway slave is both the speaker and titular character, as are Webster's "Circe," "Medea," "A Preacher," "A Painter," and "A Castaway," not to mention Browning's "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi" and a host of others.

Eulalie who avoid meaningful communication with others entirely—conveying a skepticism about what dialogue can accomplish—or they exhibit speakers like Annunciata whose ability to speak openly and honestly is only possible in isolation—conveying a distrust about the authenticity achievable in dialogue. If considering only these poems, a reader might fault the speakers for their distrust, hoping that if the characters did directly address an audience, the outcome might be more positive than the speakers would anticipate. "A Dilettante," however, offers a glimpse into what, in Webster's imagination, dialogue might accomplish—not, unfortunately, all that much. In "A Dilettante," the lack of successful communication does not have to result in actual or spiritual death or any kind of melodramatic tragedy, as it does in so many of women writers' other monologues. Even so, in the end—or at least in this poem's end—dialogue does not bridge the distance between speaker and auditor, creating neither unification nor any greater agreement on the subject at hand.

This outcome is not, importantly, due to characters who cannot see a world that exists beyond their own myopic perceptions. On the contrary, Webster's speakers always seem to play fair. From Eulalie's statement that "I blame no one—scarcely even myself" (573) to the speaker's question in "A Dilettante," "And which sees justly? Maybe both of us: / Or maybe one of us is colour-blind" (173-174), Webster's speakers tend to possess a healthy skepticism about the ascendancy of their perspectives, understanding that their own points of view might be as flawed as those that they are faulting. Yet even making these judicious acknowledgments does not change the endings Webster offers time and again. If her dramatic monologues make any overarching statement on communication, it is that dialogue cannot alter circumstance or opinion. Whether that's the ending arrived at in a debate poem like "A Dilettante" or whether characters like Eulalie and Annunciata have come to understand that certain things can only be admitted in solitude, a deep disappointment in communication pervades Webster's dramatic monologues.

Such an attitude seems counter to what Webster, given her involvement in social causes and reforms, would realistically hold. Although most of what we know about her

participation in social reforms comes after her publication of *Dramatic Studies* and *Portraits*, Rigg claims that Webster was "actively involved in public feminist activities" from 1872 to 1887 (110), working on the Executive of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage in the 1870s and as an elected member of the London School Board in the 1880s. One would expect that the faith in progress and change necessary to one so committed to social causes would go hand in hand with a faith in dialogue. Yet at least one anecdote challenges such a correlation within her own life: as Elizabeth Lee noted in her entry in the 1899 *Dictionary of National Biography*, "'Mrs. Webster was a working rather than a talking member of the [school] board'" (qtd. in Hickok 340). Indeed, the fact that her monologues exhibit, time and again, a distrust of auditors or an inability to come to agreement when dialogue is to be had suggest that perhaps Webster valued action over talk as a more effective means of change.

When it is a familiar notion to treat literary texts as discourse or speech, the viewpoint that Webster prioritized action over talk—when she made her career as a writer—would seem like a contradiction. However, if we consider the reading experience of the dramatic monologue in the way I've suggested—where reader becomes actor, embodying a marginalized figure and revocalizing her utterance—what this genre enacts is not "talk" at all, even though the genre offers a depiction of the speaking voice. What the dramatic monologue allows is a potentially transformative experience in which the reader's embodiment of a role as an actor becomes its own kind of action. Consequently, Webster's valuation of action over talk in no ways discounts Webster's work as a poet and dramatist. Unlike the aesthete in "A Dilettante," whose observations seem limited in scope to beauty and happiness alone, Webster uses her literary work as an opportunity to explore social injustice in a way that unites art and philanthropy—a synthesis that Aurora Leigh famously came to hold up as poetry's ideal.

CHAPTER III:
"I AM MYSELF, AS EACH MAN IS HIMSELF—": REJECTING PEERS IN AMY LEVY'S "XANTIPPE" AND "A MINOR POET"

In "James Thomson: A Minor Poet," an 1883 essay in *The Cambridge Review*, Amy Levy argued that, in spite of the fact that fame had eluded him, Thomson was a poetic genius. Written shortly after Thomson's death, the essay didactically suggests to Victorian readers that empathy from others might be invaluable to individuals like Thomson who don't naturally integrate into the social fabric. While Levy openly admits that "[the poet] dwells on a view of things which is morbid, nay false, which does not exist for the perfectly healthy human being" (502), she goes on to argue the necessity of understanding an individual like him. "[P]hilosophy teaches us," she claims, "that all things are as real as one another, and as unreal. …The fact that such a state of mind exists is enough; it is one of the phenomena of our world, as true, as false, as worthy, as unworthy of consideration as any other" (502). After conceding Thomson's inadequacies to her audience, she still defends his poetic sensibility and even attempts to inspire empathy for Thomson—and for all human beings—by saying, "[W]hen we consider the dark and narrow circumstances of his lonely life we can only stand aghast. … [I]t is appalling what infinite and exquisite anguish can be suffered by a single human being who is perhaps sitting quietly in his chair before us, or crosses our path in the sunny street and fields" (506).

By using the first person plural, Levy incorporates her readers in this thought experiment about the suffering that can occur in one's midst, and she later suggests that those readers may be capable of helping to alleviate such suffering. After Thomson's death, Levy recounts, "Respectable people shook their heads over him… as they had done in life. It was not to be expected that they could feel such sorrow for a man who, it was averred, had drunk himself to death" (509). Levy admits that empathy is "not to be expected," and

yet, she wonders aloud, "[W]ith due allowance of sunshine, who knows what fruit might have ripened on a soil so rich and deep?" (501). Thus, while Levy remains undecided about what others' empathy might have done for Thomson, and while she remains skeptical as to whether or not empathy is even possible, she alludes throughout this essay to the potential difference such recognition and understanding might have made for his life—and perhaps her own, one cannot help but note, given her own melancholia and eventual suicide.

Indeed, Levy was a multiply marginalized figure in Victorian London, outside of so many cultural majorities that the alienation she felt is entirely accountable. Aside from the contentious debates about the "Woman Question" that Levy was implicated in by dint of her gender and desire for social and intellectual mobility, Levy's identity as a Jew was vexed for multiple reasons. Although biographer Linda Hunt Beckman asserts that *Reuben Sachs* is meant to expose "Jewish self-hatred" rather than to convey it, Levy's novel was "perceived as an attack on the Jewish community" (Beckman, "Leaving" 185). Whatever Levy's intentions might have been with this text, however, Beckman does contend that other stories and illustrations Levy generated indicated an "ambivalen[ce] in her attitude toward her people" (189). Levy's relationship with her own religious community was strained, furthermore, as a result of her intellectual aspirations. The first Jewish woman to attend Newnham College, Levy "was an emancipated Jewish woman," Beckman explains, "at a time when most Jewish women's lives were even more traditional than those of their gentile sisters" (8). On top of such obstacles with her religious community, there is a prevailing ambiguity surrounding Levy's sexuality,[38] and Levy experienced some physical disability as

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[38] While Deborah Epstein Nord acknowledged in 1990 that among the group of New Women she was friends with, Levy "was the most overtly ambivalent about the sexual identification of her public persona" (747), Nord argued that Levy's "conventional love lyrics do not at all give [the impression she was a lesbian]" (758). Sixteen years later, however, Alex Goody identified Levy as a "Jewish, feminist, lesbian writer" (461) without footnote or afterthought. Although no evidence of romantic relationships exist, both Rebecca Shapiro's *DLB* entry on Levy as well as Linda Hunt Beckman's biography indicate that she "developed an intense crush on the headmistress, Edith Creak" of the Brighton High School for Girls (Shapiro 135) and that "[b]oth Levy's letters and poems indicate that Levy fell in love with Vernon Lee" (Beckman 121). Beckman cautions, though,

well, "frequently mention[ing] her increasing deafness" (92) throughout the 1880s. The degree to which belonging to such a number of minority groups affects any given individual might be difficult to say, but it is clear, at least at moments during her life, that Levy was well aware of her status as an outsider. Beckman claims that the poems Levy wrote while at Newnham "show that Levy was concerned… about becoming distinctly different from most people—whom she saw as living satisfactory lives of conformity, a life she did not want but was afraid to give up" (54).

Such an excessively marginalized existence may well explain Levy's impulse to imagine—to empathize with, I would say—James Thomson's experience and encourage others to do the same. It may also explain why such attempts to imagine another's experience occur repeatedly throughout Levy's lifetime. Beckman offers anecdotes of Levy's girlhood and teenage years that presage this desire, observing that "[i]n childhood and adolescence Levy lived to a considerable extent in a world of her own construction and enjoyed inventing various characters—personae—that she used as voices" (59-60). Beckman also notes that in an unpublished verse play, Levy pokes fun at "the extraordinary failure of the imagination" that leads an egotistical male character to be oblivious to what the female characters want (39). The ability to imagine others' lives and the related ability to empathize with others, then, is a skill in Levy's construction with which some are gifted and others are not. Levy's compulsion to empathize with others is evident even in the subjects Levy later chooses for her dramatic monologues, subjects whose histories of marginalization and thwarted desires erupt in desperate utterances that precede death. "Xantippe. A Fragment" takes on the eponymous heroine's historical reputation as Socrates's shrewish wife, a reputation which has limited any fuller understanding of who she was. Similarly, in

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that "one must always take into account the wide latitude society permitted women in their feelings for one another" (31).

"A Minor Poet," said to be based on James Thomson,[39] Levy dramatizes the struggles of a writer who has not gained the kind of recognition and immortality achieved by his idols, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Heine.

Levy's propensity to empathize indicates that she puts stock in the *potential* effects of the imagination, but her dramatic monologues stage bitter communicative impasses typical of the examples of the genre already examined. Although in scholarship on these poems, critics can be quick to place blame for the communicative failures in Levy's monologues upon the auditors, I contend that regardless of their desire to connect with their audiences, neither Xantippe nor the Poet wholly trust their listeners. When Xantippe's maids weep, she dismisses their tears, believing them to be self-centered. Likewise, when Tom Leigh, the Poet's "friend" whose philosophic views radically oppose the Poet's own, speaks in the Epilogue of "A Minor Poet," his words suggest that he cared about and understood the Poet far more than the Poet gave him credit for. Such evidence ultimately suggests that Xantippe and the Poet's communicative failures occur not for lack of a potentially empathetic audience, but because of their inability to believe fully in the empathy they seek.

"Xantippe" and "A Minor Poet" heighten the sting of these failures, however, by rejecting not just empathy, or identification based on the imagined experience of another, but also sympathy, or identification based on like experiences. While Xantippe and the Poet's auditors are different enough from them that any identification would have to be, in part, empathetic, they also have more in common with the speakers than is often true in dramatic monologues. Xantippe's maids, after all, have no better options in life than she did, and the Poet addresses a young man as interested in philosophic debate as himself. Such similarities would seem to allow the speakers and auditors of these dramatic monologues a more certain means of connection than that which empathy can promise—might allow, in

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[39] As Karen Weisman claims, "*A Minor Poet* does not name its protagonist, but it is clear (and would have been clear to a Victorian audience) that Levy has James Thomson, BV, in mind as an allusive point of reference" (62).

other words, sympathy to grow out of shared or similar experiences. Yet Levy's speakers suggest that not even sympathy is enough to mitigate isolation, and they accordingly resist all face-to-face identification. The suspicion that neither empathy nor sympathy is possible ultimately enables Xantippe and the Minor Poet to turn their backs, at decisive moments, on their auditors and to instead chalk up their frustrated marginal existences to Fate's doing.

The inability of Levy's characters—and Levy herself, I would add—to trust in all face-to-face identification, including sympathy, complicates my contention that poets of the dramatic monologue intended to elicit sympathetic identification with the marginal speakers they depicted through the reader's inhabitation of the first-person voice of the genre. Curiously, though, Levy does retain a faith in the unique power of reading first-person narratives to establish such sympathetic connections. There is a crucial difference between face-to-face sympathetic identification and that engendered by reading: that of the body. Because reading removes the obstacle of distinct physical bodies as the reader gives her body to the voice on the page, speaker and reader vocally and physically collapse in a way that can never be accomplished face to face. Thus, first-person narratives generate a kind of embodied sympathy distinct from face-to-face sympathy and consequently remain a conduit for the successful circulation of sympathy through reading.

While Levy remained optimistic about the ability of reading to generate sympathy, however, the evocation of it was, from her perspective, neither a guarantee of nor a stand-in for identification between real bodies in a real world. Identifying emotionally with a fictional other might be entirely possible in the privacy of one's own drawing room, but transferring this ideal into the real world becomes a much trickier prospect—a concern about the factual limitations of existence that Levy could never entirely divorce from her poetic fictions. Consequently, Levy's fictions repeatedly end in death, sometimes even in suicidal death, and presage her own incredibly personal investment in this issue. Since death removes the obstacle of the sensorial body, it could on the one hand allow for the extension of sympathy in a way that Levy otherwise finds impossible between real bodies in the real world. On the

other, because death also removes a body's conscious ability to receive sympathy, living beings who are moved to feel such emotions are left not with a feeling of connection but rather with a short-circuited emotional burden—precisely how Levy herself felt in response to James Thomson's death. Thus, while reading remains an avenue for identification in Levy's work, she ultimately fails to see how the sympathy it engenders travels anywhere but down a dead end.

Gather 'Round, Insensitive Auditors

Although Levy's work has gained critical traction in recent years, [40] "Xantippe" and "A Minor Poet" have by no means become canonical touchstones. To briefly set the stage, then: although it is not clear that Xantippe has tried committing suicide,[41] she unexpectedly awakens from a "troubled sleep" she thought would bring her death: "What, have I waked again? I never thought / To see the rosy dawn, or ev'n this grey, / Dull, solemn stillness, ere the dawn has come" (1-3). Xantippe's monologue is spurred by the very dreams that troubled her, recalling the happy, optimistic days of her youth in which her "vague desires" and "eager longings" (30-31)[42] for "knowledge, for a tongue / That should proclaim the stately mysteries / Of this fair world, and of the holy gods" (38-40) had not yet been

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[40] The *MLAB* offers Melvyn New's edition of Levy's selected works, published in 1993, as the first entry on Levy. Yet the years since have given rise to a number of articles on Levy's novels and poems, and she figures as a primary author in several recent dissertations on women's poetry—Laura Marie Williams' "'I, Writing Thus': Victorian Women Poets Write the Dramatic Monologue" (1999), Kasey Baker's "Gender, Genre, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue" (2008), Susan Jane Soroka's "'She Who Did This Thing Was Born to Do It'" (2008), and Helen Luu's "Impossible Speech" (2008).

[41] Karen Weisman calls both Xantippe and the Poet "suicidal speakers" (60), and while this is indisputably true of the Poet, it is not clear that Xantippe has attempted to take her own life. While suicide is a potential explanation as to why she did not expect to awaken, Xantippe never directly describes or refers to a suicide attempt.

[42] For ease of reference, quotations and line numbers from the poems will be taken from Melvyn New's *The Complete Works and Selected Writings of Amy Levy*.

checked by her realization that "Nature meant / So little, who had promised me so much" (131-132). Unfulfilled by her "maiden labour" (36) and unable to take part in the "merry mockeries" (33) of her companions, Xantippe comes to appreciate her arranged marriage to Sokrates.[43] Attracted by his "[g]reat voice, whose cunning modulations seemed / Like to the notes of some sweet instrument" (83-84), Xantippe hopes to find in him an intellectual education and companion. Despite her desire, Sokrates and his circle give no thought to women, excepting the "fair Aspasia," driving Xantippe to lash out in their midst in the climactic moment of the poem, only to be shunned and silenced by Sokrates' sarcastic response: "'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?'" (206-209). Defeated, Xantippe afterwards tries to repress all desire, becoming the "household vessel" (237) Sokrates wishes and the grave and severe mistress to the women to whom she now speaks.

The Minor Poet's life is equally defined by perceived isolation, an isolation that drives him to drink poison immediately before the moment in which "A Minor Poet" opens: "Here is the phial; here I turn the key / Sharp in the lock. Click!—there's no doubt it turned" (1-2). The initiation of this suicide attempt leads the Poet to relive his thwarted former attempts, after the first of which, his "friend," Tom Leigh, had lectured him about the "common good" and minimized the Poet's despair by setting it against the weight of collective suffering. In this third attempt, with Tom now absent, the Poet can apostrophize unchallenged and proclaims that our own individual sensations are all that we feel, making the collective far too great an abstraction. Feeling apart, as the Poet does—"[a] blot, a blur, a note / All out of tune in this world's instrument" (50-51)—he cannot identify with the

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[43] Levy utilizes, according to Linda K. Hughes, George Grote's "transliteration of Greek names" (276n10) in her spelling of Sokrates, though she "retains the popular English spelling of Xantippe." Hughes notes that Levy's "motives are uncertain. Possibly her transliteration represents another mediation between professionalism and popular tradition; possibly her Englishing of Xantippe suggests a modern construct embedded within a classical context" (276n10).

"thousands" that Tom invokes, and as a result, one's "joy or grief" in the Poet's eyes is no "small thing" but everything. The Poet's despair stems, in part, from his frustrated desire to write; saying goodbye to all the authors he loves, the Poet jealously mentions one contemporary, crying, "At least, he has a voice to cry his pain; / For him, no silent writhing in the dark, / No muttering of mute lips" (94-96). His chief emotion throughout this monologue is anger, blaming God for the feast he has asked Mankind to, only to reveal that "[t]here are not seats for all! … One man gets meat for two, / The while another hungers" (141-145). In his final moments, the Poet grows more peaceful and reflects on the one thing that might have made a difference in his life, remembering a woman who "did not break my heart, / Yet haply had her heart been otherwise / Mine had not now been broken" (162-164). Knowing that such thoughts can no longer matter, the Poet accepts his end with three unadorned sentences: "I only crave for rest; / Too heavy is the load. I fling it down" (170-171).

Levy makes an unusual move in "A Minor Poet," though, by including an Epilogue to the Poet's monologue. In it, Tom relates what occurs after the Poet's death, making the poem essentially two juxtaposed dramatic monologues.[44] Tom recounts how he and some unidentified others enter the Poet's rooms and "found him as you know—the outstretched arms / Propping the hidden face" (173-174).[45] Noting that "[t]here was no written word to

[44] It is important to note that this unusual move may not seem to fit generically within the bounds of the dramatic monologue. Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor's explanation of auditors in the dramatic monologue accurately exhibits the boundaries critics have set for the genre: "In real speech, the auditor of a narrative will always have the opportunity to respond to the relevance of the speaker's discourse—even if not to his face. This is obviously impossible in the dramatic monologue, which begins and ends with that discourse" (292). Levy's challenge to this norm is telling, in that she was clearly dissatisfied in some cases to allow the auditor to remain unheard and invested in exploring differences of perspective.

[45] The "you" in this line is quite provocative—either Tom, too, has his own auditor in the Epilogue of this poem (although an auditor's presence is not conclusively evident here in the same way it is for Xantippe and the Poet), or Levy means for him to address the reader. Of course, the reader does not know the physical position of the Poet's body as the address assumes; only a theatrical audience would know a such a visual detail not made explicit in the text itself. This moment, then, toys with the generic line between poetry and drama, emphasizing the dramatic possibilities of printed text.

say farewell, / Or make more clear the deed" (176-177), Tom catalogs the contents of his home to search for some clues that will allow him to construct his own narrative of what has occurred. What Tom and the others find, though, are mere fragments:

> The room held little: just a row of books
> Much scrawl'd and noted; sketches on the wall,
> Done rough in charcoal; the old instrument
> (A violin, no Stradivarius)
> He played so ill on; in the table drawer
> Large schemes of undone work. Poems half-writ;
> Wild drafts of symphonies; big plans of fugues;
> Some scraps of writing in a woman's hand… (178-185)

Summing up these various objects left behind, Tom calls them "the scattered pages of a tale, / A sorry tale that no man cared to read" (186-187).

Based on what the reader learns about the maids' and Tom's responses to Xantippe and the Poet, neither audience *seems* to be an ideal one for the characters' utterances. Xantippe accuses her maids of being neglectful of and insensitive to her needs from the beginning of her utterance. When Xantippe wakes at the monologue's opening, it is a surprise, but her maids seem to little heed the fact that she is dying; they are neither attentive nor physically near. Xantippe must ask them initially to "Come hither, maids" (8) and then remarks, "too soundly have ye slept / That should have watched me" (8-9). It is clearly problematic that the maids are sleeping while their mistress dies, but that they sleep "soundly" emphasizes their complete lack of concern with Xantippe's position. Thus, from the initial lines of the monologue, the auditors are framed as being remiss in their duties and insensible of Xantippe's needs.

Furthermore, despite Xantippe's moving description of her struggles as Sokrates' wife, the maids seem to remain callous at the monologue's end. When the dawn arrives and Xantippe faces her final moments, her final lines of the monologue read as follows:

> 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! (275-279)

Helen Luu asserts that in "[g]limpsing the dawn, Xantippe turns away from her auditors and from any further recollection of her past" (147), but much as she would like to, Xantippe cannot fully turn away from them even in these final moments precisely because she needs their help. Yet it is apparent here that the maids cannot anticipate Xantippe's needs; they are not mentally or emotionally in sync with her even though they have just heard the painful narrative of her life. And even setting emotions aside, they seem reluctant to carry out a simple request to open the window. Xantippe must urge them to be "quick" and implies with her "why tarry?" that they are unresponsive to the urgency Xantippe feels. Had they understood Xantippe's utterance, they would know that the two things that she desires at her life's end—air and light—are not simply literal needs but rather symbolic substitutes for the freedom and illumination that would signal that her life has been understood and validated, a motif that also, as noted, appears in Levy's essay on James Thomson two years later. The fact that Xantippe is dependent upon her maids for the literal fulfillment of this dying request suggests that the metaphorical fulfillment is also something she cannot acquire on her own. The poem makes Xantippe dependent upon her auditors, in other words, for deeply spiritual and emotional needs, yet it is frankly unclear at the poem's close whether or not Xantippe's dying request is satisfied by auditors who seem, at least through some of the indications the reader receives of their behavior, unmoved.

The Poet's imagined audience within the poem—his philosopher-friend, Tom Leigh—seems to be similarly unmoved by the Poet. Although the Poet, in the moment of his utterance, speaks to no one, he apostrophizes to Tom throughout his monologue and thus posits him as an auditor, invoking their earlier disagreement about the significance of the individual in relation to society. While Tom is an advocate of the "common good," arguing "what a small thing was our joy or grief / When weigh'd with that of thousands" (17-18), the Poet holds that human experience is essentially individual. Thinking of our commonalities does not minimize or alter, in the Poet's mind, his own particular sufferings.

Even though Tom is not physically present, the Poet fantasizes and dramatizes this previous conversation to the point that he says to Tom, "You shake your head" (34). The fact that the Poet conjures up Tom's physical presence, sees him bodily denying his words in this vision just as Tom had denied them in reality emphasizes that the Poet for all intents and purposes perceives himself as having a listener, and an unfeeling one at that.

This apparently insensitive response on Tom's part is only underscored by the poem's bitter and surprising Epilogue. As Cynthia Scheinberg points out, by ending with Tom Leigh's words, which the Poet earlier disavowed, the Poet's voice is silenced. As Tom remarks in the final lines, "I had deem'd him more philosopher; / For did he think by this one paltry deed / To cut the knot of circumstance, and snap / The chain which binds all being?" (204-207). Having argued against this position earlier and having committed suicide in a blatant attempt to snap that very chain, the Poet's perspective becomes submerged behind the fact that Tom gets to speak again, and without opposition. As Scheinberg remarks, Tom's final lines, "powerful in that they are the 'last word' on the minor poet before he dissolves into historical obscurity, work to recast and indeed erase the poet's own words, which clearly asserted that he did not believe there was a 'chain which binds all being'" (183). Furthermore, I would add, Tom's characterization of the Poet's suicide as a "paltry deed" belittles what could be perceived as the Poet's only successful attempt at communicating his suffering. Just as at the end of "Xantippe," the reader is left at the close of "A Minor Poet" with an auditor who seems not only unmoved but unaware that his lack of understanding is at all problematic.

All of this evidence would seem to indisputably point to the idea that the auditors in these poems fail the speakers—fail to listen, fail to empathize, and fail to recognize the speakers as subjects. Indeed, such a conclusion is one to which critics of Levy's poems have already come. As Cynthia Scheinberg observes, "In most of [Levy's] dramatic monologues, the auditor is unable to identify with the speaker and so often misses the larger point that the speaker attempts to make" (180). Karen Weisman makes a similar insinuation when she asks

of Levy's dramatic monologues, "What does it mean to situate an audience… that of necessity misconstrues the speaker and that speaker's place in his or her world?" (65). Both critics suggest, in these excerpts, that the blame for the failed communication falls on the auditors' shoulders. The auditors are the ones who "[miss] the larger point that the speaker attempts to make" and who "[misconstrue] the speaker."

Such an argument, however, neglects to account for the biased ways in which the speakers mediate their auditors' responses, ignoring glimmers of empathetic response that the auditors in both poems exhibit. The lopsided access to vocalization characteristic of the genre makes it difficult to read both parties fairly in dramatic monologues with auditors, as the lack of vocal response imposed by the genre necessarily obscures the auditors' perspectives on the speaker's utterance. As Loy D. Martin puts it, "[T]he genre contains a built-in ambivalence toward the responding listener. The listener's ability to respond is always 'there' in the consciousness of the speaker, either as potential or as realized fact, but it cannot be 'there' in the dramatic monologue" (132). To readers, silent auditors function as—to borrow a phrase from H. Porter Abbott—"unreadable minds," however perfectly the speakers might think that they understand those auditors.[46] Consequently, the auditors' silence and the genre's "built-in ambivalence" toward them make interpreting their role extremely difficult—or rather far too easy. Often treated as scapegoats who represent society's wrongs, auditors are made to shoulder all the blame for the communicative malfunctions often dramatized in the monologue. And yet, since they cannot speak for themselves in the same way, here, that Xantippe or the Minor Poet can, it becomes all the more necessary to pay careful attention to what little the poems offer us about these "failed" auditors and to hear them out, so to speak, as much as we are permitted.

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[46] I am taking liberties with Abbott's term here, as he uses "unreadable minds" to describe characters in primarily twentieth-century literature whom neither characters within the story nor readers can accurately interpret based on a lack of information about them. Although the speakers of dramatic monologues generally do know—or think they can divine—what their auditors are thinking and feeling, for *readers*, auditors remain largely "unreadable" since, in most cases, all of our information about them is mediated by speakers whose perspectives are not necessarily reliable.

To suggest that it is solely the auditors' fault for the failures in communication and identification is to ignore the evidence that these auditors do exhibit promising glimmers of empathetic response, a fact which has not been critically acknowledged. When faced with these moments of potential identification, however, it is Xantippe and the Poet who seem unable to trust in this potential and take the leap of faith that a dependence upon empathy would require. In "Xantippe," for instance, it is simply incorrect to state that the maids are wholly unresponsive to Xantippe's narrative. Toward the end of her monologue, after telling the maids that Sokrates' only concern for her when faced with his death-sentence was "that her body should not starve" (265), Xantippe remarks, "You weep, you weep" (266). Xantippe here reveals that her maids are not only listening to her but responding physically to her words. The quality or cause of these tears is difficult for the reader to discern, given that the maids do not speak for themselves, but at the very least, it is clear that they are crying.

Instead of being touched or moved by this potential display of empathy, however—instead of being at all curious about what reason the maids can offer for their tears—Xantippe immediately rejects what could be an indication that she has indeed communicated her narrative successfully. Directly after her observation that "you weep," Xantippe entreats:

> 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."
> Enough, enough. In vain, in vain, in vain! (266-272)

At the first sign that her narrative might be affecting her auditors, Xantippe obstructs the possibility of empathy by wishing that the maids not weep and suggesting that their tears are self-centered, that they are merely using Xantippe's failures as lessons for themselves.[47]

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[47] Helen Luu does characterize this moment as a "rejection of [Xantippe's] maids' response" but reads this as "Levy's exploration of her personal-poetic fears about readerly misinterpretation" (151). I do not disagree with this observation, though I read Levy as being self-

Here, Xantippe puts metaphors into their mouths, appropriating their own voices in such a way that offers no resistance but instead plays into Xantippe's conception of herself and her relationship with the maids. Rather than imagine that her maids could respond in any authentic manner, Xantippe assigns them bland platitudes by which they self-comfortingly differentiate their narrative trajectories from her own. Using metaphors of stunted physical progress—a growing plant, withered; a sailing ship, shattered—Xantippe likens the maids' concern for her to Sokrates's: that she is merely a body or "vessel" whose physical preservation or dissolution is all there is to know about her. Such metaphors are out of sync, of course, with the more metaphysical metaphors Xantippe uses for herself. In speaking to Sokrates, for instance, Xantippe says she was like "some slight bird, who sings her burning love / To human master, till at length she finds / Her tender language wholly misconceived" (136-138). Her body might be whole, might even be doing its work as though nothing is amiss, and yet that doesn't mean she has not withered or shattered inside.

After this moment, Xantippe then proceeds to put an end to her own narrative, assuming that her words have been ineffective and pointless. "Ha!," she observes, "the dawn has come; / I see a rosy glimmer—nay, it grows dark" (275-276)—and the poem ends

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aware of her fears. She may worry about "readerly misinterpretation," but I argue that she is simultaneously aware of the way in which such fears might prevent individuals from being open to potentially empathetic identification. Luu, on the other hand, takes Cynthia Scheinberg's reading of this moment as accurate, who contends 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" and continues by positing that "[Levy] has Xantippe voice the apparent truth behind the myth of sympathetic identification: even other women will not identify with her experience, but on the contrary, will work to differentiate themselves from her misfortune" (181-182).

The issue Scheinberg addresses here is of essential importance—so central, in fact, to the monologue that quibbling with her language is not simply splitting hairs. In this passage, Scheinberg again suggests that the auditors are culpable for this communicative failure, casting Xantippe's distrust of her auditors as legitimate and the possibility of "sympathetic identification" as a myth. She also conflates Xantippe's voice with Levy's, insinuating that Levy is simply using Xantippe as a vehicle for verbalizing an "apparent truth" about communication—that apparent truth being that auditors, or at least Xantippe's auditors, are simply unwilling or unable to see themselves in a marginalized speaker. I agree that Xantippe—as well as the Poet, I would add—do not trust their auditors' interpretations of their stories, but I contend that though Levy may share a skepticism toward the efficacy of communication, her attitude is more complex than that which she creates for the speakers of these poems.

with Xantippe's chastisement of the maids' silence and her plea that they open the window. Certainly Xantippe's dismissive assumptions about her maids' responses to her narrative are potentially accurate, but it is equally plausible that she is misreading their tears. She leaves no space for the possibility that they might actually be identifying with her, instead interpreting their tears as insensitive and essentially failing, herself, to offer an empathetic hand in return.

In "A Minor Poet," it is curiously the speaker's decision to apostrophize to Tom rather than address him directly suggests that the Poet, too, desires to be understood by another. Because the Poet has tried to argue with Tom in the past—and unsuccessfully so—he wants instead in this moment to win the argument, to feel validated rather than rebuked. Since, as I established earlier, Tom appears to have failed to understand the Poet's position and beliefs, the only way the Poet can gain the kind of victory and validation he longs for is to have an auditor not just mute to the readers but one that is genuinely silent. It is only through such silence that the Poet can raise Tom's objections and counterarguments while handily shooting them down. For instance, when the Poet imagines Tom's opposition to his philosophy, he argues, "You shake your head. I'm base, / Ignoble? Who is noble—you or I? / *I was not once thus?* Ah, my friend, we are / As the Fates make us" (34-37, original emphasis).[48] His series of questions clearly create an imagined dialogue first, by repeating Tom's part of the conversation and second, by asking him questions in return. The Poet's objective in constructing this imaginary dialogue with Tom, though, is not to engage in a fair debate but rather to feel, through a lack of objections, that his perspective has been recognized and understood. By arguing with Tom without Tom present, the Poet can finally

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[48] Although New's edition punctuates the line "*I was not once thus!"* with an exclamation point, the first edition of *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* shows the line as "*I was not once thus?"* with a question mark. While retaining New's line numbers, I have used the original question mark above. This is obviously a significant discrepancy in that the original again implies an imagined dialogue (suggesting that the Poet is repeating and countering Tom's accusation that he "was not once thus"), while the punctuation in New's edition implies that it is the Poet who emphatically argues that he has not always been this way.

triumph over Tom's philosophy of the common good and allow his own viewpoint to win the day.

Needless to say, the ways in which the Poet characterizes Tom through these moments of apostrophe construct a seemingly unfeeling "friend"—one who refuses to set aside his philosophies for a moment, even if it means further alienating a human being whose struggles have already led him to attempt suicide. And yet, as Xantippe's interpretation of her maids cannot be verified as accurate, so too is the Poet's version of Tom filtered through his own perspective. While we do not, however, have the maids' side of the story against which to test Xantippe's reading, we do have Tom's response in the Epilogue of "A Minor Poet," and it is an illuminating one. After describing what he and the others found in the Poet's room when they entered, Tom remarks:

> Alas, my friend, I lov'd him well, tho' he
> Held me a cold and stagnant-blooded fool,
> Because I am content to watch, and wait
> With a calm mind the issue of all things.
> Certain it is my blood's no turbid stream;
> Yet, for all that, haply I understood
> More than he ever deem'd; nor held so light
> The poet in him. (188-195)

He does end the poem, to be fair, with the same philosophic lecture the Poet fought so vehemently against in the beginning. Tom "had deem'd him more philosopher; / For did he think by this one paltry deed / To cut the knot of circumstance, and snap / The chain which binds all being?" (203-206). However, his comments preceding this are really quite understanding, given Tom's plainly different perspective on the world. While not imagining the Poet's feelings per se, Tom does imagine how the Poet sees him, attempting on some level to put himself in the Poet's place.

Tom's awareness that, to the Poet, he seems a "cold and stagnant-blooded fool" and his admission that his "blood's no turbid stream" indicate that he is clearly not oblivious to the major differences between them. Tom's recognition of those differences is key. Though he understands that the Poet thinks him foolhardy, Tom maintains his philosophic position,

indicating that he has thought about the Poet's claims and that his difference of opinion is founded on conviction rather than myopia. He is not merely "wag[ging his] philosophic tongue" (19) without reason or belief, as the poet accuses; instead, his awareness of the Poet's disapproval and yet adherence to his beliefs gives Tom's character some depth that the Poet fails to attribute to him. Moreover, despite their differences, Tom still says he "loved" the Poet and "understood" and respected him to what degree he was able. Whether or not these sentiments are enough to redeem Tom in the reader's eyes, Tom here seems to be exhibiting far more understanding in the Poet's direction than the Poet ever gives to him. As a result, the portrait of Tom via the Poet and the portrait of Tom in the Epilogue give us very different Toms—one not at all empathetic and one partially so. Whatever empathy Tom might have offered to the Poet, however, goes unexplored and untapped because the Poet chooses to read Tom in a way that reinforces his own alienation and marginality.

It is not only Tom's surprisingly sensitive reaction to the Poet's death that illustrates that the Poet might not have been as receptive to forging a connection with Tom as his attempt to communicate with him would imply. It is also the Poet's solipsistic understanding of existence—which he reveals during his monologue—that indicates how utterly isolating he perceives the human experience to be. Remembering Tom's assertion that the "common good" was far more significant than any individual concerns we might have, the Poet declares:

> I am myself, as each man is himself—
> Feels his own pain, joys his own joy, and loves
> With his own love, no other's. Friend, the world
> Is but one man; one man is but the world.
> And I am I, and you are Tom, that bleeds
> When needles prick your flesh (mark, yours, not mine). (21-26)

Although Tom barged into the Poet's quarters and saved him during previous suicide attempts—meaning that the Poet did not exactly invite those encounters—the fact that the Poet invokes Tom during this final monologue would suggest that he does, ostensibly, want

to communicate. And yet the philosophy he reveals in this passage illustrates that he perceives the human experience to be highly individual. Although two people might feel pain or joy or love, their experience, the Poet emphatically observes, is not shared. The tautological redundancy throughout the passage reveals as much: from the grammatically nonsensical construction of "joys his own joy" to the epanadosic formulation of "the world is but one man…" to the both nonsensical and palindromic "I am I, and you are Tom," the Poet cannot seem to escape from a language that collapses on itself. The philosophy illustrated in both the content and language of this passage would seem to render the act of communication pointless, for whatever commonalities are discovered or connections forged, human beings—as the Poet has it—are ultimately alone.

Indeed, the Poet's assertion that there is nothing "common" about our experience—that even sharing an experience such as being pricked by a needle still results in separately feeling and bleeding bodies—indicates that he does not even trust *sympathy* as a means of connection. Even if two people love or suffer or bleed under very similar circumstances, the resulting sensations are always only one's "own"—"yours, not mine," as the Poet emphasizes, or vice versa. This is a troubling perspective, as it calls into question both the effectiveness of imaginative empathy *and* of sympathy drawn from personal experience. Rather than believe that their auditors could identify with them in any possible manner, Xantippe and the Poet dismiss the very individuals they summon, asserting through their actions that the self necessarily exists in isolation, a proverbial island.

Although there is enough evidence in "Xantippe" and "A Minor Poet" to establish that the speakers in both poems perceive their auditors as insensitive, Levy complicates the speakers' perspectives by uncovering and exploring their own culpability in these communicative failures as well, making them distrustful of both empathy *and* sympathy. While it is nice to think that experience can be transferred simply by having an audience receptive to that experience, the tensions inherent in "Xantippe" and "A Minor Poet" expose the fallacy of this thinking. It is possible that the auditors' potential moments of

identification in both monologues do not exist, but we never get to find out because of both Xantippe and the Poet's inability to believe that empathy or sympathy through successful communication is possible. Initiating an exchange in which they seem to desire transformation, Xantippe and the Poet instead reject the possibility of it, choosing endings that befit the narrative trajectories of their lives.

Fate, Fixed Plotlines, and Barriers to Identification

The communicative failures Levy dramatizes in "Xantippe" and "A Minor Poet" are as much the fault of Xantippe and the Poet, I've suggested, as they are of the auditors who listen to them. Yet it remains to be seen why, when the possibility of connection with others is within reach, Levy's speakers each decide to turn inward, shutting out their auditors and abandoning communication. In the case of Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and "Bertha in the Lane," I suggested that the trope of the deathbed narrative so common in Victorian fiction was not an adequate conception of the monologues. While death is one very possible ending for both speakers, their monologues are attempts to open up alternative outcomes for themselves—outcomes that the auditors have equal hand in determining. The same thing cannot be said of Levy's Xantippe and the Poet, who, though they engage with a real or imagined audience, see no other options for themselves except a certain and pitiable death. Thinking she would have been dead by now, Xantippe instead wakes by chance and speaks to the maids who are simply present at the time, her narrative illuminated by "Death, holding high his retrospective lamp" (126). The same is true of the Poet, who reveals early in his monologue that "[t]his is the third time" he has attempted suicide; the Poet knows, however, that this time is different. He locks the door and proclaims, "[T]here is luck in threes."

Peter Brooks, by way of Walter Benjamin, has articulated one of the operative realities of narrative: "If in Benjamin's thesis …, 'Death is the sanction of everything that

the storyteller can tell,' it is because it is at the moment of death that life becomes *transmissible*" (28, original emphasis). Echoing Montaigne's assertion (who echoes Aristotle's line of inquiry) that no man may be called happy until the nature of his death is known, Brooks contends that a narrative is never complete until the ending has occurred since "only the end can finally determine meaning" (22). This observation has important ramifications for Levy's dramatic monologues, in that both Xantippe and the Poet feel sandwiched between an unexpected return from death and an anticipated actual death. Such a small window of time allows little possibility for a plot twist that would restructure the way in which they read their own life-narratives. Their lives, in other words, have nearly become stories, the plots recorded and unchangeable.

The drive toward death alone, though, cannot sufficiently explain Xantippe and the Poet's inability to trust in their auditors, when the finality of an oncoming death can prompt misguided characters to apologize, forgive, or assert religious faith and to die subsequently surrounded by a loving and supportive community of family and friends. Such a moment of conversion is made impossible in Levy's dramatic monologues because Xantippe and the Poet's awareness of imminent death operates in tandem with their inability to dissociate their present and future from their past. In his explanation of "narrative transaction and transference," Brooks explores the links between Freud's concept of the transference and narrative.[49] For individuals like Xantippe and the Poet, scarred by past identities of failure or rejection, what psychoanalysis would attempt to accomplish is a "more precise and orderly recollection of the past, no longer compulsively repeated, insistently reproduced in the present, but ordered as a retrospective narrative" (227). While a successful analysis would "[lead] from this claim of identity to a revised one" (228), these results are not easy to

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[49] Transference is defined, in psychoanalysis, as "a process of actualization of unconscious wishes. Transference uses specific objects and operates in the framework of a specific relationship established with these objects. Its context *par excellence* is the analytic situation. In the transference, infantile prototypes re-emerge and are experienced with a strong sensation of immediacy" (Laplanche 455).

achieve. There is a "core resistance with which the transference must deal," Brooks continues, which is the "analysand's insistence on the continuing force of his identity as established in the past."[50]

Both Xantippe and the Poet exhibit this core resistance to transference, a resistance made most evident by their attribution of the direction of their lives to Fate. Rather than believe they are the writers of their own destinies—rather than see the present moment, fleeting though it may be, as an actual opportunity for transformation—both Xantippe and the Poet read their existences as predetermined. Xantippe tells her maids of her younger years "[e]re I had learnt to grasp the barren shape / Of what the Fates had destined for my life" (128-129). Although she claims to have initially "fought my fate with gentle words" (133), she later curses "[t]he Fates which marked me for an Athenian maid" (233)—ultimately resigning herself to a "sort of fierce acceptance of my fate" (236). Furthermore, among her final words to her maids is the wish that a "fairer fate befall / You all that stand there…" (273-274)—a wish that emphasizes, with its internal rhyme of "all," her continued understanding of herself as apart from a group for whom happiness is possible. Such an insistence on Fate's role in her life stands at cross-purposes with her apparent desire to elicit understanding from her auditors and transformation for herself. Not only could empathy or sympathy fail to alter what Fate has decreed, but in fact is made impossible by the very nature of what Xantippe takes her fate to be: one of unmitigated isolation, necessarily outside of a group that could confirm and value her identity.

Despite the fact that the Poet invokes an imagined auditor and seems to want to be understood, the Poet, too, believes that his failure has been fated, reinforcing that, like Xantippe, he sees no real possibility for transformation. The Poet accordingly laments, during his apostrophe to Tom, "Ah, my friend, we are / As the Fates make us" (36-37), and

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[50] Brooks's analysis here specifically relates to Balzac's *La Colonel Chabert*, but it has much broader applicability. Indeed, as he later says, "Those texts that dramatize narrative situation, contract, and transaction may most patently demonstrate the value of a transferential model" (235).

after he opens the window to feel the sun, he remarks, "Ha, ha! 'tis sweet awhile to cheat the Fates, / And be as happy as another man" (116-117). Significantly, the Poet suggests here that it is possible to "cheat the Fates," allowing room, however momentary, for release from his isolation and despair. Yet as the Poet soon declares, "I turn / From the sun's light, or haply shall I hope. / I have hoped enough; I would not hope again; / 'Tis hope that is most cruel" (122-125). While the Poet shows in this moment that he is not immune to desire and optimism, he also draws on his past experience of hope as "most cruel" in order to turn from it—indicating either that the Fates cannot be cheated for long or that it's simply less disappointing to believe in them. This dependence both Xantippe and the Poet place on Fate as the author of their lives calls into question their entire undertaking in these moments of narrative desperation, as no interaction in the present of the poem could alter what Fate has already dictated.

Accepting empathy or sympathy from the maids or from Tom when the stories of their lives have already been recorded thus becomes impossible; doing so would mean revising how Xantippe and the Poet have come to see their lives up to this point and their immediate futures, as connecting with others and decreasing their own sense of isolation would provide a different narrative for each of them. Yet because their deaths are pending—because they have already cut off any future that might offer a more positive Fate than the one they believe they have each been dealt—the only option becomes rejection. Both Xantippe and the Poet must die in perceived isolation, a manner that appropriately fulfills the narratives of their lives as they understand them to be.

Because Xantippe and the Poet anticipate death's quick and certain approach and read the nature of their ending as fated, they thwart the contractual nature of the narrative exchange they initiate—a contract, however, much different from what Roland Barthes establishes in *S/Z*. In his analysis of Balzac's "Sarrasine," Barthes argues that the question raised by every narrative is *"What should the narrative be exchanged for? What is the narrative 'worth'?"* (89, original emphasis). That question, however, only makes sense when it is the

audience that desires the narrative. In the contexts of Levy's dramatic monologues—as well as some of the other dramatic monologues I examine—the circuit of desire is reversed: it is the speaker who desires the attention of an audience, and the audience that should gain something in exchange for the favor of listening. For Mary Louise Pratt, in her examination of speech act theory, what auditors earn in a speaking situation like those typical of the dramatic monologues I analyze here is "the right to pass judgment on the speaker's contribution" (109).[51] It is because the voluntary audience has given up "floor rights," Pratt contends, that they consequently earn the opportunity to evaluate what the speaker has said (109). However, given that Xantippe and the Poet's monologues are simultaneously their dying words, the auditors are prohibited from responding directly to the speakers, apart from what minor responses they can make during the monologues themselves.

Xantippe and the Poet, in other words, disingenuously enter into the process of narrative transaction they undertake. While they do seem to want to undergo a transformation of the sort psychoanalysis would attempt to achieve, the certain death they await—coupled with the ultimate meaning that death helps to give to their lives—prohibits them from genuinely entering into the narrative exchange before them. Although Xantippe specifically gathers her maids for her utterance and expects their attention, she cannot entertain any responses from them that alter the narrative arc her identity and coming death

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[51] Although J. L. Austin attempted to separate his speech-act theory of "ordinary language" from literary language in *How to Do Things with Words*, the line between the two has been extensively contested by scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, and J. Hillis Miller—and helpfully so since reasons abound for approaching the genre of the dramatic monologue from this theoretical angle. Speech and literature, after all, have been entwined for quite some time; as Murray Cohen has argued, for instance, at the end of the 1700s, linguists started to "share a conception of language in terms of speakers and listeners" rather than "writers and readers" (as qtd. in Kreilkamp 17)—a paradigm shift that found its way even into the language of literature, particularly during the Victorian period. As Garrett Stewart has shown, the trope of directly addressing the reader became habitual in the Victorian novel. "[I]solated Victorian subjects," he asserts, "want their story told, however indirectly, as a story *told*. They want the image of a narrator—and thus of an auditor or reader" (31). While the dramatic monologue certainly captures orality in text, similarly to the novel, the genre is furthermore at its core "about" communication and the ways in which it can fail.

have led her to expect. Likewise, although the Poet imagines Tom Leigh's presence rather than speaking to him directly, he does so specifically so that he can carry *his* point uncontested. The Poet wants to argue with Tom—but only if he can come out the winner. Consequently, both Xantippe and the Poet violate the terms of narrative exchange by eliminating the very process of give and take. They want to claim the benefits of a captive audience without giving that audience anything in return.

Authors, Readers, and the Deceptions of Fiction

The distinction I draw between empathy and sympathy has important ramifications for discussions of the genre of the dramatic monologue, given that Robert Langbaum's influential theory of the genre, developed in *Poetry of Experience*, hinges upon the idea that the dramatic monologue creates a "tension between sympathy and moral judgment" (85). While this theory remains a foundational way in which discussions of dramatic monologues are approached, it is not an unproblematic one. For instance, one major critique leveled at Langbaum is that he fails to account for a variety of readers and responses with his use of a universalizing "we." As Langbaum argues of Browning's "My Last Duchess," "*We* suspend moral judgment because *we* prefer to participate in the duke's power and freedom, in his hard core of character fiercely loyal to itself" (83, my emphasis). Claiming that she does not "prefer to participate" in the duke's charade and accordingly does not "suspend moral judgment," Cynthia Scheinberg contends in "Recasting Sympathy and Judgment," "What is missing from [Langbaum's] brilliant analysis is an acknowledgement that a reader's capacity for sympathy is almost always linked to a reader's cultural, political, and gendered identity. The problem in Langbaum's theory is that he never acknowledges how his own identity affects his ability for sympathetic response" (176). Rather than sympathize with the Duke, she sympathizes with the position of the Duchess, resulting in a vastly different reading of the monologue.

My argument departs from Scheinberg's in that I suggest that a reader's inhabitation of a speaker of the dramatic monologue can generate sympathetic identification regardless of how different their backgrounds and experiences. However, Scheinberg's attention to sympathy's dependence upon "cultural, political, and gendered identity"—dependence, in other words, upon shared experiences—raises a troubling question about the dramatic monologues I examine here. Perhaps the most disquieting aspect of the communicative failures Levy dramatizes in "Xantippe" and "A Minor Poet" is this: the speakers each have auditors who resemble them, at least demographically. Xantippe would be hard pressed, after all, to find auditors better suited to understand her dissatisfaction with feminine labor and her desire for more intellectual stimulation than the maidens who have been subject to the same kinds of limitations and constraints. And while the Poet and Tom Leigh clearly have different outlooks on the self's relation to the community, both are educated, philosophically minded young men.

At a very basic level, then, one would expect the speakers and their auditors to be more naturally able to connect—to be more naturally *sympathetic* to one another's positions—having more in common than, to take an extreme case for comparison, Barrett Browning's runaway slave and the slaveholders in pursuit of her, or for that matter their pilgrim fathers. Indeed, it is by selecting speakers and auditors so superficially similar that Levy registers a deeply troubling attitude toward what communication can accomplish: even those who *should* be sympathetic, even those who *should* be most naturally able to trust and to understand each other given their life experiences, cannot. As moments in the poems indicate, though, this is not a one-way failure on the part of the auditors. While neither Xantippe nor the Poet may be aware that they are turning from auditors who may be potentially understanding, the fact that Levy orchestrates this possibility suggests that she is—and that she consequently perceives these failures of communication as much the fault of the speakers as their auditors.

Although "Xantippe" and "A Minor Poet" are fictional scenarios to be sure, Levy seems to be attempting through these fictions to understand the real-world viability and efficacy of empathetic and sympathetic understanding. Just as she wondered whether empathy might have assuaged James Thomson's marginalization, so too was Levy invested in establishing what, if anything, she might expect from others as she struggled with her own painfully marginal life. The fact that Xantippe and the Poet ultimately turn from their auditors at critical moments betrays a skepticism that perhaps stems from Levy's awareness that she herself could not always summon undivided sympathy for other marginalized figures. For instance, as Beckman explains, when the number of foreign Jews was increasing in England, "[i]t is evident that [Amy] and Katie found it embarrassing to encounter other Jews in public places because they had a painful sense that all Jewish people would be judged by the behavior of any representatives of the group and *that they too participated in the judging*" (111, my emphasis). Elsewhere, Beckman notes that "[a]nxiety about whether they would be accepted as English and welcome in 'good' society caused highly-anglicized, affluent Jews like the Levys to be condescending toward Jews who were less assimilated and to be highly class-conscious" ("Leaving" 190). This double bind Levy found herself in—experiencing the pain of marginality and yet simultaneously feeling prejudice toward and distancing herself from others in some ways like herself—explains, perhaps, why Levy makes Xantippe and the Poet ultimately unwilling to trust in their auditors. Levy's own inability to sympathize would suggest that the distance between self and other—no matter how seemingly minimal—is impossible to overcome.

Importantly, the skepticism toward both empathy and sympathy exhibited in Levy's dramatic monologues does not preclude the *reader's* ability to sympathize with the speakers. In distinguishing his own singular experiences from Tom's, the Poet points to the separateness of their bodies as the ultimate obstacle to identification. Individual bodies do their own individual bleeding, regardless of how similar the wound inflicted. As I argue, though, reading the present-speaking, first-person voice of the dramatic monologue allows

for the metaphorical inhabitation of another's body and voice. While such a move does not, quite obviously, replicate direct, sensorial experience, the contrivance of the dramatic monologue is that it supplies the reader with the closest approximation of such experience, requiring the reader to become an actor giving body and voice to a character rather than an auditor who merely sees and hears that character from a remove. Although Levy was not a dramatist like Webster, and her dramatic poetry comprises only a small portion of her oeuvre, Levy's own childhood habit of taking on personae coupled with her attraction to first-person narrators[52] suggest that she found something particularly effective about a more direct inhabitation of a character rather than a removed depiction of one.

Furthermore, the particular subjects to whom Levy chose to give voice through the genre of the dramatic monologues and other dramatic poetry suggest how necessary the readerly experience of role-play seemed to Levy for especially marginalized figures. In addition to Xantippe, whom Victorian society largely understood as a shrew, and the Minor Poet, who was based upon a real person who suffered from a lack of understanding, Levy chose to dramatize two other excessively liminal characters: Mary Magdalen and Medea. History has represented these women with a one-dimensionality similar to that which has characterized Xantippe, emphasizing Magdalen's role as a sinner, penitent though she might be, and Medea's as the perpetrator of filicide. In both "Magdalen" and "Medea," however, Levy allows these transgressive female figures to speak in their own voices, and with powerful results. While the speaking subject of "Magdalen," as Cynthia Scheinberg has established, is not necessarily the Biblical Mary Magdalen but possibly a Victorian counterpart, Scheinberg nonetheless asserts that "[i]f we allow Levy's Magdalen to be the

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[52] Although *The Romance of a Shop* and *Reuben Sachs* both have third-person narrators, Levy's last novel, *Miss Meredith*, switches to a first-person voice. And out of the seven stories featured in Melvyn New's anthology of selected works of Levy's, four are written in the first person: "Between Two Stools," "Griselda," "Cohen of Trinity," and "Wise in Her Generation." Beckman also discusses three unpublished stories of Levy's, two of which have first-person narrators—"The Doctor" and "Euphemia." The vast majority, too, of Levy's poetry is lyric and so also written in the first person.

Biblical Magdalen, then this scene becomes that woman's fantasy of how she would revise Christian history" ("Canoninzing" 192). While the Biblical Magdalen was entrusted to convey the news of Jesus' resurrection and new Christian identity to the apostles, Levy's Magdalen refuses this role, and the dramatic monologue ends with Magdalen's regret that she could not say to Jesus "[t]hat all is done, that I am free; / That you, through all eternity, / Have neither part nor lot in me" (83-85).

Levy offers a similarly dramatic representation of Medea in "Medea. (A fragment in drama form, after Euripides.)"—a generic choice perhaps made in avoidance of writing another dramatic monologue on the subject of Medea when Augusta Webster had already done so in 1870. Even in this "fragment in drama form," though, Medea has nearly half of the over 375 lines, with Aegeus, Nikias, and Jason splitting the rest. While Nikias narrates the events of Medea's revenge, Medea gets to speak both before and after her murders of Kreon, Glaukê, and her two children. The poem does not necessarily attempt to absolve Medea of her crimes, as Aegeus, a citizen of Corinth who defends her initially, finally admits to Nikias, "You judged this thing aright; / This woman was dark and evil in her soul; / Black to her fiend-hearts' root; a festering plague / In our fair city's midst" (353-356). Yet it does allow Medea's side of the story to be heard directly from her mouth. Such a move also allows the reader to momentarily inhabit Medea's voice and to experience from her perspective her difference from the people of Corinth, her longing to be loved, and her devotion to Jason—a devotion which she understands as "woman's chiefest curse, / That still her constant heart clings to its love / Through all time and all chances; while the man / Is caught with newness" (53-56). And indeed when Medea learns that Jason is to wed Glaukê, she realizes, "I have poured the sap / Of all my being, my life's very life, / Before a thankless godhead; and am grown / No woman but a monster" (117-120). Aware of the "monster" she has become, Medea is yet able to offer her side of the story in the first person, which likewise causes the reader to experience it from that same vantage point and adopt, in a kind of forced sympathetic identification, Medea's words as his or her own.

The use of the present-speaking first-person voice also allows the reader of "Xantippe" to experience her subject position through role-play, complicating the one-dimensional representation of her as a shrew. Speaking as Xantippe, the reader recalls how, when told that she would wed Sokrates, she "foolish, wept to see at once cast down / The maiden image of a future love, / Where perfect body matched the perfect soul" (75-77). And yet, because Xantippe longed for knowledge, she comes to appreciate Sokrates and his wisdom, leading the reader to voice her dream "[a]gain of thee, sweet Hope" (87), despite her initial repulsion. Their marriage, of course, offers Xantippe none of the intellectual stimulation she begins to believe possible, and yet Xantippe specifically says to her auditors, "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" (113-115). Such a pointed refusal to blame the person in part responsible for her present position seems remarkably generous, given what Xantippe has revealed about her history; the gesture, in fact, seems entirely out of keeping with what one would expect of a shrew—this, despite the fact that she was aware that all Sokrates wanted in her was "a household vessel" (237). And even though Xantippe's narrative of her history might easily absolve her from blame, she still holds herself somewhat accountable for the course her life has taken, exclaiming toward the end, "The gods forgive me! Sorely have I sinned / In all my life" (273-275). Experiencing this greater complexity and depth firsthand through an inhabitation of the first-person voice of Xantippe, the reader is placed in a more personally compromising position—the reader could still, in Langbaum's estimation, either sympathize or judge, but whatever evaluation is made becomes self-directed as much as it is an evaluation of someone else entirely.

Furthermore, it is the curious subtitle of "A Fragment," that also implicates the reader's role in both this dramatic monologue and in the genre more broadly. When "Xantippe" is flanked by unconsciousness on both sides and possesses a clear beginning, middle, and end, the fact that this monologue is subtitled "A Fragment" is, quite frankly, a

puzzle. What, the reader must ask, is this meant to be a fragment of?[53] While the deliberate construction of poetic "fragments" was a vestige of Romantic convention, the fragment-designation of a dramatic monologue like "Xantippe" also points to the inescapably incomplete written version of a text purported to have been spoken. Although Levy offers the reader words on a page, what is noticeably missing is the voice itself. In order to make the written fragment of an oral utterance complete again, the reader must supply the voice, turning reader into speaker and vocally—and subsequently sympathetically—allying the two as well.

Although the Minor Poet is not historically marginalized in the same way that Magdalen, Medea, and Xantippe are, his monologue, too, functions for the reader in the same way that these other dramatic poems do. Although the reader could easily hold the same kind of philosophic tenets as Tom Leigh, the reader simply cannot take the same external perspective of the Poet that Tom is able to. Rather, the reader must experience, via the Poet's own first-person voice, his perspective that "[u]nderneath, / For all the sunset glory, Pain is king" (107-108) and must vocalize the Poet's own confidence in his decision to take his life, saying that "I wrought before in heat, stung mad with pain, / Blind, scarcely understanding; now I know / What thing I do" (158-160). Because of the unique use of an Epilogue in "A Minor Poet," though, the reader's sympathy is ultimately channeled in two different directions, as shortly after proclaiming that he knows what he is doing in

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[53] Linda K. Hughes offers several possible interpretations of Levy's decision to designate "Xantippe" as "A Fragment." Hughes writes, "'A Fragment' was a common title or subtitle for nineteenth-century poems, variously indicating embryonic rather than fully developed thought or statement, a brief glimpse or apercu, a sketch, or an open-ended lyric. More substantively, it could designate the innovative Romantic form theorized by Friedrich Schlegel, an aesthetic work unto itself that gestured toward the infinite. One of Goethe's famous maxims seems even more pertinent to Levy's poem: 'Literature is the fragment of fragments. The smallest part of what has been done and spoken has been recorded; and the smallest part of what has been recorded has survived.' 'Xantippe' foregrounds the fragmentary character of all surviving historical literature by crafting a supplement to it. In its most literal sense, however, her subtitle may be most scholarly in its implication, for it suggests a classical text surviving only as a fragment, as with almost all of Sappho, and newly given to the public in translation" (265).

committing suicide, the reader then leaps into Tom Leigh's voice, saying, "I sometimes doubt / If they have not, indeed, the better part— / These poets, who get drunk with sun, and weep / Because the night or a woman's face is fair" (194-197). Tom then even denigrates and denies the Poet's attempt, through his suicide, to "snap / the chain which binds all being" (206-207). Such sentiments obviously counter the Poet's own belief that he struggled more than most people and entangle the reader's sympathies, making it not only difficult to judge either of them but likely to leave the reader in a state of divided sympathy.

Levy's skill with and inclination toward theatrical, first-person genres like the dramatic monologue suggests that she perceived them as one of the most powerful vehicles for establishing identification with marginalized figures. Yet in spite of her optimism about the effects of the reading process, Levy curiously seems to have doubted the real-world applicability or viability of the very sympathy she attempted to generate with her work. For Levy, who was such an outsider herself, the ways in which emotion generated by fiction circulated in the real-world was a crucial concern. Just as Levy's dramatic monologues posit that bodies necessarily remain separate and consequently unable to understand each other's experience, so too does her work suggest that the distance between fiction and fact is impossible to overcome. Suspecting that sympathy for fictional others cannot extend to their real-world counterparts, Levy ultimately questions the benefit of reading, despite its ability to elicit emotion for others.

Levy's apprehension about the insurmountable divide between fictional and nonfictional worlds plays out in "Cohen of Trinity," a short story written the year of her suicide.[54] Forced to leave Cambridge because of his lack of discipline, Cohen writes a successful novel five years later and gains the kind of esteem and admiration that had eluded him at the university. What is so intriguing about this story is that it shares some

[54] I am indebted here to Karen Weisman's "Playing with Figures" for bringing the parallels between this story and Levy's dramatic monologues to my attention.

unmistakable parallels with "A Minor Poet": the story is narrated by a fellow Cambridge student who remarks, "There never indeed existed anything between us that could bear the name of friendship. Our relations are easily stated: he liked to talk about himself, and I liked to listen" (480)—relations that perfectly describe those of a dramatic monologue. Excepting the one obvious difference that success eludes the Minor Poet, the relationship between the men in "Cohen of Trinity" is reminiscent of that between the Poet and Tom Leigh. The similarities here are telling, for Cohen's response to his success can shed light on why Xantippe and the Poet reject the identification they were potentially receiving from their auditors.

After the narrator and Cohen cross paths again at a club dinner, they retire to Cohen's apartments to talk, and Cohen explains, "'Nothing… can alter the relations of things—their permanent, essential relations… 'They *shall* know, they *shall* understand, they *shall* feel what I am.' That is what I used to say to myself in the old days. I suppose, now, 'they' do know, more or less, and what of that?'" (485, original emphasis). As knowing, understanding, and feeling are all descriptive of empathy and sympathy, Cohen has attained what Levy seemed to desire for James Thomson as well as for the speakers of her dramatic monologues. Rather than erase Cohen's suffering and marginality, however, the consequences of achieving identification are nondescript; as Weisman puts it, "[A]ttaining an audience has clarified very little for him" (70). Even though the "they" of society now know Cohen through his book, his life is not altered in the least. "[W]hat of that?" is all he can say about obtaining from others a psychic identification, and in another parallel to "A Minor Poet," ten days after this meeting, Cohen commits suicide.

The fact that Cohen's fate is the same as the Poet's, even though Cohen achieves an understanding audience and the Poet does not, overtly exposes the tensions I have been exploring in Levy's dramatic monologues. Although empathy and sympathy appeal to Levy, she ultimately does not seem to have faith in their real-world potential. While this might seem like a cynical attitude, it is not an ill-founded one, according to Ekbert Faas:

> In one sense, the Victorian reading public was surprisingly open-minded… But there were definite limits to this open-mindedness. By and large, reviewers tolerated the portrayal of mental perversion only as long as it was done the way in which an alienist would diagnose a morally insane delinquent so as to have him hospitalized for further observation and treatment. Whether insane morally or otherwise, a madman, after all, was a madman, to be pitied, analyzed, and if possible, cured, but hardly to be let loose upon 'normal' society. Like Victorian asylums, dramatic monologues in this sense are a means of sequestration, particularly of their authors' own morbidities. (185)

Thus, while identifying with deviants might be acceptable in a dramatic realm, such societal outsiders needed, in realistic terms, to remain categorically separate and distinct from the mainstream. While Xantippe and the Minor Poet are not insane characters exactly, they have been marginalized to the point of mental crisis, and so would presumably also be affected by the prejudice that demanded that mental peculiarity remain shut out from ordinary life. Even more perplexing, however, is the fact that this hypocrisy on the part of Victorian readers is one of which Faas claims they were perfectly aware. As Faas continues, Victorian poets "might use the madhouse cells of their monologues to expose to quasiclinical analysis their own most pressing spiritual dilemmas. It compounds the paradox to know that most Victorian readers were aware of it… Browning and others, [the reviewers] argued, largely adopted these masks in order to camouflage private emotions" (200). Thus, while readers might have their suspicions that the dramatic monologue was merely a fictional veil for actual mental crisis, Faas illustrates that they demanded that veil and would not be open to identification without it. Consequently, Levy's sense that there existed no small distance between the ideals of empathy and sympathy and the real-world practice of it was, if self-pitying, also accurate.

The difficulties with real-world identification were not confined, however, to those with mental problems. In *Scenes of Sympathy*, Audrey Jaffe points to the complications more generally accompanying the circulation of sympathy in the non-fictional realm, suggesting that what might be self-gratifying in fiction becomes problematic in actuality. "[T]he distinction between sympathy for fictional characters," Jaffe writes, "and sympathy for actual

people dissolves into—or rather, may be reformulated as—the difference between the pleasurable sympathetic feelings fiction invites and the potential threat of an encounter with an actual person. Pleasure, here, coincides with an absence of reciprocity: a fictional character cannot look back" (7). While planting internal auditors into a poem attempts to counteract this division between fiction and non-fiction by giving auditors the chance to "look back" and act in response—and in turn to make the reader more aware of the "threat" involved in reciprocity between physical bodies—the anxiety or premonition that such encounters inevitably fail prevents Levy from exploring what successful communication resulting in connection might look like.

What Levy does explore time and again, however, is death. Although she doesn't, at least in her poetry, seem to endorse empathy as a viable result of communication or sympathy as a means of connection, Levy does, in "Xantippe" and "A Minor Poet," explore death as a possible avenue for identification that simply cannot take place through dialogue. Indeed, Audrey Jaffe's distinction between the pleasure of feeling for a character that cannot look back and the threat of feeling for a person who can rings true on a level Jaffe does not explore—that similar discrepancy between the identification that can be offered to the dead versus the living. In *Death Sentences*, Garrett Stewart offers a curious anecdote: upon following the delivery of a corpse to a morgue, Charles Dickens observed that all the faces watching "concurred in possessing the one underlying expression of *looking at something that could not return a look*" (qtd. in Stewart 55, original emphasis). The eerie parallel suggested here between the non-fictional dead and fictional characters logically leads us to expand Jaffe's conclusions to the dead as well: if fictional characters can much more safely be given empathy than actual people—and sympathy, in Levy's estimation—then the dead, too, can be non-threatening recipients of identification since they also can no longer "look back." Death removes, furthermore, the barrier the Poet perceives between himself and Tom: their separately conscious bodies.

Since death eliminates the body's sensorium, Levy might have paradoxically wanted to explore death as a possible avenue for the extension of sympathy in a way that she otherwise finds impossible between real bodies in the real world. If true, such an impulse offers another irony to the premature deaths that Xantippe, the Poet, Cohen and Levy herself encounter: deprived of companionship and understanding during life, they achieve it—or so Levy hoped—in death. Identifying with a dead body, however, is not without its own complications: namely, if an individual's death does generate a surge of sympathetic or empathetic emotion in others, the unconscious dead cannot receive those emotions. While the ability of the live body to look back might threaten sympathetic identification, the *inability* of the dead body to receive it turns what is meant to be a feeling of connection into an emotional burden. Racked with an overwhelming desire to extend empathy or sympathy to the dead, the living instead become sufferers of short-circuited emotional deadweight.

Amy Levy was well aware of the difficulty of feeling for one who could not benefit from her sympathy. In "James Thomson: A Minor Poet," Levy meditates on what one can do with Thomson's work and memory, which she admired deeply, now that he had taken his life. She asks plaintively, "[W]hat is there for us to do now that the great agony is over? We read the books of the dead man, close them, and away. They are books over which one wrings the hands in despair. There is so much and yet so little" (508). She later remarks, "To us, who never saw his face nor touched his living hand, his image stands out large and clear, unutterably tragic: the image of a great mind and a great soul thwarted in their development by circumstance; of a nature struggling with itself and Fate; of an existence doomed to bear a twofold burden" (509). Sadly—and ironically—any reader who has been moved by Levy's poetry and fiction can apply her lament over Thomson's fate to Levy herself. As Linda Beckman explains of Levy's suicide, "On Sunday she made her last entry: 'Alone at home all day.' Levy died early Tuesday morning, the 10th of September. Her death certificate states that the cause of death was 'asphyxia from the inhalation of Carbonic Oxide Gas from the burning of charcoal. Suicide when of Unsound Mind'" (201). Taking her own

life in this way at the age of twenty-seven, Levy leaves her readers in the same kind of vexed position she found herself in with relation to Thomson: what can one do, knowing her own tragic end?

Writing is certainly one response—one that Levy explored in reaction to Thomson's death. It is also a response that Harry Quilter, an editor who had rejected a short story of Levy's, was compelled to make. In "Amy Levy: A Reminiscence and a Criticism" in the April, 1890 issue of *The Universal Review*, Quilter admits:

> I should scarcely have thought of now writing concerning Miss Levy's work were it not that I feel that in some measure I owe amends to her art. For it so happened, that the opportunity came to me more than a year ago, was offered me, indeed, by the authoress herself, of accepting one of her stories. Rightly or wrongly—I would fain think wrongly now—I did not consider it up to the mark; and—while asking her to give me a chance upon another occasion—rejected it. Let me now therefore do whatever is possible to repair my mistake. (496-497)

Indeed, it is the absence of Levy, for Quilter, that prompts him to write about her work, as he fully admits he would likely not be writing otherwise. It is her death, too, which makes him question his own prior decisions as an editor and feel responsible for making "amends to her art." Despite Quilter's own remorse over Levy's suicide and the small role his rejection may have played in her depression and despair, though, he still faults her pessimistic perspective, arguing that "if we set out very determinedly to make no allowance for sympathy or sentiment, to suspect our own emotions as well as those of others… we are very apt to end by failing to see the use and attractiveness of sympathy, feeling, or sentiment at all…" (502). Ironically, Quilter's perspective almost becomes tantamount to Tom Leigh's in this elegiac tribute to Levy's work; while acknowledging her gifts, Quilter still sharply separates his perspective from Levy's, asserting that cynicism or "detachment of mind" is "the most fatal possession of the story-teller" (502). Quilter may indeed be moved by Levy's plight—enough to linger on her memory—yet he cannot, in the end, fully ally himself with

her, empathetically or sympathetically. Not even death, it seems, can overcome the vast distances between the self and other that Levy was always struggling to erase.

For me, a reader who has been deeply moved by Levy's poetry and life, "what one can do" is not particularly clear or simple given her skepticism of the real-world potential of both empathetic and sympathetic identification. Although, in Levy's estimation, it makes more sense to turn to Fate than to an audience whose responses cannot be trusted, the ideal of identification with others is not necessarily to be subsequently discarded. As Martin rightfully points out, "When we think about the interactions of a monologue's speaker with his listener and with a shared world, we cannot forget that the selfhood of that speaker is also indissolubly integrated into the poetic self that created him. That self too has a listener, and for the poem to achieve its full being, that listener, the reader, must also participate in an active, creative interaction" (160). Yet Levy herself perceived an insurmountable divide between the generation of sympathy via fiction or poetry and its real-world application. Reading might very well yield "active, creative interaction," but in Levy's estimation, a reader's emotional engagement travels nowhere productive and short-circuits into an emotional strain.

This does not mean, however, that the only option left us is to close her poems and "away," as she felt she could only do with Thomson. While attention to Levy's works cannot alter lives already wrought with and defined by pain and alienation—Xantippe's, the Minor Poet's, James Thomson's, and Amy Levy's—continued interpretations of and scholarship on Levy's poems and more generally on the dramatic monologue can provide an insight into the problems that accompany attempts to transcend the differences that marginalize such lives. As Levy herself was someone who might have benefited from empathy and sympathy and yet who found the obstacles surrounding it too overwhelming to defeat, it is evident that emotional identification cannot be perceived as always and inherently good but must be approached with an awareness of its hazards and complications.

Locating an audience is not the same as trusting one, a step which asks us to believe not that "we are as the Fates make us" but instead as what faith in others might allow us to become. And yet, given the dramatic monologue's tendency to present failed communication, it is as though Levy worked in a genre that itself has no faith in the idea of faith in listeners and audiences—no faith, quite simply, in others—hear them out though we may.

CHAPTER IV:
"I CANNOT BEAR TO LOOK AT THIS DIVINELY BENT AND GRACIOUS HEAD": ABANDONING CHRIST AND DIALOGUE IN CHARLOTTE MEW'S "MADELEINE IN CHURCH"

While poets have continued to write dramatic monologues up to the present moment, the dramatic monologue remains a decidedly Victorian genre, or at least one whose rise and fall was situated squarely within that historical period. Yet the dramatic monologue so easily falls into its own literary-historical category in part because the genre was somewhat idiosyncratic within its historical context. Contemporaneously referred to as the "psychological monologue," the dramatic monologue more closely resembles the modernist prose that succeeds it than the realist novels with which the Victorian dramatic monologue coexists.[55] Through its attempts to capture the mind in its present moment, its use of formal fragmentation, its propensity to question Truth through the juxtaposition of perspectives of speakers and auditors, and its refusal to draw clear ethical lines—thereby leaving judgment to the reader—the dramatic monologue generically defies the notion that modernism marks a radical break from the Victorian literary world.

Given that the dramatic monologue is such a proto-modernist genre, it perhaps comes as no surprise that modernist poets occasionally dabbled in the genre themselves. As Laura Severin observes in a study of several modernist women poets, including Charlotte Mew:

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[55] Because some Victorian prose is more experimental than criticism has historically acknowledged, I limit my comments to the realist novel for which the Victorian period is largely known. The dramatic monologue and its innovative formal elements that I list above offer a striking departure from realist novels often featuring third-person, omniscient narrators who feel free to judge the characters depicted, such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, and William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.

> Though twentieth-century poetry has been most noted for its fractured lyrics, these women poets continued to breathe life into what has been seen as an outmoded nineteenth-century vehicle, the dramatic monologue. Hardly a spent poetic form, however, it has proved remarkably flexible for these women poets in their attempts to both present themselves as poets in a masculinist tradition and to re-present women's image. (4)

Severin's characterization of the genre as "remarkably flexible" helps to explain why a poet like Charlotte Mew utilized it. Indeed, although Charlotte Mew's dramatic monologue, "Madeleine in Church," takes us out of the dramatic monologue's period of vogue, its use of the speaker-auditor relationship forms a compelling dialogue with the Victorian counterparts I have been exploring. Mew's monologue heightens the concerns about connection and communication commonly addressed by the dramatic monologue even as it pushes on the formal qualities that came to define the genre.

Spoken by a modern Mary Magdalene figure, "Madeleine in Church" takes the speaker-auditor divide to yet another level: rather than address another human being directly or through apostrophe, Madeleine's silent auditor is Christ. [56] On the one hand, Christ seems to be a safer auditor for a marginalized figure like Madeleine—or any of the other speakers the poets of this study embody—to address since, for the Christian at least, Christ is arguably the most trustworthy and ideal auditor a speaker could have. Because humans will inevitably fail each other, as the other dramatic monologues of this study have shown, Christ fulfills a desire for the divine human, the one who will provide everything that a fellow human cannot. On the other, however, he also represents the highest stakes, since while a human's judgment could always be wrong, Christ's is ultimate.

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[56] As Fitzgerald rightly points out, "Madeleine isn't, in the late Victorian sense, a 'magdalen'" (126)—isn't, that is to say, a prostitute. Madeleine has been married to or in relationships with a few different men; she mentions by name Monty, Stuart, and Redge, indicates another potential current relationship with a man named Jim, and elsewhere vaguely refers to "these boys" (stanza 6). Fitzgerald aptly calls Madeleine a "demi-mondaine" who has "the capacity for good, but knows she has done harm" (126). Jessica Walsh, too, indicates that Madeleine is "a fallen woman who escapes the label 'prostitute' only because she has married several times" (234), a woman, Walsh continues, "whose desires place her outside the acceptable categories of wife or spinster" (235).

The lack of indicators from Christ signaling either validation or judgment, though, prompt Madeleine to reject him as an auditor in the same fashion that Webster's and Levy's speakers reject theirs. Yet because Christ is also the Logos and etymologically tied, as such, to the concepts of word, speech, and discourse, Madeleine does not reject him alone in abandoning her address to him. She symbolically abandons dialogue as a means of achieving effective communication and forging connections between unlike individuals. "Madeleine in Church," then, offers perhaps the most powerful repudiation of communication in all the dramatic monologues taken up by this study. Although Christ's silence and physical intangibility might make the argument that Madeleine rejects him seem implausible, Madeleine's subtle shifts in address throughout the poem indicate her dismissal of Christ as an auditor. Although Madeleine sets out to speak to the Logos embodied, she turns away from him, preferring an isolation that not even prayer can mitigate.

Charlotte Mew only wrote a few dramatic monologues,[57] but it is a genre that was particularly suited to her past and experience. As Penelope Fitzgerald's biography of Mew points out, orality was central to Mew's relationship to literature. Read aloud to in school, as many students were, Mew also performed her poetry in later life, both to child and adult audiences—and it is recorded that Mew "was a splendid and dramatic reader of her own verse" (Blain 17). Perhaps even more compellingly, the confessional nature of the dramatic monologue held a troubling allure for Mew; as a child, she and her siblings were forced to confess their sins during nighttime prayer.[58] As Jeredith Merrin observes, "Mew's poetry,

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[57] "The Farmer's Bride" is another dramatic monologue by Mew, but since there is no specified auditor for the poem, I do not deal with it here. Glennis Byron also reads "Ne Me Tangito" (1929) as a dramatic monologue spoken by Mary Magdalene to Christ, but because character and physical situation in this monologue are less specific, it is not as clearly flagged as dramatic as "Madeleine in Church" and the other dramatic monologues of this study.

[58] Mew reveals this detail in her essay, "An Old Servant," and both Penelope Fitzgerald and Jeredith Merrin acknowledge this curious autobiographical fact in their biographical and literary criticism.

like Robert Lowell's twentieth-century American confessional work, exhibits a self-exposing, painfully vulnerable quality that has ties to Catholic confession" (212).

What confession and the vehicle of the dramatic monologue allowed Mew to consider more carefully was the specter of judgment. A painfully sensitive child, Mew worried a great deal about being watched and judged while growing up, writing later that "the sky hangs like a gigantic curtain, veiling the face which, watching us invisibly, we somehow fail to see. It judged in those days my scamped and ill-done tasks. It viewed my childish cruelties and still, with wider range, it views and judges now" ("Country Sunday" 371). While confession could provide for Mew, who assumed so much guilt, a way to clear her conscience, she remained divided on the benefits of speaking for oneself. In fact, the skepticism that Madeleine exhibits toward communication in "Madeleine in Church" calls into question the very purpose of stating one's own case. If one cannot trust in an auditor to judge fairly or mercifully, what is the point of narrating one's case at all? This is the question that women poets of the dramatic monologue ask time and again, and each draw a similar conclusion: communication between self and other is bound to fail, and so the speakers turn away from their auditors.

The unique power of the dramatic monologue, though, is that it allows its reader to refrain from being simply one more auditor in the crowd. Rather, the genre's depiction of a first-person voice speaking in the present necessitates that the reader inhabit the speaker's perspective, turning the reader into an actor rather than auditor. By working in a genre that allows readers to directly embody the speaker's voice and thus sympathetically identify with the plights of the marginalized others like Madeleine, Mew and the poets of this study find a way to maintain their skepticism of empathy without giving up on the possibility of connection between selves separated by distance and difference. Paradoxically, however, they suggest that such a connection can only grow out of the solitude and privacy so often necessary for reading.

Christ, Hear My Prayer

It is difficult to categorize Christ as a "silent auditor" equivalent to the other auditors that have populated the dramatic monologues of this study, from siblings to servants to friends to murderers to ghosts. These others have one very important trait in common: they are all human (or were at one time) and merely so. While, to be sure, Christ as narrated in the gospels was human, too, Mew emphasizes his difference and distance from the human experience in "Madeleine in Church." Although the pilgrim ghosts of Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" no longer have a bodily existence, they remain able to offer physical gestures or responses that let the runaway slave know how her plea is being heard. Not so in Madeleine's case—no matter how much she wants Christ to respond or talk back or offer some kind of sign to indicate his presence, he does not, making him a silent auditor in the most literal sense.

What allows this dramatic monologue to fit into the paradigm established in the other dramatic monologues of this study, then, is Madeleine's behavior toward and expectations of Christ as her auditor. Just as the other speakers throughout this study seem to want their auditors to respond in a particular manner, so too does Madeleine desire a particular response from Christ, and although she knows full well that desire is unlikely to be fulfilled, she nevertheless rejects him as an auditor because of it. Such a rejection signals a similar distrust of communication that other women poets of the dramatic monologue share, though Mew's skepticism is registered at a level more comprehensive and ultimate than the others. Through Madeleine's rejection of Christ, Mew not only lodges a suspicion toward a spiritual dialogue many believers claim to have with him, but she simultaneously spurns the the ability of the Logos—and by extension, the word, the act of speech, and the place of discourse—to mitigate one's isolation within the world.

Madeleine's difficulty in addressing Christ is evident from the opening scene in which, upon entering the church, she chooses the "plaster saint" to pray to over Christ

himself.[59] Stating that she'd "rather pray / To something more like my own clay, / Not too divine" (1),[60] Madeleine signals a preference for the saint's corporeality, believing that his bodily immersion in the world allows him to better understand Madeleine. Because Christ was always more than human, Madeleine is less trusting of him, lamenting that Christ never fully understood a merely human existence. "For," she continues, "once, perhaps my little saint / Before he got his niche and crown, / Had one short stroll about the town; / It brings him closer, just that taint" (1). Aware of her alleged fallenness, Madeleine believes that the plaster saint could understand her position more fully, and in consequence, would be a better auditor for her than Christ ever could be.

Much as she prefers the plaster saint to Christ, Madeleine similarly expresses a preference for the thieves crucified alongside Jesus at Calvary to Jesus himself. Referring to the three crosses, the tallest of which Jesus was crucified upon, Madeleine advocates that "[w]hen we are sure that we can spare / The tallest, let us go and strike it down / And leave the other two still standing there" (2). As Linda Mizejewski convincingly observes of this moment in the poem, "Thinking of the 'trees of Calvary,' [Madeleine] has only disdain for the martyr's symbol, preferring instead the symbols of the human criminals" (295). While "disdain" is perhaps too extreme a description of Madeleine's feelings toward Christ, her comfort in addressing or believing in solely human beings seems to stem from the fact that

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[59] The features of the church Madeleine enters—plaster saints and the crucifix—would signal it as either Catholic or High Anglican. Because Mew was attracted to Roman Catholicism, as Fitzgerald notes, one might assume the setting is specifically Catholic, an assumption that Jessica Walsh does make. Other scholars like Linda Mizejewski and Jeredith Merrin acknowledge Mew's attraction to Catholicism while avoiding labeling the type of church Madeleine has entered. Of Mew's own religious affiliations, Val Warner notes that "[w]hile Charlotte's letters show that she appreciated the quiet of a Quaker household, she was fascinated too by the sumptuous trappings of the Roman Catholic church in the 1890s, though she ridiculed superstition in the priest in 'The London Sunday' and in 'Notes in a Brittany Convent.'" Warner adds that Charlotte's sister, Anne Mew, "died an Anglo-Catholic" (xvi).

[60] Because there is no scholarly edition of Mew's work complete with line numbers, I will specify a passage by its stanza, according to my count from the 1921 edition of *The Farmer's Bride* printed by *The Poetry Bookshop*.

they are tangible to her in a way that Christ has never proven to be. Revealing her familiarity with the crucifixion scene in the Bible, Madeleine alludes to the thief's plea that Christ remember him and confesses that "I, too, would ask Him to remember me / *If there were any Paradise beyond this earth that I could see*" (2, my emphasis). Because she cannot see Paradise, though, and because Christ has not proven its existence to her, Madeleine initially chooses to address her own kind—flesh and blood and nothing more.

Yet as quickly as Madeleine's resistance to addressing Christ is established, it is undone. While she doesn't want to speak to him, she also cannot help herself, and so her monologue becomes directed toward Christ, as she weighs her own painful experience of the bodily world against the promises made by Christianity. As Mizejewski posits, Madeleine's obvious initial resistance to Christ within the walls of the church becomes understandable if what she's seeking is an unorthodox brand of Christianity—one that would be accessible to the thieves and sinners with whom Madeleine identifies. "[P]erhaps, *perhaps* she can find a hint of the noninstitutionalized Jesus," Mizejewski suggests, "perhaps she could be 'touched' in the way Mary Magdalene was; perhaps her loss of harmony—body and soul—could be restored" (295).[61] Such a suppressed desire of Madeleine's reveals itself through multiple passionate outbursts to Christ. During the first of such moments, Madeleine cries:

> Oh! quiet Christ who never knew
> The poisonous fangs that bite us through
> And make us do the things we do,
> See how we suffer and fight and die,
> How helpless and how low we lie,
> God holds You, and You hang so high,
> Though no one looking long at You,
> Can think You do not suffer too,
> But, up there, from your still, star-lighted tree

[61] Linda Mizejewski's "Charlotte Mew and the Unrepentant Magdalene: A Myth in Transition" offers close readings of Mew's "Fallen Woman" poems, including "Madeleine in Church," in order to make a historical argument about Mew's revision of the Fallen Woman figure as she was presented in Victorian novels and poetry. Although my interpretation of Madeleine's struggle with the divide between the sensual and spiritual does align closely with hers, my different ends—to examine Madeleine's relationship with Christ as an auditor—also require a discussion of Madeleine's resistance to Christian conceptions of sin.

What can You know, what can You really see
Of this dark ditch, the soul of me! (3)

Madeleine's contradictory desires for Christ erupt in the opening line of this passage, as "quiet" functions at once as adjective and imperative. Christ is simultaneously too quiet for Madeleine, who desperately desires his response, and also too loud, as she cannot escape the voice of the church in her head. Needing a physical manifestation of Jesus whom she can get answers from or shut up, Madeleine here conflates the being with the crucifix, though such a move yields neither desire. Pointing to his lack of a merely human existence, Madeleine concedes that Christ must also suffer but still separates his experience from hers, disbelieving that he can know or see a human anguish that is decidedly her own. When "God holds" him, and particularly "so high," Madeleine can see nothing but a vast gulf between his experience and a purely human one. Madeleine's intense desire, in other words, for some kind of physical, tangible access to him is frustrated, despite the fact that in addressing Christ here, she speaks simultaneously to the church's statue of Jesus crucified. And yet her language suggests that it is not by her fault alone that Christ cannot understand her—or his, for that matter; it is a problem, it seems, of distance, as Christ's removal from Madeleine makes it impossible, she suggests, for him to "really see" her soul.

Madeleine's powerful sensual experience of the world not only causes her frustration with Christ's physical inaccessibility but it also creates confusion for her about what behavior Christ must expect of her. Sensual experience is in fact so spiritually potent for Madeleine that in saying, "I think my body was my soul" (4), Madeleine provides the ontological underpinnings for her argument with the church. Failing to understand how her overpowering experience of the tangible world could be condemned by Christianity, Madeleine continues:

And when we are made thus
Who shall control
Our hands, our eyes, the wandering passion of our feet,
Who shall teach us
To thrust the world out of our heart, to say, till perhaps in death,
When the race is run,

> And it is forced from us with our last breath
> "Thy will be done"?
> If it is Your will that we should be content with the tame, bloodless things,
> As pale as angels smirking by, with folded wings.
> Oh! I know Virtue, and the peace it brings! (4)

Assuming that Christianity expects her to "control" her passions and to "thrust the world out of [her] heart," Madeleine exposes the unfairness of such expectations when she has been made in such a way that her body and soul are one. And yet, she does not entirely believe that she is made out of accordance with Christianity's dictates, as she qualifies her understanding of Christ's will, saying to him, "*If* it is Your will that we should be content with the tame, bloodless things, / As pale as angels" (4, my emphasis). Such a qualification leaves room for the possibility that Christ's will is no such thing, and yet, again, Madeleine requires a sign from Christ to know that her sensual experience of the world is not only permitted but validated by him and Christianity. She needs a reaction of some kind from her auditor, but such a sign of response never comes.

The skepticism that grows out of Christ's unresponsiveness causes her to stop addressing him time and again throughout the monologue, particularly when she considers God. While Christ's humanity makes him seem potentially accessible to Madeleine, she fails to know how to claim him when she reflects upon God's more extreme distance from the human experience. As Madeleine reflects, "If there were fifty heavens God could not give us back the child who went or never came / Here, on our little patch of this green earth, the sun of any darkened day, / Not one of all the starry buds hung on the hawthorn trees of last year's May" (7).[62] The ephemeral nature of sensual human experience cannot, from

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[62] The suggestive line of the "child who went or never came" could biographically refer to Mew's three brothers who died in childhood or her own decision not to have children in order to avoid transmitting mental illness, as eugenic theories at the time discouraged. Angela Leighton traces Mew's use of this figure as a literary trope: "The idea of the lost child, whether deriving from the memory of those early lost brothers, from Charlotte's feelings of thwarted motherhood or perhaps from her equally thwarted love for other women, is turned into a figure for the emptiness at the heart of all vision. The object of the quest is elusive and hard to reach. If it is reached, it leaves the quester either dead or empty-handed" (292).

Madeleine's perspective, be accounted for or forgiven. Since she claims that her body is her soul, the impermanence of corporeal experience causes her to distrust—or, to an even greater extreme, reject—a different kind of spiritual experience. Madeleine's bitterness toward God, though, becomes conflated with her distrust of Christ at moments in the poem, and any division between them becomes difficult to trace. Ceasing to speak directly to "You," then, Madeleine simply refers to "Him" in the following passage, unleashing her indignation toward Christianity's way of winning believers:

> "Find rest in Him" One knows the parsons' tags—
> Back to the fold, across the evening fields, like any flock of baa-ing sheep:
> Yes, it may be, when He has shorn, led us to slaughter, torn the bleating soul in us to rags,
> For so He giveth his beloved sleep.
> Oh! He will take us stripped and done,
> Driven into His heart. So we are won:
> Then safe, safe are we? in the shelter of His everlasting wings—
> I do not envy Him His victories. His arms are full of broken things. (8)

To be "won" by being "shorn," "led… to slaughter," and having one's soul "torn… to rags," is—quite obviously—not a ringing endorsement of Christianity. Consequently, after observing that "His arms are full of broken things," Madeleine declares that "I shall not be in them. Let Him take / The finer ones, the easier to break" (9). The lack of specificity Madeleine exhibits in this passage in referring to God or Christ suggests that she struggles to situate where Christ belongs on the vast spectrum separating herself and God. Uncertain whether Christ's perspective is closer to God's or her own, Madeleine oscillates between addressing him specifically and lumping him together with God, shunning him entirely.

While rebuffing Christ momentarily allows Madeleine to assert her power to choose what kind of spiritual experience she desires, her realization of the isolation attendant upon her choice prompts her to come back to addressing Christ, despite her skepticism of him. Although Madeleine's appreciation of the sensual is some solace, she cannot escape her awareness that this is an isolating spirituality. Madeleine fearfully acknowledges that there is "[n]othing to see, no face, / nothing to hear except your heart beating in space / As if the

world was ended" (9). Again, Madeleine betrays what kinds of qualities she wishes her companion to have: something to *see*—a face—the ability to make noise to fill the silent void surrounding her. Without a tangible companion, she feels as though she is on the verge of death. Reminded that she is "very soon to be / A handful of forgotten dust" (9), Madeleine desperately cries out, "There must be someone. Christ! there must, / Tell me there *will* be some one. Who? / If there were no one else, could it be You?" (9, original emphasis).

Madeleine's emphatic desire, registered literal by Mew's italics, for someone "to speak to" underscores how desperately she wants an auditor. The fact, though, that she is reluctantly addressing Christ in the wake of several failed relationships indicates that Madeleine has not found communication with other human beings satisfactory or successful. She has not found "a friend," it seems, among her many male companions, made equally evident by the dismissive attitude she adopts toward them. Remarking that she "should drown poor Jim, poor little sparrow, if I netted him to-night" (2) and lumping him in with others when she exclaims, "these boys! The solemn way / They take you, and the things they say" (6), Madeleine indicates that while she gets something out of these relationships, it is not the mutual understanding she seeks now from Christ. The men with whom she has verbally communicated have not provided for Madeleine the kind of auditor she wants.

Christ, however, hardly fulfills all of Madeleine's needs in an auditor either. Seeking a response from him and not getting one, Madeleine must find another way to understand her relationship with Christ. Feeling a particular kinship with Mary Magdalene, Madeleine turns to Christ's relationship with her in an attempt to determine where she must stand with him. Imagining the moment when Mary Magdalene "saw You on the steps of Simon's house / And stood and looked at You through tears" (10), Madeleine conflates herself with Mary Magdalene a few lines later as she continues:

> For some of us there is a passion, I suppose
> So far from earthly cares and earthly fears
> That in its stillness you can hardly stir

Or in its nearness, lift your hand,
So great that you have simply got to stand
Looking at it through tears, through tears. (10)

By jumping from a focus on Mary Magdalene to speaking of "some of us," Madeleine acknowledges her similarity to Mary Magdalene and attempts to make sense of her relationship with Christ through the comparison. As Madeleine says to Christ:

Surely You knew when she so touched You with her hair,
Or by the wet cheek lying there,
And while her perfume clung to You from head to feet all through the day
That You can change the things for which we care,
But even You, unless You kill us, not the way. (10)

Suggesting that Mary Magdalene was not depraved but rather expressed her spirituality through the body, Madeleine attempts to justify her own inability to deny the body as well. It is only through the indulgence of bodily desire and pleasure that Madeleine can feel spiritual, though she remains haunted by the fear that Christianity does not endorse her brand of religion. By aligning herself in solidarity with Mary Magdalene, though, Madeleine can more confidently challenge Christ, asserting as she does in those last lines that "You can change the things for which we care, / But even You, unless You kill us, not the way."

This conclusion does not generate for Madeleine an easier acceptance of Christ, however. Rather, the disconnection between her fusion of the sensual and spiritual and the church's division between the two continues to plague her. Mary Magdalene, Madeleine concludes, "was a sinner, we are what we are: the spirit afterwards, but first, the touch" (12). By using the first person plural, Madeleine reveals in this line that she cannot escape the feeling that she, too, is considered a sinner in the eyes of the church. Yet she also wonders, "if [Mary] had not touched Him in the doorway of the dream could she have cared so much?" (12). Madeleine's experience leads her to think not—just as it was for Mary, so too is "the touch" Madeleine's way of entering the spiritual realm. The touch must necessarily come before "the spirit," she has learned from her own immersion in the world. Although

Madeleine arrives at this conclusion for herself, it is one that, despite her efforts at addressing him, Christ never validates.

Madeleine's own recollections of her various lovers coupled with her kinship with Mary Magdalene might lead one to assume that Madeleine is primarily concerned with defending her sexuality and clarifying her understanding of its expression. Essential to note, though, is the fact that her sexuality is just one vehicle for experiencing the spiritual realm. Because she equates body and soul, *every* physical experience functions for Madeleine as a conduit to the metaphysical. It is not the sexual alone but the sensual more broadly—all things tangible and tactile—that evoke for Madeleine the transcendent. In the following passage, for instance, Madeleine recalls her vivid encounters with her surroundings at a young age:

> We are what we are: when I was half a child I could not sit
> Watching black shadows on green lawns and red carnations burning in the sun,
> Without paying so heavily for it
> That joy and pain, like any mother and her unborn child were almost one.
> I could hardly bear
> The dreams upon the eyes of white geraniums in the dusk,
> The thick, close voice of musk,
> The jessamine music on the thin night air,
> Or, sometimes, my own hands about me anywhere—
> The sight of my own face (for it was lovely then) even the scent of my own hair,
> Oh! there was nothing, nothing that did not sweep to the high seat
> Of laughing gods, and then blow down and beat
> My soul into the highway dust, as hoofs do the dropped roses of the street. (4)

Madeleine explains here how her observation of the natural world, her own body included, elevated her beyond a physical plane, conjuring up in her not only conflicting emotional responses but also spiritual longing. The way in which Madeleine's contact with phenomena like shadows and geraniums straddles realms of experience manifests itself in this passage in Mew's use of synesthesia and personification. Assigning sonic properties to smells and sights—"[t]he thick, close voice of musk" and "[t]he jessamine music"—Mew deliberately collapses and entangles the senses in ways that echo Madeleine's own way of being. Mew's anthropomorphization, too, of musk and geraniums—both giving the geraniums "eyes" and,

in another bizarre confusion of form and function, eyes that "dream"—similarly imitates Madeleine's inability to neatly separate spheres of experience. Madeleine's equation of the physical and spiritual is further rendered in her need to transpose metaphorically the abstract movements of her being into concrete images, her disappointed soul no more than a "dropped [rose] of the street" trampled by the "hoofs" of everything she encounters in the world. The interconnectedness for Madeleine of body and soul, of sensation and spirit, makes the expression of her sexuality not only *not* sinful but actually the very opposite: a mode of worship.

Yet because Christ continues to remain silent throughout Madeleine's monologue, she again shifts from addressing him directly to speaking of him in the third person for the duration of the monologue. Particularly since her monologue ends in this way, Madeleine's decision to stop addressing Christ becomes a more deliberate and final rejection of him as an auditor. As Madeleine laments in the penultimate passage:

> And He has never shared with me my haunted house beneath the trees
> Of Eden and Calvary, with its ghosts that have not any eyes for tears,
> And the happier guests who would not see, or if they did, remember these,
> Though they lived there a thousand years.
> Outside, too gravely looking at me, He seems to stand,
> And looking at Him, if my forgotten spirit came
> Unwillingly back, what could it claim
> Of those calm eyes, that quiet speech,
> Breaking like a slow tide upon the beach,
> The scarred, not quite human hand? –
> Unwillingly back to the burden of old imaginings
> When it has learned so long not to think, not to be,
> Again, again it would speak as it has spoken to me of things
> That I shall not see! (13)

In this passage, Madeleine struggles with the impossibility, given the tenets of the Christian faith, of any kind of physical connection with Christ. Despite her intense desire to have a personal relationship with him, he "has never shared" Madeleine's metaphorical religious house with her. And even if Christ stands on the outside, "gravely looking at [her]," Madeleine wonders what her spirit could "claim" of him physically—of "those calm eyes, that quiet speech, / … The scarred, not quite human hand?" Madeleine's language here calls

up the biblical scene of Thomas's skepticism of Jesus's resurrection—an allusion which seems deliberate, given Madeleine and Thomas's similarity. As depicted in John, Thomas responds to the disciples' claim to have seen the Lord by saying, "'Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe'" (20:25). In effect, Thomas's need not only to see Jesus but to physically touch and penetrate the wounds on his body is no different from Madeleine's prioritizing of the touch over the spirit. Thomas's skepticism, however, is rebuffed; Jesus appears to him and says, "'Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe'" (20:27). Although Jesus also chastises Thomas, reminding him, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed'" (20:29), he still proves he has been resurrected by physically appearing and encouraging Thomas to touch him.

Rather than take away Thomas's lesson in this moment, though, Madeleine instead identifies with Thomas's need for physical access to Christ. Furthermore, if Jesus did physically appear to Thomas at this point in history to prove himself, it reinforces to Madeleine that Christ *could* offer someone like her evidence of his existence and that the absence of such evidence indicates either that he does not care for her or that he does not exist. Despite that the point of this scene is to answer the doubt that can stem from a lack of tangible proof of Christ, Madeleine understands that if her "forgotten spirit came / Unwillingly back"—to a more straightforward relationship with Christianity, I take her to mean—it would "speak as it has spoken to me of things / That I shall not see!" (13). In other words, no matter how deliberately Madeleine attempts to divorce herself from an expectation of Christ's physical tangibility, she recognizes that her own need for this kind of corporeal connection with him is irrepressible, making her only option to turn her back on Christ and stop attempting to reconcile her fusion of the sensual and spiritual parts of her existence with Christianity.

Finally resigning herself, in the last stanza, to the irreconcilability of her experience with Christ's, Madeleine mournfully admits, "I cannot bear to look at this divinely bent and gracious head" (line). Unable to keep herself from the expectation of a responsive Christ, Madeleine must finally turn away from him entirely. And yet even as Madeleine does so, Mew ends the poem with Madeleine's recollection of how far back her longing for a dialogue with Christ goes:

> When I was small I never quite believed that He was dead:
> And at the Convent school I used to lie awake in bed
> Thinking about his hands. It did not matter what they said,
> He was alive to me, so hurt, so hurt! And most of all in Holy Week
> When there was no one else to see
> I used to think it would not hurt me too, so terribly,
> If He had ever seemed to notice me
> Or, if, for once, He would only speak. (14)

Madeleine exposes in this recollection her expectation of reciprocity; because she "used to lie awake in bed" thinking about Christ and worrying that he was "so hurt, so hurt!", she feels that Christ should do the same in return. Particularly since Christ's pain translated for an empathetic Madeleine into her own, indicating that she was "hurt…too, so terribly," she wants him to alleviate her own pain as much as she hopes to alleviate his. Yet requiring signs that Christ "seemed to notice me" or wished that "He would only speak," Madeleine exposes the necessity on her end of having some kind of direct, tangible connection with him.

Although Madeleine seems to still be holding onto some small hope in the last stanza, it is significant that she returns to her childhood desire to speak to Christ directly. Despite her schoolgirl longing, such a relationship never materialized, then or later on in Madeleine's adult life. Returning to an early awareness of her spirituality, then, allows Madeleine to hold onto that mindset, even though she has had dozens of years of life experience to reinforce the impossibility of a physical connection with Christ. And hopeful as she yet might be in the final stanza, the fact remains that Madeleine has reverted to speaking *about* Christ rather than *to* him, as she has attempted, on and off, to do throughout

the monologue. Thus, while perhaps still superficially holding onto the hope that the relationship she has wanted with Christ remains possible, the fact that Madeleine finally abandons her attempts to address him speaks far more audibly than Christ ever has.

The Hazards of Talk

Madeleine's hesitation to speak to Christ reflects, I would argue, the struggle Mew herself had with religion throughout her lifetime and reveals a skepticism on Mew's part about the efficacy of communication similar to that held by the Victorian poets of this study. Mew's "Madeleine in Church" was published in *The Farmer's Bride* in 1916, well past what is considered the end of the Victorian era, and yet the similarity of its themes and attitudes to the other Victorian dramatic monologues examined here exposes a disturbing trend. While the criminal or mad minds often dramatized by Robert Browning may more immediately discomfit a reader, I would suggest that the women poets' distrust of the ability of confession-like communication to yield empathetic understanding between individuals—a distrust that persists into the Modernist period—is far more troubling. While most of these monologues offer earnest attempts at communication, at least initially, it is over the course of the monologues that speakers lose hope and in consequence of their interactions with their auditors that they question the possibility of empathy and turn their backs on their communicative efforts.

Because the skepticism toward communication and empathy exhibited in these dramatic monologues by women poets is an actual concern for the poets as well as a fictional one for their speakers, biographical parallels are more germane to analysis of the poems than is often the case. Thus, as Madeleine's auditor is Christ, Mew's own relationship to religion can perhaps offer useful insights into Madeleine's rejection of him. Fitzgerald reveals that, when Mew was still a young girl, she "had entered an Anglo-Catholic phase" but "suffered from all the spiritual nausea of belief and unbelief" (31), and Alida Monro explains that

"[s]ome of [Mew's] contemporaries… always expected that she might find rest and consolation in the Catholic Church, and she was, as her poems show, very much possessed by the idea of Christ and the Cross" (xii-xiii). There was, however, a major drawback to Catholicism: as Merrin explains it, Mew "would have converted to Catholicism if it hadn't been for the required sacrament of confession" (212).

On one hand, confession held a strong appeal for Mew in that she placed enormous value upon the ability to speak for oneself. Mew was horrified by the reality that creatures may not always get the opportunity to defend or clarify their behavior or simply present their side of the story. In "The Trees are Down," for instance, Mew recalls seeing a dead rat in Spring, and in explaining the rat's hold upon Mew's imagination, Fitzgerald claims, "The worst thing about it was its silence. It couldn't state its own case" (18). Mew's impulse to write a dramatic monologue like "Madeleine in Church" only reinforces this concern. Mew's choice of subjects seems to proclaim that women akin to Mary Magdalene—marginalized women, that is to say, who have been historically silenced—deserve a word of their own. Consequently, Mew's generic choice is critical: not only does her poem imagine what a modern-day Magdalene would be feeling, but it allows her to speak, fictional as she might be, for herself.

For someone perceived to be a sinner, the primary benefit of confession in a religious context would be, of course, forgiveness. Mew was not, according to Merrin, immune to the appeal of that benefit. "Mew's hovering around Catholicism suggests," Merrin claims, "… an attraction to the church's promise of forgiveness and peace following the requirements of sincere prayer and full confession" (212). Yet Jessica Walsh illustrates that an attraction to confession was double-edged. "The strict structure of Catholicism," Walsh posits, "would have given her a set of rules for dealing with her desires—but confession would have meant admitting those very desires. It would have demanded an awareness of the body's weaknesses, and that is something Mew could never allow herself to achieve" (223). Admitting her wrongdoings was not a foreign concept to Mew, as she

reveals in "An Old Servant" that "'Forgive us our trespasses' was no idle phrase when after it, each night at bedtime, we had to specify them" (405). Mew does not single out any particular moments of shame, but she suggests that the nighttime ritual through which their servant led the children involved the confession of trespasses—giving Mew auditors at a young age, essentially, for what would likely be intimate and embarrassing details for a child to reveal. Whether or not this particular ritual had a lasting impact upon Mew is impossible to say, but by cause or coincidence, "Madeleine in Church" reveals a skepticism of confession and communication that prompts Madeleine to reject even an auditor as ideal as Christ.

Madeleine's complaints, I would argue, are twofold: first, Madeleine's monologue calls into question Christianity's definition of sinner and sin, ultimately interrogating the religious standards by which its followers are judged. By participating in the religious act of confession, one simply reinforces the church's prescriptions of right and wrong, moral and immoral, holy and unholy, even if one disagrees with where the church draws the line between such categories. Yet while Mew's "Madeleine in Church" is meant, in part, to question Christianity's easy categorization of sins and the sinners who commit them, I would argue that Mew's wariness of confession goes beyond the submission it requires to the church's designation of what merits judgment or necessitates forgiveness. Mew ultimately questions the purpose of confessing anything. If one's audience does not understand one's position to begin with, Mew wonders through "Madeleine in Church" whether an audience ever could. And like the other poets of this study, Mew seems to argue with this dramatic monologue that the empathy that confession might generate is a fiction. Not even Christ, Madeleine finally believes, could understand a human whose experience of this world is so far removed from his own.

Madeleine's resistance to confession in the church stems, in part, from her disagreement with what constitutes sin. While she is aware that, in the eyes of the church, she is perceived as a sinner, Madeleine cannot accept such an easy and pat categorization of

her behavior—and by extension, of herself. Madeleine's own experience, however, has led her toward a much blurrier understanding of such categories. As I argued above, if Madeleine's body is, as she claims, her "soul," then her sensual experience of the world is not sinful but spiritual. As Linda Mizejewski points out, Madeleine "insists… that such is the natural human condition—'we are made thus'—while the religious demand to 'thrust the world out of our heart' is unnatural" (290). This belief is echoed in Madeleine's refrain that "we are what we are" (4, 12). As Madeleine's language suggests, humans have no control over how we are made, and though she pretends to be resigned to the label of "sinner," Madeleine also debates the fairness of such a label. Madeleine cannot accept that enjoying the sensations that her body naturally has is sinful when she—and all human beings—are created with those bodies. Thus, because confession calls the faithful to admit to acts deemed sinful by the church, Madeleine's disagreement with Christianity's definition of sin causes her to in turn be reluctant to participate in confession. At least part of what she seeks from Christ is the reassurance that she has not acted as shamefully as the church would have her believe.

While Madeleine's wariness of confession arises in part from her hesitation to categorize her experience of her sexuality as sinful, it also stems from a larger distrust of what communication can ultimately generate between speaker and listener. This distrust is one, again, that Mew herself arguably shares. Mew's attitude toward confession and skepticism of its benefits can perhaps circuitously be illuminated through a compelling discovery Fitzgerald made during the course of her biographical research. In 1917, Fitzgerald notes that Mew was reading Joseph Conrad's *Chance* and marked in her copy a passage in which Marlow explores the hazards of confession. Because Fitzgerald excises part of the passage, I have chosen to reproduce the fuller version from *Chance*:[63]

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[63] Although it is possible that Mew only marked the portions of *Chance* that Fitzgerald directly quotes, the rest of the passage I include is useful in that it resolves potential ambiguities and thus allows for a clearer explication of the passage. To be clear, what Fitzgerald quotes is as follows: "Never confess! never! never—a confession of whatever sort is always untimely. The only thing

> Never confess! Never, never! An untimely joke is a source of bitter regret always. Sometimes it may ruin a man; not because it is a joke, but because it is untimely. And a confession of whatever sort is always untimely. The one thing which makes it supportable for a while is curiosity. You smile? Ah, but it is so, or else people would be sent to the right-about at the second sentence. How many sympathetic souls can you reckon on in the world? One in ten, one in a hundred—in a thousand—in ten thousand? Ah! What a sell these confessions are! What a horrible sell! You seek sympathy, and all you get is the most evanescent sense of relief—if you get that much. For a confession, whatever it may be, stirs the secret depths of the hearer's character. Often depths that he himself is but dimly aware of. And so the righteous triumph secretly, the lucky are amused, the strong are disgusted, the weak either upset or irritated with you according to the measure of their sincerity with themselves. And all of them in their hearts brand you for either mad or impudent… (212)

While Marlow admits that listeners might be curious—might even have "secret depths" that are stirred—that does not necessarily make them "sympathetic souls." Each responds according to his disposition, and "all of them," Marlow claims, categorize the confessor as "mad or impudent." In his attempt to quantify the number of genuinely sympathetic souls, Marlow's progression from "one in ten" to "one in ten thousand" offers a bleak perspective on the possibility of connection between a confessor and his auditors. While the confessor might hope for empathetic understanding—and in a religious context, forgiveness—Marlow cynically insists that most auditors cannot offer this.

The full passage is crucial to examine since readings of Fitzgerald's excerpt can lead to alternate understandings. Jeredith Merrin, for instance, has argued that this passage "suggests some reasons for [Mew's] own ambivalence about confession—not only as religious sacrament and social exposure, but also as poetic practice." As Merrin has it, "On the one hand, confession is always, and emphatically, a bad idea: dangerous, premature,

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which makes it supportable for a while is curiosity. You smile? Ah, but it is so, or else people would be sent to the rightabout at the second sentence. How many sympathetic souls can you reckon on in the world? One in ten, one in a hundred—in a thousand—in ten thousand? … For a confession, whatever it may be, stirs the secret depths of the hearer's character. Often depths that he himself is but dimly aware of" (135).

inopportune. On the other hand, confession appeals to curiosity, contributes to a sense of sympathetic or empathetic community, and has the power to stir up 'secret depths' in the hearer (or reader)" (213). While Conrad's passage does indicate that confession "appeals to curiosity" and "stirs the secret depths of the hearer's character," Marlow emphatically does not claim that confession generates a "sympathetic or empathetic community," as Merrin extrapolates. Just as Amy Levy's Xantippe accuses her maids of utilizing her story in self-serving ways, so too does Marlow insinuate that a listener's reaction to a confession will be self-gratifying rather than sympathetic. The "righteous" will "triumph secretly," the "lucky" find themselves "amused," and so forth. Although a confessor may "seek sympathy" in sending up his or her dark secrets, confession, in Marlow's estimation, will not validate such optimistic expectations.

The dismissal of the notion that confession can generate empathy and communal solidarity depicted in this passage from Conrad's *Chance* becomes a useful viewpoint from which to understand Madeleine's own behavior in Mew's "Madeleine in Church." Desirous of finding an empathetic auditor in Christ, Madeleine attempts to directly address him multiple times, hoping all the while for a compassionate and validating response. Although Madeleine could take Christ's silence as merely a necessary function of the human relationship with the divine, she instead chooses to interpret his silence as evidence of his inability to understand her position. Importantly, though, what Madeleine comes to reveal is that she does not fault Christ for being unable to empathetically imagine her experience. Rather, Madeleine questions the possibility of empathy altogether. It is not that *he* can't understand another's experience removed from his own; rather, it is that such an understanding is simply a fiction.

In "Madeleine in Church," then, as in all of the dramatic monologues I explore, the ideal of empathy is called into question, distrusted, and ultimately rejected. Although the desire to be understood prompts countless characters to open up to a variety of auditors—from relatives to strangers who themselves range from supportive to hostile—time and

again, the speakers throughout this study are made to realize that the gap between their position and their auditors is an impossible one to close. While *sympathetic* identification might be possible—identification, in other words, with someone who has been through a similar experience as oneself (as Madeleine sympathetically identifies, in this monologue, with Mary Magdalene)—*empathetic* identification is hoped for and sought after only to be roundly dismissed throughout these texts.

Madeleine does not depart from this established trajectory: she comes to realize that since Christ has not directly experienced her position, there is little use in talking to him—but not because of any personal failure on his part. Rather, Madeleine's rejection of Christ stems from a disbelief in the possibility that communication can result in empathetic identification, and in turning from him, Madeleine offers the most blatant critique of communication throughout this study due to what Christ symbolizes. As John 1:1 famously opens: "In the beginning was the Word, / and the Word was with God, / and the Word was God" (148). Understood to describe Jesus as the Logos incarnate—the "Word" become "flesh"—this passage considerably amplifies the implications of Madeleine's turn away from her chosen auditor.[64] While other speakers of the dramatic monologues throughout this study also cast aside their auditors, Madeleine's rejection of Christ packs a greater symbolic punch. In addition to dismissing the authoritative word of the Catholic Church, Madeleine simultaneously abandons the concepts of word, speech, and discourse, etymologically related as they are to the Logos. Thus, Madeleine's rejection of Christ becomes tantamount to a rejection of dialogue altogether.

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[64] The *OED* defines "Logos" as follows: "A term used by Greek (esp. Hellenistic and Neo-Platonist) philosophers in certain metaphysical and theological applications developed from one or both of its ordinary senses 'reason' and 'word'; also adopted in three passages of the Johannine writings of the N.T. (where the English versions render it by 'Word') as a designation of Jesus Christ; hence employed by Christian theologians, esp. those who were versed in Greek philosophy, as a title of the Second Person of the Trinity. By mod. writers the Gr. word is used untranslated in historical expositions of ancient philosophical speculation, and in discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity in its philosophical aspects."

Madeleine's distrust of empathetic identification explicitly surfaces at moments during the monologue, such as when she accusatorily wonders, "But, up there, from your still, star-lighted tree / What can You know, what can You really see / Of this dark ditch, the soul of me!" (3). The obstacle here is not Christ's own blindness to Madeleine's trouble but rather one of relative distance. It is Christ's position "up there" and subsequent removal from her own experience that makes him incapable, in Madeleine's eyes, of accurately seeing and understanding her own experience. The distinction might seem trivial, but it is a crucial one. Merrin, for instance, has argued that this dramatic monologue "pointedly question[s] the empathetic capacities of a distant 'Christ who never knew / The poisonous fangs that bite us through / And make us do the things we do'" (212). Though I agree with the thrust of Merrin's argument, I quibble with her language—and for no small reason, as the point Madeleine is making at such moments in the poem reflect the larger impulse I have been tracing in dramatic monologues by women poets throughout this study.

Madeleine does not exactly "question the empathetic capacities" of Christ specifically; she instead questions the possibility of empathy altogether. Madeleine makes the assumption in both the passage I quote above as well as the one Merrin quotes that *only* shared experience could result in understanding. If Christ "never knew / The poisonous fangs that bite us through," how could he be expected to understand Madeleine? Similarly, if he is "up there" at an insuperable distance from Madeleine, it is impossible—at least as far as Madeleine concludes—for him to "really see" her soul. Importantly, Madeleine does not expect Christ to have empathetic capacities at all. She instead rejects out of hand the possibility of empathy and assumes that only shared or similar experience—*sympathetic* experience, as I've been discussing it here—could allow two beings to accurately appreciate one another's set of choices, values, and perspectives on life. Oral communication, in consequence, accomplishes nothing, and Madeleine accordingly rejects Christ as her auditor as well as language altogether.

The one moment of connection depicted in "Madeleine in Church" reinforces the notion that Madeleine only trusts sympathy over empathy—only trusts shared experience, that is to say, finding dialogue and the distance it necessitates between bodies troubling. Madeleine readily admits to having had a string of unsatisfying romances, but after imagining the kiss Mary Magdalene gave Jesus, Madeleine muses:

> I wonder was it like a kiss that once I knew,
> The only one that I would care to take
> Into the grave with me, to which if there were afterwards, to wake.
> Almost as happy as the carven dead
> In some dim chancel lying head by head
> We slept with it, but face to face, the whole night through—
> One breath, one throbbing quietness, as if the thing behind our lips was endless life,
> Lost, as I woke, to hear in the strange earthly dawn, his "Are you there?"
> And lie still, listening to the wind outside, among the firs. (11)

Although there are certainly two bodies in this equation—bodies that of course cannot have exactly the same experience as one another—their literal closeness makes this experience as shared as any event could be for two people. It is only through sharing this direct physical connection that Madeleine feels that she and her companion achieved a transcendent spiritual connection as well. While Madeleine's skepticism of the existence of empathy hinges upon the fact that two bodies will always be two bodies, this unique moment in which Madeleine and her companion lie "but face to face," physically united for "the whole night through," allows them to momentarily become not two but "[o]ne breath, one throbbing quietness." Their harmony here—their sympathy, I would say—is so powerful that Madeleine would choose this kiss as her afterlife, feeling that the singularity of their breath was like "endless life," a feeling subtly captured for the reader, too, in the noticeably elongated line of twenty syllables.

Furthermore, this spiritual moment of unity—the only like it in Madeleine's history—is possible, the passage suggests, in part *because* they do not speak. Dialogue cannot be created, after all, out of only "[o]ne breath" between them, making their consequent silence requisite to their transcendent connection. Nor is dialogue desirable, since it is only

when her companion speaks that the fragile, otherworldly dimension of their connection seems to shatter. Just as the dying sister in Barrett Browning's "Bertha in the Lane" finds in nature first harmonious and unparalleled bliss and then a foreign and unfamiliar world upon discovering that her betrothed loves her sister, Madeleine finds the dawn "strange" and "earthly" upon hearing her companion's voice—a voice, moreover, using language that can only figure their bodies as separate. No longer one with him, she is suddenly "you" and he, by implication, "me." This jarring realization of their difference and distance causes her to turn her attention not to him but to the wind—notably a substitute for the quiet, singular breath suddenly lost to her—as she clearly wants to avoid returning to the realities of the human world.

Rejecting Dialogue, Embracing Reading

While Madeleine rejects the spoken word directed at an auditor, "Madeleine in Church" as a text and Mew as a poet cannot disavow language and communication altogether, since Madeleine's abandonment of oral communication is necessarily, if ironically, conveyed to the reader through words written. The line between the spoken and the written is of critical importance within the genre of the dramatic monologue as a whole, but especially within "Madeleine in Church," as this monologue deliberately engages with the Logos in both Christian and conceptual terms. In *The Presence of the Word*, Walter Ong discusses the religious line between the spoken and written. He explains:

> When the Son is conceived of as the Word of God, he is certainly not conceived of as a written word, either in the Father's thought or in our own. The Father 'utters' the Word. And the Third Person of the Trinity, significantly, is thought of in the Scriptures and subsequently in classical Christian theology as breath (Latin, *spiritus*), the Holy Spirit—connection with oral utterance is patent here. (188)

This distinction between the spoken and written word is intentionally blurred, however, within the genre of the dramatic monologue, as it attempts to be both at once—words

meant to be perceived as spoken by characters created by the poets, who necessarily capture these "spoken" words in the written. A genre built upon a kind of identity crisis in terms of its mode of communication naturally engages in a meta-debate about communication itself, but when Mew so pointedly engages with the Logos, she raises the stakes beyond Madeleine's personal situation to make a broader argument about words themselves. As Ong observes, the Word is conceptually oral. Thus, in turning away from addressing Christ, Madeleine simultaneously turns away from speech itself.

Madeleine's rejection of direct address could be tantamount to a rejection of language or communication altogether, particularly in light of the argument mounted time and again within the dramatic monologues of this study that empathetic identification is an impossibility. As a writer, though, Mew cannot eschew communication so entirely. To believe that communication cannot possibly generate understanding between unlike individuals not only calls into question the act of confession, after all, but also the act of writing itself. Because readers would presumably be unlikely to have had experiences similar enough to those of Madeleine or the speakers of the other dramatic monologues examined in this study as to be able to sympathetically identify with them, a written text could no more bring about empathetic identification than a verbal plea for understanding. Just as a verbal message has to travel from sender to receiver, so too does a text have to travel from writer to reader in an attempt to cover the distance between two different individuals, and women poets of the dramatic monologue like Mew present such a feat as unachievable.

As I have argued about the other dramatic monologues of this study, though, the reader becomes a pivotal figure in this beleaguered chain of communication. Rather than be one additional auditor for whom communication resulting in empathy is an impossibility, the reader is able to inhabit an alternative position. The specific qualities of this subgenre make the reader's role unique and critical; because dramatic monologues are representations of speech, they are necessarily spoken in the present moment and the first person. Thus, the reader slips into the voice of the "I" much as an actor playing a role, allowing for a more

direct imaginative experience. Rather than being told what it is *like* from Madeleine's perspective to be a sinner in the eyes of the church, the reader supplies the character's voice and effectively—if only momentarily—becomes Madeleine.

Such a distinction between auditor and actor may seem like a minute one, but it is this very distinction that prevents the act of writing from becoming an exercise in futility. If one goal of communication is to generate understanding between different individuals, and if such a goal is impossible to achieve through the avenue of direct address, then it is only the *sympathetic* identification that comes from shared experience that makes such understanding possible. To be sure, the inhabitation of a first-person voice which reading a dramatic monologue precipitates does not stand in for or equal firsthand experience, but the imaginative process unlocked by embodying someone else's voice more closely approximates that experience than a passive reception of it, better fostering an understanding of marginalized individuals that poets like Mew were hoping to promote.

Mew's belief in the necessity of embodiment and role-play when reading is demonstrated by her own penchant for performing her poetry. Mew, along with poets like Anna Wickham, presented at Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop and participated in women's salons. As Laura Severin rightly extrapolates, "Their involvement in these arenas suggests that print art did not completely satisfy their artistic longings for both the bodily freedom of performance or the engagement it could bring" (20). Indeed, Mew was well aware of the unique opportunities afforded by performance, given how greatly she herself transformed when offering readings of her work. Fitzgerald describes Mew's performances as follows: "The effect of the readings was astonishing… Once she got started (everyone agreed) Charlotte *seemed possessed*, and seemed not so much to be acting or reciting *as a medium's body taken over by a distinct personality.* She made slight gestures and strange intonations at times, tones that were not in her usual speaking range" (111, my emphasis). "She seemed, quite literally," Fitzgerald continues, "to have been *carried away by the experience of reading*" (111, my emphasis). Fitzgerald's language here is richly suggestive. As a reader, Mew did not blandly

recite her own poetry but rather transformed into the voices necessitated by her work, both emotionally and vocally. Mew's openness to being "possessed," "carried away," and "taken over by a distinct personality" indicate how much she valued and engaged in active role-play when reading. Inhabiting another voice, or perhaps more accurately, allowing another voice to inhabit her own body, Mew's behavior as a reader can act as a model for how she might have wanted her own readers to experience the voices of her poetry as well.

Mew's style of reading certainly supports the notion that she viewed reading as an opportunity to channel or be "possessed" by voices other than one's own. Her detailed attention to the look of the typographically set poem on the page, though, further substantiates this claim. As has been widely noted in criticism of Mew's work, Harold Monro—the man behind The Poetry Bookshop, of course, and the publisher of *The Farmer's Bride*—had difficulty with the typesetting of Mew's collection for two reasons. First, the subject matter of the collection was risqué enough to scare off the Methodist printer he had initially lined up for the project. On top of this, though, Mew had particular designs upon how "Madeleine in Church" was supposed to look on the page. As Bristow explains, Mew "insisted that the length of her 'abnormal lines' (many of which exceeded twenty syllables) should sit, wherever possible, unbroken on each page" (271). This was not possible in all cases, but, Bristow continues, Monro "agreed to issue *The Farmer's Bride* in a format in which the pages were so wide that they looked, most distinctively, almost square" (271).

While poets generally pay careful attention to line breaks as a matter of craft—and while those line breaks certainly do carry visual weight—the effects of where and how the lines break upon the page is especially noticeable when reading aloud, as the pauses that interrupt the voice are audibly palpable in a way that is simply not true of silent reading. Mew's attention to the effects of typesetting, then, underscores her hope or expectation that readers would not only be seeing the text but also reading aloud and physically inhabiting poetic voices like Madeleine's. Fitzgerald confirms this supposition, noting that, while Mew's request to have unbroken lines created challenges with the printing, "Monro…

understood that she was thinking of the text as something to be read aloud – a 'printed score', as he called it himself…" (162). Mew wrote, too, to Catherine Dawson Scott in 1913 that "'[a]ll verse gains by being spoken, and mine particularly – I suppose because it's rough…'" (qtd. in Fitzgerald 126). I have argued, using Garrett Stewart's concept of "evocalization," that whether reading silently or aloud, the reader still undergoes this process of embodying the always present, first-person voice of the speaker, but the fact that Mew kept so deliberately in mind the reader's oral experience of the poem reveals how she envisioned reading as a physically transformative experience as much as a mental or emotional one.

Thus, it is not orality in and of itself that Madeleine or Mew or the other poets of this study reject; nor do they claim that any human connection is an impossibility. What they specifically question is the ability of dialogue to forge sincere social bonds. When, regardless of the efforts made, speakers cannot expect to be understood by the auditors—as Madeleine here does not anticipate Christ's understanding—the monologue becomes, rather unfortunately, a waste of breath. Yet rather than reject orality altogether, the speaking voice, in fact, plays a crucial role in Mew's and the Victorian women poets' imagination of the dramatic monologue. The irony is simply that the only way they can imagine a speaking voice effectually generating connection and identification is when it is speaking to itself.

Suggesting that a voice can both be speaking to itself and generating connection seems like a contradiction—one that is only rescued by the reader. Though a speaker in her fictional context may reject auditors, the text cannot reject the reader's inhabitation of the character, allowing reader and character to connect, even if the reader simply reiterates a rejection of auditors and communication. Consequently, although the Victorian period often calls up idyllic visions of communal, fireside reading, the vocal, embodied reading experience envisioned by Mew and the other poets of this study hinges, I argue, upon privacy and solitude. In 1916, when Mew published "Madeleine in Church" in *The Farmer's Bride*, reading had already transformed into a more isolated experience, as modernist writers

came to play with sentence construction, grammar, and punctuation in ways that could only be adequately registered visually. Texts in the prominent American journal, *Poetry*, inaugurated four years before Mew published *The Farmer's Bride*, for instance, were considered as aesthetic objects in and of themselves.[65] Thus, rather than print in two-column formats typical of newspapers, the narrow width of which often necessitated breaking and wrapping lines, *Poetry* fashioned itself more along the lines of a fine book. As Bartholomew Brinkman points out:

> This fine book format… is dependent on the placement of a single poem on each page, framed by a border of white space. Isolating the poem has the effect of directing the reader's attention to a single poem, literally closing off context (or in the white space providing a kind of empty context, a buffer zone) and limiting the possibility of the poem being contaminated through its interaction with other writing. The poem is made less porous, more of a self-contained object. Meaning is directed inward to the elements that construct the art-object. Or, as in many books (and quite differently from a painting on the wall), the margin becomes a place for critical commentary that elucidates these formal elements. In either case, the central placement of the poem on the page encourages a level of care and contemplation that was not readily available to poetry in other bibliographical formats. (30)

Such self-conscious decisions about the presentation of its printed texts from what came to be the premiere venue for American poetry heralded a new visual dimension of the poetic reading experience, in turn affecting expectations of its reading audience. Requisite visual attention to the printed page supposes individual readers who each come to the text with their own eyes and bodies. To be sure, modernist poetry was still performed to a listening audience—perhaps most famously by Edith Sitwell but also, as I discussed, by Mew herself as well as many other modernist poets—but such communal moments could no longer fully

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[65] Mew was never published in *Poetry*, though Val Warner notes that "[Ezra] Pound was enthusiastic about Charlotte's poetry and in turn forwarded copies to *Poetry* in Chicago. *Poetry* rejected them," Warner continues, "but *The Egoist* printed 'The Fête'" (xi).

account for the text, as the significance of form necessitated individual, isolated readers, who each personally encountered the text.

While the literary-historical context of modernism makes it most plausible to suggest that Mew imagined isolated readers, I would argue that all the poets I examine not only had individual reading experiences in mind for their texts but *private* ones, as it is the distance, isolation, and solitude of private reading that best encapsulates their arguments about empathy, identification, and community. The arguments made by Mew and the other female poets of the dramatic monologue studied here can perhaps be illuminated by Jacques Derrida's theories about how communities function. Rather than believe in a kind of ideal community where all communication is successful and all individuals transparent to one another, Derrida—in line with the notion of the unity of opposites—holds that communication contains non-communication while community contains distance and space. Consequently, he contends that "the social bond itself supposes or requires interruption" (Deutscher 63). It is necessary, in Derrida's mind, to acknowledge "impossibilities of communication and community" (64) in order to prevent ourselves from having false expectations of human communities and to respect incomprehension within relationships rather than to treat it as an obstacle.

Derrida's belief in the inevitability of interruption, distance, and communicative failures within the realms of communication and community very closely align with the views of Mew as well as Barrett Browning, Webster, and Levy. The communicative failures dramatized in their monologues and the characters' subsequent rejection of their auditors all anticipate—or at the very least embody—Derrida's own disavowal of an perfect, faultless community. Where Derrida, however, sees no possibility for an ideal communicative interaction, Mew and the other female poets of this study posit a limited and particular realm in which communication might have a chance at succeeding. Ironically, though, this successful communicative encounter is not one that occurs face to face but rather one that can *only* come about in the mediated interactions between authors and readers in the private,

isolated encounter with the written word. Successful communication between sender and receiver, in other words, can only happen through writing and the spatial and temporal separation it imposes between participants.

Such a position on the part of poets like Mew seems to challenge classical theories about the hierarchy of and relationship between speech and writing. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates privileges speech over writing, contending that writing is an inadequate stand-in for the speechmaker, a living, breathing being who can respond, answer questions, defend his ideas—who can engage, in short, in dialogue, as Socrates himself so brilliantly did. Writing, on the other hand, can never talk back. As Ong observes:

> Spoken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than mere words. Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal. They never occur alone, in a context simply of words.
>
> Yet words are alone in a text. Moreover, in composing a text, in 'writing' something, the one producing the written utterance is also alone. Writing is a solipsistic operation. I am writing a book which I hope will be read by hundreds of thousands of people, so I must be isolated from everyone. While writing the present book, I have left word that I am 'out' for hours and days – so that no one, including persons who will presumably read the book, can interrupt my solitude. (*Orality* 101)

While the distinctions that Ong enumerates here are ostensibly accurate, Derrida challenges such a stark division between speech and writing. Just as writing can be unreliable due to the ambiguity that comes from its distance from consciousness, so too can speech be just as unreliable. Speech, in Derrida's estimation, then, is a form of writing. Instead of consisting of an immediacy and presence which promise purity of consciousness and truth, speech is subject to the same kind of "delay, deferral of meaning, ambiguity, some degree of the speaker's 'distance', the possibility of confusion, deception and unreliability" (Deutscher 13) as writing. As Derrida claims, the embodiment of the voice, the "being-before-the-eyes or

being-at-hand, installs a sort of fiction, if not a lie, at the very origin of speech. Speech never gives the thing itself" (*Of Grammatology* 240).

If we were to apply this debate to the genre of the dramatic monologue, Socrates' position in the *Phaedrus* would privilege the dramatized exchange between speakers and their auditors occurring within the monologue as the ideal context for communication to occur, considering as far inferior the isolation that Ong details as indicative of writing—and, I would add, often of reading as well. Derrida would contend, however, that neither speech nor writing can yield "ideal" results, as both are subject to all the ambiguities and slippages that arise from the inevitable distance between language and meaning. Mew and the poets of this study, I argue, offer a third position in this debate, signaling a distrust of dialogue in their dramatic monologues while retaining a faith in the possibilities afforded by writing due to the distance it imposes between subjects.

Just as the other poets of the study stage failures of direct address between speakers and auditors, so too does Mew have Madeleine give up on her direct address to Christ as a vehicle for successful communication. Obviously in Mew's case, I use "direct address" loosely, as a major part of Madeleine's frustration is that she is not speaking to the embodied Jesus who would be tangible and humanly responsive. However, as I argued earlier, having presumably tried unsuccessfully—given the string of failed relationships Madeleine recounts—to connect with other human beings, Christ becomes for Madeleine the ideal auditor. Thus, Madeleine's decision to speak to Christ as opposed to some former lover or other auditor can be considered her best possible scenario for communicative satisfaction and success. Despite the seemingly superior qualities that typify speech or dialogue in Plato's estimation, though, the female poets of this study seem to—across the board—illustrate that direct address is inevitably flawed and bound to fail.

While Mew plots the problems with direct address through Madeleine's failed attempt, Mew's decision to represent such an attempt through writing indicates that she retains a faith in the possibilities afforded by the printed word. Rather than consider all

attempts at communication futile, Mew curiously champions the solitary act of reading and, we can safely speculate, the solitary act of writing as the means toward identification with others whose experiences are far removed from one's own. As a vehicle for communication and a means of connection with other humans, writing is almost comically paradoxical, as Ong captures above. Though a poet's intention in composing a literary work might be to generate a better understanding of marginal characters like Madeleine or Xantippe or a prostitute and elicit identification from their readers, the fact that acts both of writing and of reading tend to require isolation seems like a potential flaw. However, it is only due to the isolation of reading that the "I" can become mobile—a possibility that is simply not achievable in dialogue. In such a context, two or more voices occupy distinct bodies that necessitate physical distance which separates and intervenes. Thus, it is only through the act of reading—and more specifically, only through the act of reading a genre like the dramatic monologue written as a depiction of first-person speech—that the self necessarily inhabits the first-person voice. The reader of "Madeleine in Church," consequently, does not *listen to* Madeleine but *speaks as* her. By supplying the character's very voice, the distance between self and other or speaker and auditor collapses and generates the best conditions for effective communication to occur. When Madeleine temporarily occupies the reader's body, her experience becomes the reader's own, forging a sympathetic identification that stems from shared experience, even if such experience is only ever fictional. Charlotte Mew's own well-documented secrecy upholds my hypothesis that readers could be sympathetic in a way Mew never trusted even those closest to her to be; acknowledging that Mew never revealed to her good friend, Alida Monro, that she had siblings who were incarcerated in mental asylums and who had died during her childhood, Angela Leighton surmises, "Certain facts in Charlotte's life were not for public communication, even between friends, but only for poetry" (*Victorian Women* 276).

In treating "Madeleine in Church" alongside the other dramatic monologues I have examined, I have been quick to draw attention to the parallels this poem shares with the

works of Barrett Browning, Webster, and Levy, but there is a glaring potential difference between this and its Victorian counterparts: "Madeleine in Church" is only debatably "oral." In fact, some might quibble with my decision to call this a dramatic monologue at all. Mew does offer, in the title alone, a particular character within a specific setting, and Madeleine does talk to Christ at points within the poem. However, while the orality of "Bertha in the Lane" or "Xantippe," for instance, is indisputable given that the speakers address human auditors, it is possible that Madeleine's monologue is more interior than it is dramatic.[66] Believers, after all, typically address Christ silently through prayer, and although a proper confession would require a priest as an intercessor, there is clearly no priest involved in this address. Despite the fact that Mew intended, as I note above, for the poem to be read aloud, my decision to align it with the dramatic monologue is a blatantly interpretive move.

Yet I would argue that it is the very ambiguity of the orality of this monologue that underscores precisely what I have been forwarding about its rejection of the Word in the guise of Christ. Mew deliberately uses several generic cues to signal this as a dramatic monologue to her readers, a subgenre that would be far more familiar to a general readership in the early twentieth century than it is today. Mew, however, was not content to simply regurgitate old methods. What looks and acts, at moments, like speech, acts at other times like a silent, interior monologue. "Madeleine in Church" as text, then, enacts the very struggle Madeleine herself goes through in debating whether to continue addressing Christ or to abandon dialogue and turn inward. At times, the text seems to speak aloud; at others, the voice it depicts seems to be silent and directed inward.

The variety of metrical patterns that Mew uses partly account for this ambiguity. "Madeleine in Church" ranges from short lines of tetrameter to atypically long lines that

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[66] This ambiguity has already been noted by Val Warner, who observes, "In Parts of 'Madeleine in Church' [Mew] brought dramatic monologue near to interior monologue, but the associations she makes are always intensely emotional, *intense*, rather than the chance detritus of the everyday" (xviii).

stretch in several instances above twenty syllables (and up to twenty-eight in one case)—the former bearing characteristics more typical of speech as well as of poetry composed within the oral tradition and the latter bearing characteristics more typical of written prose. Take, for instance, the following passage:

> Oh! quiet Christ who never knew
> The poisonous fangs that bite us through
> And make us do the things we do,
> See how we suffer and fight and die,
> How helpless and how low we lie,
> God holds You, and You hang so high (3)

Primarily written in iambic tetrameter and grouped in rhyming tercets, this passage can easily be imagined as oral, given the tendency of poems performed and passed down orally to adhere to an iambic meter and memorable, straightforward rhyme scheme. The plainness of the diction, the simplicity of the sentence structure, the rhythmic predictability of the lines—all combine to create an oral effect. Yet juxtapose the behavior of a passage like this with an entirely different moment within the poem:

> We are what we are: when I was half a child I could not sit
> Watching black shadows on green lawns and red carnations burning in the sun,
> Without paying so heavily for it
> That joy and pain, like any mother and her unborn child were almost one. (4)

Stretching up to eighteen syllables in the second and fourth line and following no specific metrical pattern, passages such as this pose a sharp contrast to tightly controlled moments like the one above. Although this passage does follow a straightforward *abab* rhyme scheme, it sounds like a different voice entirely, making any singular metrical classification of the poem impossible.

The ambiguity of the poem's "voice" perhaps most closely resembles that of its modernist descendent, T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."[67] While

[67] Although I don't mean to specifically suggest Mew's influence on Eliot in calling "Prufrock" a descendent of "Madeleine," Jeredith Merrin does note that John Newton argued in the *Times Literary Supplement* that "some of T. S. Eliot's most famous lines were specifically influenced by [Mew's] work" (202).

Prufrock too signals an auditor ("Let us go then, you and I"), the auditor is never explicitly named or described in the same way that auditors like Bertha, the slave owners, or Tom Leigh are, and much of the content of the address does not obviously signal dialogue ("The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes / The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes…"). Although Madeleine's auditor is more explicit than Prufrock's, who might be a fictional character or the reader him or herself, both speakers' language functions with a metrical and stylistic complexity that bespeaks, at moments, interiority rather than dialogue.

The stylistic shift toward interiority evident in dramatic monologues like "Madeleine" and "Prufrock" is, I would argue, the natural extension of the concerns and anxieties I've been tracing in women's dramatic monologues throughout the Victorian period. The skepticism regarding human communication and connection, the disbelief in the possibility of empathy, the rejection of others in favor of speaking to oneself—all point toward those versions of modernism in which individuals grapple with the physical and spiritual alienation growing out of a destabilized world. Characters like Madeleine might urgently desire to connect with God or fellow human beings, but they are simultaneously plagued by the potential hopelessness of it. If we are all fundamentally alone, what good is it to speak to others? This question hovers threateningly over the shoulder of the Victorian dramatic monologues I examine here, finding its answer in Mew's "Madeleine in Church" and Madeleine's turn both from the world of human auditors and Christ himself.[68]

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[68] While Mew published "Madeleine in Church" in 1916, labeling her a "modernist"—with the thematic and aesthetic connotations that word still carries—is not entirely satisfying. As Bristow observes, "Attempts to categorize Mew as a Victorian, fin-de-siècle, or modernist writer cannot account for the defiant manner in which her best writings, with their unrestrained rhythms and overextended rhymes, reconfigure as far as they can the formalities of the literary past in the name of renewing her longstanding protest against modernity" (276). Thus, while I discuss "Madeleine" as a modernist text simply due to its publication date, it is not necessarily representative of the attitude other modernist texts exhibit toward the problem of human connection, many of which offer revised notions of self and other.

Like the Victorian poets of this study, Charlotte Mew continues to doubt the ability of communication from self to other to generate empathy and alleviate a marginalized individual's suffering. More boldly than any of the poets of this study, though, Mew stages a rejection of communication entirely, as Madeleine turns her back both on Christ as well as on the related ideas of word, speech, and discourse that the Logos symbolizes. Dispensing with direct address from self to other as a way of achieving emotional understanding, Mew does not, however, suggest that all identification between two people worlds apart is impossible. Rather, through the act of reading the subgenre of the dramatic monologue, the reader is made to inhabit an alternative identity that more closely illuminates another's experience than communication from self to other, even if the reader in turn becomes trapped in her own closed communicative circuit.

The perspective that only reading can be a successful vehicle for effective communication and that direct address between separate beings is always bound to fail is an admittedly bleak one. While this argument does make a compelling case for the necessity of what authors and readers do, it also nullifies the significance we place upon exchanges that occur within the classroom, within departments, and among scholars in settings like academic conferences—exchanges that might be conducted with less urgency than the scenes depicted in these dramatic monologues but that often fundamentally revolve around crucial questions. It is important to note, then, that even if Mew herself genuinely felt and believed what she presented as Madeleine's perspective when she wrote the monologue in her forties, she was heartened, over time, by the generosity and kindness of her friends. While her attempts at romantic love never came to fruition and led, at times, to embarrassment,[69] Mew did enjoy genuine friendship. As she wrote to Evelyn Millard two

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[69] Mew fell in love with May Sinclair, a relationship covered extensively by Fitzgerald as well as Suzanne Raitt. The public embarrassment to which I refer seems to have stemmed from Mew's confession to Sinclair of her devotion, a moment preserved only through hearsay. Sinclair apparently confided the occurrence to some of her acquaintance, as Raitt refers to Catherine Dawson Scott's remark in her diary that "'Charlotte has been bothering and annoying May'" and to Rebecca West and G. B. Stern's report that "Sinclair had told them that "'a lesbian poetess', Charlotte Mew, had

months before she took her life, "One faith I have and that is in the wonderful everlasting kindness of my friends who have borne so much and done so much for me – and where that comes from I cannot doubt" (qtd. in Fitzgerald 224).

Mew's friendships, however, were not ultimately enough for her to live for: whatever solace friendships might offer, they either did not fulfill her vision of ideal human connection or could not assuage the human connections already lost in the deaths of her mother, father, three siblings in early life, her brother Henry in 1901, and her sister Anne in 1927—devastations that the sensitive Mew never overcame and, in Anne's case, that left her with overwhelming guilt.[70] On March 24, 1928, then, Mew took her life by drinking Lysol. Her suicide reiterates the existential ramifications of the questions that plagued her life and propelled her poetry and is a reminder that, in contrast to what W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley famously argue, it can be, if not exactly fallacious, at least short-sighted *not* to look at authorial intention and biographical contexts, as they can illustrate just how exigent are literary conceits and constructs—and the readers who encounter them—to the psyche of the author. Even if Mew herself once wondered "if Art – as they say, is rather an inhuman thing" (qtd. in Fitzgerald 133),[71] her decision to publish her poetry and prose testifies to some kind of faith, however small, in Art to do the work that she suspected humans could

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chased her upstairs into the bedroom"' (5). Fitzgerald, sifting through the information available, concludes, "What is certain is that there was an uncontrolled physical confession of furious longing, desiring and touching which terrified May, and perhaps also terrified Miss Lotti" (138). Fitzgerald suggests that this happened during "the summer of 1914" (138).

[70] Mew composed her will in January of 1928, specifying in it that her main artery should be severed before burial. Fitzgerald indicates that Charlotte "began to torment herself because she had not done the same thing for her sister, who might, in consequence, have been buried alive" (222). Leighton, too, indicates that after Anne's death in June, "Charlotte fell into a deep depression from which she never recovered" (277).

[71] Mew wrote this in a letter to Edith Oliver when she was visiting Dieppe. The fuller quotation offered by Fitzgerald is as follows: "'It makes all the difference to me to be in the right place… And I should never have done *Fête* if I hadn't been here last year. One realizes the place much more alone I think – it is all there – you don't feel it through another mind which mixes up things – I wonder if Art – as they say, is rather an inhuman thing?'" (133).

not do themselves—work that is so famously distilled in the imperative at the heart of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*: "Only connect!" While Madeleine may have found face-to-face connection with humans dissatisfying and failed to find a connection with Christ at all, by publishing her work, Mew tapped into one possible site of connection, albeit one that paradoxically hinges upon temporal and spatial distance between bodies. The exchange she had in mind is not of knowing glances between two sets of eyes but of a seemingly more banal variety: that between a singular set of eyes and a book.

EPILOGUE

> *… and yet she speaks and can speak only to a few scattered hearers—to those whom she is, in some strange and far-off fashion, personally dear.*
>
> —Charlotte Mew, "The Poems of Emily Brontë"

Poignant as the utterances of the primarily female speakers of the dramatic monologues of this study are, what makes them more poignant still is the relationship they bear to real women's speech in the nineteenth century—and to real women's speech today, my own included. This project began as an attempt to understand a fear I have struggled with since I was assigned, in eighth grade, to give a speech: the fear of speaking to audiences, even in as intimate a public setting as a classroom. While this phobia has caused me my own unique moments of shame and terror and sadness, the fear itself is not at all specific to me. Anxieties surrounding women's public speaking continue to claim scholarly attention, such as in Judith Baxter's 2006 essay collection, *Speaking Out: The Female Voice in Public Contexts*. And they claim far more.

Earlier this year, Jennie Kinneberg Wrisley, a friend of mine, took her life. She was, for a time, a graduate student at Iowa who entered the program the same year I did. We found each other at the library bus stop after the cursory introductions at orientation were over, and both of us were a bit shier and more awkward than usual, given the newness of everything. But we managed some small talk and made a startling discovery: through a comical series of questions ("Which bus are you waiting for?" "Oakcrest." "Me too!" "Where do you live?" "Benton Manor." "No! So do I." "What building are you in?" "814." "You're kidding." "Which apartment?"), we found that we coincidentally lived across the hall from one another. When I called my mom to tell her this, she said, "What a relief! I feel like you're being taken care of."

And I was. Jennie was a caretaker—a champion of all the four-legged and web-footed creatures of the world. In the time that I knew her, she harbored dogs, cats, a prairie

dog, a bunny, ferrets, rats, ducks, guinea fowl. She welcomed them all. Her love was limitless for all of the creatures in the world but burned especially strong for the defenseless, as it was love shot through with indignation. Jennie had an uncanny ability to intuit vulnerability, and wherever she saw it, she stretched out her hand. We sat together in class, quiet as mice the both of us, and helped each other through the new and bewildering world of graduate class discussions. Jennie wrote to me in the margins of my class notes, messages that range from the congratulatory "BRAVE Laura" and "Beautiful comment" to the trifling "I'm jealous of those tights" to the whimsical "I think you look like a fairy princess." The incredible difficulty of opening our mouths in this new environment made every comment either a small triumph or a lingering shame, and others' apparent composure made our own struggle even more unsettling. What did it mean, that our voices felt so uncomfortable, so ill-at-ease? Neither of us could say at the time, so we simply forged ahead, helping each other. My mom was right: I was being taken care of.

I'm not sure when Jennie's struggle to speak began, but mine began at some point late in elementary school. While in second and third grade, I would raise my hand so high that I could barely keep myself seated, hoping to spell "cooperation" or to say that nine times five equaled forty-five, by the time I reached middle school, I had begun to shy away from such public displays of academic enthusiasm. I still aced my tests, and though I burned inside with the answers during class, I merely gripped my pencil and fixed my eyes on my notebook. It was painful, this dictum to hide—coming from where, I didn't know. When I reached college, though, I began to notice that I was not the only one. In my literature classes, there were bodies whose voices didn't come out of them. They seemed to be my allies in a world that expected a body to speak. These bodies were almost always the bodies of women, and there we sat day after day—rapt, attentive, and silent.

A friend of mine has argued that it is selfish not to speak in a classroom, that being a part of a community requires contributing to that community. It's about give and take. If a group functions orally, as they so often do, then one must be prepared to talk. Mladen

Dolar confirms this: "We are social beings by the voice and through the voice; it seems that the voice stands at the axis of our social bonds" (14). To withhold one's voice, then, is an anti-social gesture, an insult to a group. I know what my friend means. I have heard myself agreeing with him against my comprehension of myself, for no matter how logical an argument he has, I have never been able to consider the hammering heart, the parched mouth, the enflamed cheeks—the flood of fear and terror that clamp my voice to the back of my throat—as symptoms of selfishness.

In fact, one could paradoxically see in an individual's silence exactly the opposite. While Jacques Lacan famously theorized that the mirror-stage in a child's life—the moment when they recognize in a reflection their body as separate from their mother's—is the fundamental stage of ego-formation, Dolar claims that there is an important element of ego-formation that precedes the mirror-stage. "To hear oneself speak," Dolar says, "—or, simply, just to hear oneself—can be seen as an elementary form of narcissism that is needed to produce the minimal form of a self" (39). If he is accurate, it could mean that silent bodies suffer from literal selflessness. I take liberties here, given that I do hear my voice in ordinary contexts—talking to my husband, my mother, my dog; socializing with friends; singing in the shower. Yet perhaps because of this, the absence of it in other contexts is all the more disconcerting. Perhaps the ego can only be as expansive as the terrain into which a voice can confidently travel, which for me and those allies who have acknowledged each other with an understanding gaze, does not always include the classroom.

While women have often been stereotyped as being the more talkative of the sexes, according to Anne Karpf, author of *The Human Voice*, "Only two out of fifty-six studies appearing between 1951 and 1991 found that women talked more than men" (338). This stereotype stems in part from the perception that women spend more time on the phone with their girlfriends, mothers, and children, more time articulating their feelings, and more time attempting to get reluctant men to do the same. But such a stereotype neglects how much of our lives are scholastic or professional. Children, after all, spend nearly one-half of

their waking hours in classrooms, and as Karpf illustrates, "In American classrooms, according to one study, boys spoke on average three times as much as girls" and "were eight times more likely than girls to call out answers" (161). Patterns like this established at an early age are hard to shake, as Karpf also shows that "[w]hen 100 public seminars were analysed, men, it was found, dominated the discussion time in all but seven" (161).

Over a century and a half ago, Margaret Fuller was working to counteract the discrepancies in education for men and women in America that resulted, in her opinion, in vastly different experiences of the intellect. Concerned that women were too passively learning, Fuller launched a series of "Conversations" in 1839 in which 200 women came to participate to discuss topics like Ethics, Ignorance, and Culture. She wanted to help them develop a public voice, to encourage them to articulate opinions on topics that might seem to lie beyond their domestic sphere. Happy with the progress her group of female contributors had made, Fuller decided to invite prominent male scholars—Ralph Waldo Emerson among them—to participate. This experiment, however, proved disastrous. Despite that the majority of participants were women, despite that the men were the outsiders in this pre-existing community, the male scholars dominated discussion. From this, according to biographer Carolyn Feleppa Balducci, Fuller "learned an important lesson: that the education of women ought to take place among women" (47).

I have not always been as quiet as I am now. As I neared the end of college, I had seminars in Eighteenth-Century British and Nineteenth-Century American Women's Literature. I surprised myself in those classes because I had things on my mind and wasn't afraid to say them. I would simply speak, and others would build upon my ideas, as I would on theirs. It seemed so simple and natural that I forgot I had ever been timid in the past. When I thought of my identity as a student, the word "quiet" no longer even came to mind. I had grown confident and comfortable in the classroom in a way that I hadn't experienced from the third grade on and haven't experienced since. It matters, I suppose, that these classes were composed entirely of women.

But perhaps more important than the female to male ratio of these classes were their atmospheres: more collaborative than competitive, more cordial than combative. They marked a departure from what I had become accustomed to. When speaking in the university or writing scholarly essays, we are trained to always anticipate how we will be attacked. The mindset is a militaristic one. One's critical observations are never free from the possibility of assault, and the success of an idea seems to depend less on the idea itself and more upon one's savvy in defending it. As a result, the primary question behind making critical arguments becomes not "Do I believe it?", but rather, "Can I support it?"

In college, one of my professors called this world of literary discourse a "game". His take on this is not uncommon. When Jennie went to speak with the Director of Graduate Studies about her class performance during her first year at Iowa, he noted that her professors consistently mentioned her lack of participation. He told her that the solution to the problem was easy: she simply had to learn how to bullshit. That's all, he said, discussion is. His words were flippant, of course, meant more to encourage than to dissuade, but Jennie shortly afterward arranged her Masters' Portfolio, opting not to finish the doctoral program. In her introduction to that portfolio, Jennie writes, "Literary criticism sometimes seems like pure amusement, or wordplay, a place to engage in intellectual sparring with no real consequence." Jennie was not the only one to leave the program that year. Three other classmates left as well, all of them women. They were my allies in a world that expected a body to speak—even if all that was expected to come out of that body was bullshit.

Jennie certainly did not take her life because of her difficulty in the graduate classroom here. She went on to another Masters' program where she excelled and nurtured a very different use of her voice: as a poet. Her reasons for committing suicide are not entirely transparent to me—as if they could be—though I do know they cannot be reduced to any individual struggle she faced. There was her health. And her pain. And her need. But she was a person who wanted to say things of consequence, with consequence, and the graduate classroom was not an environment where she could easily do so—and she kept her

mouth shut accordingly. Her voice was simply not at home. What she withheld from the human communities she was surrounded by, however, found outlet in her poetry. It became the vehicle for her voice, the place where she could say things that mattered.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one topic that surfaces in Jennie's writing is not at all unlike what I've discussed in the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, and Charlotte Mew: the interrelation of self and other. While she does not explore this through the genre of the dramatic monologue, and while her lyric voices do not actively reject auditors or others in the way I have set forth, her poetry is filled with an awareness of the entanglement of self and other, the desire for self-sufficiency always undone by an acute and persistent longing. As she writes in "For a Philosopher," as the speaker walks in a field at night:

> I was alone but not quite alone--
> there were beasts invisible to me
> humming and buzzing and chirping,
> their wild thrum sounding
> from every niche of the obscurity.
>
> At first I thought their call
> was assertion or celebration
> of self and existence
> against the brutal dark: *I am! I am! I am!*
> I chanted the same and found it
> a hollow declaration.
> If the preservation of self is all you want,
> let me tell you, it's not enough.
>
> I think the beasts were only
> whimpering to one another:
> *Where are you?*
> which is exactly
> what I was crying out
> (for you or for your body,
> or for something unworldly,
> or for all of those)
> and for a moment the cry became bone,
> became white, became
> everything I was.

Jennie, too, struggles with the paradox of the longing for a transcendent connection that is never quite possible given the nature of individual bodies, always apart. Suffering from a rare neuromuscular disorder, Jennie was all too familiar with the way that the body traps and distances, isolates and contains, its experiences ultimately one's own and always impossible to truly identify with, regardless of people's best intentions. In "To God, From Chronically Ill," for instance, Jennie writes:

> Bring on the men in droves,
> O Lord. Your champions:
> the tenderhearted, the gentle,
> the ones with large soft hands.
> I will show them fits of paralysis,
> convulsions, again and again
> until they slink away.
> This time I will cackle
> and maybe do an old witch dance.
> I will not be tricked into love.

I was one of them: one of "the tenderhearted, the gentle" who desperately wanted to help a friend in pain. One, even, who knew what I was up against, immersed as I had been in writing about women poets who found empathy implausible. But I could not be her champion—as no one could—and her suicide will always be a reminder to me of one of the fundamental truths of our existence: our inevitable isolation, even in the midst of any and every auditor we could call round to listen.

But gratefully Jennie left traces behind that not every quiet voice among us does: "scattered pages," in Tom Leigh's terms, "of a tale." Tom Leigh might call the remnants of the Minor Poet's labors "[a] sorry tale that no man cared to read," but he misspeaks. There are always those who care to read, always those who will want to encounter a voice lost to time, and who, through the act of "evocalizing" or "sounding" a poem, will embody that voice in a way that gives it renewed life and generates a connection that cannot occur in any other way. And this is the paradox of the writing and reading circuit: it connects readers with speakers, with the poets themselves, even, but necessarily at a temporal and spatial

remove. But it's a trade off: even if there were parameters around Jennie's actual voice, even if she could not speak freely within every community that she encountered face to face, her writing will perhaps earn her a wider audience in the end—or, rather, will earn her countless scattered auditors, adopting her voice in sympathetic identification, speaking with her in unison.

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