

© 2017
Caolan Madden
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PERFORMING POETESSES:
COLLECTIVITY AND THEATRICALITY IN VICTORIAN POETRY

by

CAOLAN MADDEN

A dissertation submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Written under the direction of

Carolyn Williams

And approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

OCTOBER 2017

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performing Poetesses: Collectivity and Theatricality in Victorian Poetry

By CAOLAN MADDEN

Dissertation Director:

Carolyn Williams

This dissertation traces the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century history of what I call “Poetess theatricality”: a highly gendered literary mode that imagines the poem as a space for collective, spectacular theatrical performance. As a corrective to popular and critical depictions of the Poetess’s solitary suffering, and as an expansion of more recent accounts of the Poetess as an “empty” and abstract figure, this dissertation argues that Poetess performance was understood by Victorian audiences to be multiply embodied: a chorus not only of voices but of gesturing, costumed bodies whose performances invoked the material profusions of popular print cultures, the crowded, often messy realities of social life, and the possibilities of social reform. Drawing on recent work in nineteenth-century poetics on the gendered, citational performances we now associate with the figure of the Poetess, as well as on scholarship on the significance of spectacle in the Victorian theater, this project revises existing understandings of the relationship between Victorian poetry and dramatic form: while the most significant poetic innovation of the period, the dramatic monologue, has ensured that Victorian

poetry has always been associated with the theater, this study argues for a collective, spectacular theatricality that the genre of dramatic monologue does not accommodate.

The period covered by this dissertation (1823 – 1922) saw the consolidation of the Poetess as a familiar figure in nineteenth-century print culture. As the popular success of seemingly chaste and moral Poetess writers such as Felicia Hemans made print publication more respectable for women poets, the role of Poetess became increasingly distinct from the more dangerously public, sexually compromised roles of “playwright” or “actress.” This dissertation shows, however, that the figure of the actress was never fully detached from the figure of the Poetess; instead, the collective, corporeal, spectacular aspects of theatrical performance reappear, continually reconfigured, as a major feature of Poetess writing throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—in the sprawl of feminine bodies, objects, and texts in Hemans’s *Records of Woman*; the casually citational, shape-shifting figures that circulate in gift books compiled by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (otherwise known as L.E.L.); the elaborately stage-managed crowds of working-class and aristocratic supernumeraries who threaten the heroine’s narrative control in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*; the poet-housewives and sympathetic audience-actors in Augusta Webster’s essays and dramatic monologues; and the characters, readers, and performers who form temporary communities through their recitation of the portable, quotable catchphrases in the work of Charlotte Mew. In directing critical attention to the theatricality of the Poetess, this dissertation works to connect recent work in Victorian poetics with the gendered, embodied experiences, performances, and *stuff* that have been the object of so much important feminist criticism.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation argues for the significance of poetry as collective endeavor, and I feel lucky to have been supported and encouraged in this work by a crowd of teachers, colleagues, and friends. I am especially grateful to my dissertation committee, whose thoughtful and generous engagement not only helped me to shape the project, but kept me excited about its unfolding ideas. Carolyn Williams influenced and encouraged this project from the beginning and read multiple drafts of every chapter, continually suggesting how I might put my ideas in conversation with recent work in poetry and poetics; her expert guidance pervades every page of the dissertation, and her practical advice ensured that I had the time and resources to finish it. Carolyn's enthusiasm for her colleagues' ideas meant that I had the opportunity to meet several times with the whole committee and to benefit from their collective wisdom at crucial junctures in my writing process. Meredith McGill, who was my first adviser at Rutgers, brought the same infectious intellectual energy to our committee meetings that she brought to our advising meetings early in my graduate school career; her perspective as an Americanist was foundational to my understanding of the Poetess as a transatlantic figure, and the project benefited enormously from her expertise in the history of print culture, her thoughts on the gendered consequences of public performance for women, and her generous, collaborative approach to conversations about poetry and poetics. Jonah Siegel's attention to the scope and structure of the dissertation, and gift for suggesting directions in which my research should go, led to some of the most significant breakthroughs in my argument; meanwhile, his line edits and writing advice sharpened my prose and will continue to influence many writing projects to come. Finally, Tricia Lootens began

shaping this project long before the dissertation defense, generously sharing the text of her *Political Poetess* before it was published, and offering both big-picture feedback on the project and exquisitely detailed and helpful responses to my first chapter. Tricia's suggestion that I concentrate on theatricality and performance brought the whole project into focus and helped me see where my own enthusiasm for the dissertation lay; I feel incredibly lucky to have benefited from the insight of someone who has thought so deeply and brilliantly about the ongoing history of the Poetess.

Thanks, too, to the many other teachers and readers who have engaged with this project: to Lynn Festa and the participants in her Fall 2012 dissertation writing seminar, who not only encouraged me to think rigorously about key questions in the dissertation, but who helped me to believe I could write a dissertation at all; to David Kurnick and Kate Flint for helping me to think critically about gender, genre, and private and public space during our meetings leading up to my qualifying exams—and for writing scholarship that became indispensable to my argument; and to the Montrose Circle, without whose collegial, convivial feedback and advice I may never have written anything. I am indebted, too, to teachers who shaped my thinking about poetry and poetics long before this project began: to Rutgers professors William Galperin, Emily Bartels, Mark Doty, Elin Diamond, Marianne DeKoven, and Chris Iannini; to Ammiel Alcalay and the Lost & Found community at CUNY and Elisabeth Frost at Fordham for their perspectives on twentieth-century and contemporary poetry; to Mary Jo Salter, who encouraged my interest in nineteenth-century poetry and my love of archival research; and to Tom Otten, who introduced me to the pleasures of close reading and whose

brilliance and enthusiasm guided my undergraduate research on Sylvia Plath, research that inspired and continues to undergird this dissertation.

This project has benefited materially from a travel grant from the Rutgers Department of English, which allowed me to travel to London to do archival research for my chapters on Augusta Webster and Charlotte Mew at the British Library; and from a fellowship to the Dickens Project in Santa Cruz, California, where many thrilling conversations with colleagues gave me a wider understanding of Victorian literature as a field. In addition to the British Library, I am grateful for access to the Mill Taylor collection at the London School of Economics, and the Berg and Pforzheimer collections at the New York Public Library.

A portion of Chapter Four appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of *Victorian Poetry*, a special issue on Augusta Webster edited by Patricia Rigg; I am extremely grateful to Professor Rigg for her thoughtful suggestions. I would also like to thank the organizers and participants at the conferences where early sections of many of my chapters were presented, including NAVSA, NVSA, INCS, and the Rutgers Graduate Symposium; in particular, I would like to acknowledge the participants at the 2015 NVSA conference in Providence, Rhode Island, whose feedback was especially helpful to my fourth chapter. In addition, I am profoundly grateful to Lauren Kimball for her collaboration on a panel proposal for the C19 conference (and to Meredith McGill for suggesting the collaboration); our conversations, and her work on performance and reform movements, helped me to articulate many of the major questions that shaped my final dissertation.

Of my classmates and colleagues, I also wish to thank Mimi Winick, Becca Klaver, Elizabeth Oldfather, Mark DiGiacomo, Fred Solinger, and Kyle McAuley for

advice on chapter drafts, conference proposals, and countless questions about academic life; my Ph.D. cohort, including Tasia Milton, Anne Terrill, April Graham, and Brian Pietras, for solidarity and friendship; Kate Durbin, whose “women as objects” project was a major influence on this project; Joanna Neborsky, whose 2005 research sparked my thinking about theatrical spectacle; and Hanna Andrews, Marisa Crawford, MC Hyland, Lily Ladewig, Krystal Languell, Emily Skillings, and Jennifer Tamayo for many indispensable conversations about feminist poetics.

This project would not have been possible without the support of Kutie George and Meghan Wheeler, whose expert and loving childcare allowed me to focus on writing with a light heart, or Suzanne Barrett and my mother, Mary Farrell, who arranged for me to have long days of uninterrupted writing. Thanks, too, to Anna Hindell for invaluable advice and wisdom. I am grateful for the love and support of my family: Rory Madden, Alison McDonough, Don and Sharon Madden, Lynn and Peter Hughes, Logan Hughes, and Willow Burke. I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, whose feminist insistence on the importance of women artists and commitment to theatricality and spectacle may have made this project inevitable; to my daughter Jane Hughes, whose imagination and *joie-de-vivre* have grown along with this dissertation; and to my husband Paul Hughes, whose kindness, brilliance, humor, and willingness to help me talk through my arguments has made these years of writing—and the many years before them—a wonderful pleasure. I would like to dedicate this dissertation, too, to the memory of Hannah Maitland Frank, whose kindness and encouragement made this solitary process easier, and whose brilliant interdisciplinary thinking, inimitable wit, and generous, collaborative instincts brought so many people together.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
List of Illustrations	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	
“A Choir of Poetesses”: The Multiple, Theatrical Poetess in English Literature and Culture	37
Chapter 2	
“These Things for the Grave”: Objects, Attributes, and Mobile Identity in the Work of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon.	107
Chapter 3	
“We Make a Pretty Show”: The Threat of the Theatrical Poetess in <i>Aurora Leigh</i>	169
Chapter 4	
“We Should Be <i>That</i> Iago”: Augusta Webster’s Lyric “We”	228
Chapter 5	
“Not a Natural <i>Cri de Coeur</i> ”: Charlotte Mew’s Quotable, Extractable Poetics	276
Acknowledgement of Previous Publication	320
Works Cited	321

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. “Donna Julia.” <i>Heath’s Book of Beauty</i> , 1833	155
Figure 2. “Rebecca.”	156
Figure 3: “Gulnare.”	158
Figure 4: “The Enchantress.”	161
Figure 5: “Medora.”	161
Figure 6: “Lolah.”	162

Introduction: Poetess Theatricality Unmasked

The Poetess is always multiple. While many nineteenth-century readers—and most twentieth- and twenty-first century critics—imagined the sighing, fainting, sentimental figure of the Victorian Poetess as a solitary figure, a suicidal Sappho or a wounded nightingale privately and almost involuntarily expressing her personal suffering on the edge of a stormy cliff or in the seclusion of a wooded glade, other nineteenth-century writers and readers understood that the work of Victorian women poets is characterized by collaborative, public, often spectacular theatrical performance. As a corrective to the myth of the Poetess's solitary suffering, and as an expansion of more recent accounts of the Poetess as an “empty” and abstract figure, this dissertation shows that Poetess performance was understood by Victorian audiences to be multiply embodied: a chorus not only of voices but of gesturing, costumed bodies whose performances invoked the material profusions of popular print cultures, the crowded, often messy realities of social life, and the possibilities of social reform.¹

In using the term “Poetess”—a term which will strike many twenty-first-century readers as archaic, if not sexist and condescending—I draw upon recent work in the study of nineteenth-century poetics that has given us productive new contexts in which to understand not only the word “poetess,” but those women poets who may have self-consciously written or been read as “Poetesses.” Rather than rejecting the term as entirely derogatory, critics writing on the “poetess tradition” or the “figure of the poetess” use it to describe a specific set of literary practices and genres associated with women poets

¹ The phrase “Poetess performance” originates with Tricia Lootens; see *The Political Poetess*, especially Lootens's “Introduction” (1 – 26). See also my discussion of Lootens's use of the phrase below. Following Lootens's example, I capitalize “Poetess” when discussing the Poetess as a mode of performance, a figure, or a fiction, reserving “poetess” for discussions of the word itself and for occasions where the word does seem to indicate a historical person.

writing in Britain, America, and across the globe from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. The “current critical category” of the Poetess, as described by Tricia Lootens (“States of Exile” 32), refers to the work of a nineteenth-century woman poet publishing in popular, market-driven publications, whose work was highly conventional and sentimental and capitalized upon the perceived moral authority and tenderness of feeling that, according to the Victorian doctrine of “separate spheres,” was the domain of women.

The period covered by this dissertation (1823 – 1922) saw the consolidation of the Poetess as a familiar figure in nineteenth-century print culture and accompanied what Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson describe as the “lyricization” of poetry: a process by which the wide variety of verse genres that proliferated in English literature up until the end of the eighteenth century came to be understood as belonging to the increasingly abstract category of “lyric,” so that by the twentieth century all poetry was read “lyrically,” as examples of the “genre of personal expression” (*Lyric Theory Reader* 2). This period of lyricization, in conjunction with the related process by which the popular success of seemingly chaste and moral Poetess writers such as Felicia Hemans made print publication more respectable for women poets, was a period during which the role of Poetess became increasingly distinct from the more dangerously public, sexually compromised roles of “playwright” or “actress”—despite the fact that these three roles had been considered nearly identical from Restoration drama onward. During the nineteenth century, then, *theatricality*—a term that in this dissertation indicates the publicity, collectivity, artifice, and spectacle of the theater, and is distinct from the related concepts of *drama* and *performance*—was becoming a problem in Poetess writing, a

force that could endanger the respectability and legitimacy of women poets even as it offered opportunities through which poets could theorize the dangers, pleasures, and formal and social possibilities of public performance.

This dissertation shows, however, that the figure of the actress was never fully detached from the figure of the Poetess; instead, the collective, corporeal, spectacular aspects of theatrical performance reappear, continually reconfigured, as a major feature of Poetess writing throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore, in chronologically following the path of established critical narratives of the rise and fall of the Poetess, this dissertation traces an alternative history of the Poetess's theatricality, illuminating new and surprising ways in which Poetess performance continues to pervade literature and culture to the present day.

While most critics and readers in the twentieth century have dismissed Poetess writing for its failure to conform to modernist and New Critical standards of originality and irony, this dissertation participates in ongoing efforts to read the Poetess on her own terms. In response to earlier criticism that downplayed women poets' agency and intelligence, recent critics in Poetess studies identify the deliberate strategies present in writing that strikes many contemporary readers as naive self-expression or as the unskilled regurgitation of clichés. Within that broader project, this dissertation addresses two strains of recent scholarship: one demonstrating that poetry by Victorian women was much more public-minded and politically engaged than is commonly understood,² and

² This strain of criticism includes Isobel Armstrong's argument in "The Gush of the Feminine" (1995) that women's dramatic poetry performs cultural critique and Anne K. Mellor's 1997 work on the politics of the "woman poet" (as opposed to the Poetess). More recently, Lootens's *The Political Poetess* (2017) demonstrates how the Poetess, seemingly insulated in the private "heart" of the domestic, feminine sphere from the masculine endeavors of warmongering and empire-building, participated in public, political work. In attending to the politics of Poetess performance I also take inspiration from Shannon Jackson's writing on performance and women's reform work; Jackson's coining of the term "reformance" highlights the

another, often related, strain describing Poetess poetics as a set of generic, infinitely repeatable conventions and the Poetess as an “empty figure,” a personification or vehicle available to any number of writers who deliberately and self-consciously used that figure in order to participate in cross-cultural exchange within a global literary market.³ The collective, public aspect of Poetess theatricality allows us to see new ways in which many Poetess performers imagined their relationship to community formation, social life, and political activism. It also widens our understanding of the generic conventions that informed Poetess performance, suggesting that the Poetess figures’s supposed “emptiness” paradoxically teems with countless, variously embodied figures.

Thus the theatrically multiple Poetess figures in this dissertation include the silent sprawl of feminine bodies, costumes, objects, and texts in Felicia Hemans’s *Records of Woman*; the casually citational, shape-shifting figures from Byron and Scott that circulate in gift books compiled by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (otherwise known as L.E.L.); the elaborately stage-managed crowds of working-class and aristocratic supernumeraries who threaten the heroine’s narrative control in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*; the poet-housewives and sympathetic audience-actors in Augusta Webster’s essays and dramatic monologues; and the characters, readers, and performers who form temporary communities through their recitation of the portable, quotable catchphrases in the work of Charlotte Mew. The poems, essays, and stories in which these figures appear are creative in their replication and re-arrangement of the stock conventions of femininity that,

commonalities between “performance,” “reform,” and “form.” “Sharing an etymological root that means ‘to bring into being’ or ‘to furnish,’” Jackson argues, “performance underscores the material acts of construction implicit in the term reform” (8).

³ Prins and Jackson, “Lyrical Studies” 523; for more on the circulation of the Poetess as a generic figure, see Prins’s *Victorian Sappho* (1999), Eliza Richards’s *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe’s Circle* (2004), Jackson’s “The Poet as Poetess” (2011), and Lootens’s *Political Poetess*.

whether freely chosen or forced upon them, were available to nineteenth-century women writers: the attitudes, gestures, and tableaux of monodrama and melodrama; the crowns and helmets and gems and flowers of stereotyped gift-book beauties; the feminine statues and corpses and brides and housewives of sentimental literature; and the ephemeral, disposable detritus that increasingly accumulated during the nineteenth-century explosion of print culture aimed specifically at female consumers—gift albums and scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, advertisements, mass-produced stationery and seals, playbills, and other ephemera. To perform as Poetess is to be richly supplemented by a host of proliferating costumes and properties and performing figures, to be part of a highly theatrical chorus or choir.

In its focus on Poetess *theatricality*, this project revises existing understandings of the relationship between Victorian poetry and dramatic form: while the most significant poetic innovation of the period, the dramatic monologue, has ensured that Victorian poetry has always been associated with the theater, this study argues for a collective, spectacular theatricality that most accounts of the dramatic monologue as the textual representation of an individual voice do not accommodate. Further, I deemphasize the relationship between “poet” and “speaker” that dominates so many critical accounts of dramatic poetry, especially poetry by women, in order to direct attention instead to the relationships Poetess theatricality imagines between figures within the poem; between poet and readers; or between multiple readers of the same poem.

This dissertation’s focus on popular, spectacular performances also brings together intersecting concerns about Poetess performers’ investments in questions of class, gender, and politics in a way that previous studies of women’s poetry as

performance have rarely done. In the work of the poets I discuss here, theatricality is significantly and unavoidably gendered feminine: not simply because the poets themselves are women, but because these poets participate in a culture in which to perform publicly—in print or in person—as a woman is different and more hazardous than to perform as a man.⁴ Thus the ambivalence about public performance that we can detect in Hemans's *Records of Woman* or Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, or the interrogation of stigmatized sexual practices such as prostitution or non-reproductive sex in the work of Webster and Mew become legible not—as many critics have read them—as the poet's personal anxieties or even a sympathetic impersonation of the anxieties of another woman, but as responses to a culture in which the figure of the *actress*, itself inextricable from the figure of the prostitute, mediates all public performance by women. And unlike dramatic monologues, which tend to invoke dramatic genres with high literary and cultural value, these poems invoke the crowd-pleasing spectacles associated with popular Victorian theatrical genres such as melodrama and burlesque, genres that in the nineteenth century were often associated with working-class audiences and attained a relatively low cultural status—not unlike the cultural status assigned to the popular middle-class genre of sentimental poetry by women, as well as the periodicals in which those poems circulated.

Theatricality, then, not only provides a way of understanding theatrical performance as a formal influence, a thematic concern, and a topic of representation in Poetess writing, but also a useful framework for bringing together aspects of Poetess

⁴ Susan Rosenbaum's *Professing Sincerity* demonstrates the degree to which, in a literary culture already suspicious of the relationship between writerly sincerity and commercialism, "women writers were particularly subject to readerly distrust and censure" due to the "concern that women poets . . . 'sell' themselves," a concern that linked women poets to prostitutes (20).

performance that have been touched upon individually but rarely considered in tandem—its publicity; its popularity; its multiplicity; and its status as visual, material spectacle—all characteristics of the Victorian theater as it was staged, as opposed to literary drama that was valued as a reading text as much as a text for performance. In this project’s focus upon “theatricality” rather than “drama,” I draw upon David Kurnick’s work on Victorian theatricality as the “publicity, exteriority, and collectivity of the theater” (7). I use Kurnick’s formulation to link the *publicity* of women poets’ print publications—a publicity that critics have long acknowledged as a feature and a problem of women’s performance both in print and onstage—to the *collectivity* specific to theatrical performance. Kurnick argues that theater as a form is “premised on a foundational cooperation” between actors (17) and that theater’s “formal trace . . . indexes the collective horizon that is the necessary ground of any meaningful political engagement” (18), linking the “collectivity” of theatricality not only to the collective experience of audience and performer but to the cooperation—or at least co-presence—of the performers themselves.

Therefore, this dissertation argues for taking the “drama” in “dramatic monologue” more literally. Or—more accurately—for considering the relationship between Victorian poetry and the spectacular, material, crowded, often messy stages of the Victorian theater. While Victorian intellectuals commonly characterized English drama as “in decline” (Booth, *Prefaces* 4), recent scholarship has shown that during the Victorian period the theater was both vibrant and popular; in particular, “illegitimate” theatrical genres such as melodrama, burlesque, and extravaganza flourished in England from the beginning of the nineteenth century. These genres combined music and dancing

with speech and could therefore be produced outside of the officially licensed theaters of Drury Lane and Covent Garden, the only theaters where spoken drama was permitted between the years of 1737 and 1843. Due to the illegitimate theater's inventive solutions to the prohibition against spoken drama—strategies which made their way to the legitimate drama as well—Victorian theater often emphasized the nonverbal aspects of performance, relying upon music in addition to visual features such as the exaggerated gestures and arresting tableaux of melodrama, the elaborate “transformation scenes” of extravaganza, the troupes of dancers characteristic of burlesque, and the spectacular special effects that nineteenth-century technological developments made possible in both the legitimate and illegitimate theater. These features all required the supplementation of material objects such as costume, props, and stage machinery; they all contributed to the “developing pictorialism” that Martin Meisel and Carolyn Williams, among others, cite as a characteristic of theater over the course of the nineteenth century; and they frequently depended upon the presence of multiple performers, often filling the stage with crowds of extras. The theatricality of the Poetess invokes, in its metaphors, formal structures, and representations, these aspects of the nineteenth-century theater: its vast, cross-class audiences; its stages crowded with supernumerary performers; its costumes, properties, stage dressings, and special effects; and the simultaneous, collective, often cooperative experience that these elements made possible.

In its simultaneity and collectivity, its ephemerality, its popularity, its relatively low cultural prestige, and its association with glamorous feminine figures, Poetess theatricality is also linked to the ephemeral, widely-distributed print publications in which Poetess performers often published. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the

circulation of magazines, newspapers, and gift albums expanded, facilitating the rise of the professional poet and the gendered, eroticized celebrity of the Poetess.⁵ As Judith Pascoe has shown, nineteenth-century poets experienced publication in periodicals as analogous to theatrical performance because both were forms of interactive public display that exposed an artist's work directly to a wide and responsive audience: although readers could not respond as immediately to a magazine poem as a live audience could respond to performance, the speed with which poets received feedback on magazine writing—in the form of letters, reviews, and even parodies or homages—was stunning in comparison to the production time necessary to print and distribute more expensive volumes of poems (8). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, periodicals and book publishers both marketed poetesses, like actresses, as celebrities, printing glamorous portraits in the pages of magazines and the frontispieces of poetry collections and cultivating public fascination with poets' personalities and private lives. Such a focus on the Poetess's glamorous body had its consequences, not least among them a critical tendency to minimize the seriousness of work by young and beautiful Poetess performers, and to ridicule women poets who had the audacity to engage in theatrical Poetess performance despite their own lack of youth and beauty.

This association between theatricality and print publication was not exclusive to women poets. Male writers also published in magazines; male actors performed onstage; male poets from Wordsworth and Keats to Tennyson and Browning expressed ambivalence about print publication as theatrical display; at the same time, many of the

⁵ This period also saw the rise of "Byromania" and a similar interest in the eroticized body of Lord Byron—demonstrating that Poetess theatricality, although usually gendered feminine and developing primarily from literary conventions and reading practices associated with women's writing, was not exclusive to women poets. Though Byron's body and persona were theatrically eroticized, however, his poetry did not engage in staging and recycling sentimental clichés.

same poets gave theatrical live performances of their poetry or wrote their own plays for theatrical production in (failed) efforts to transcend their success as lyric poets and become great dramatic poets in the vein of Shakespeare.⁶ Yet the association between print publication and theatrical performance was stronger and more morally charged for women writers—particularly for women poets. Gendered cultural expectations that women should be modest, silent, and confined to a private domestic sphere severely heightened the social and cultural risks of women’s public performance; so did the often conflicting expectations that performing bodies be young, beautiful, and erotically appealing. Despite a decrease in the stigma associated with print publication, it continued to be linked to acting throughout the nineteenth century, and acting continued to be linked to sexual promiscuity and prostitution. As Susan Rosenbaum and other critics have shown, since women poets were understood to be expressing their own private feelings in their work, they were especially vulnerable to charges of insincerity, duplicity, immorality, crass commercialism, and prostitution—charges that could be traced, Augusta Webster argued in 1879, to the first-person “personal pronoun” that poets “have to use” (155). When a woman writes as an “I,” the assumption is that either the feelings she writes about are her own, and therefore a violation of the privacy and modesty expected of women, or those emotions were manufactured for the market, in which case the woman poet is not only a seller of herself, but a broker of lies.⁷

This link between Poetess and actress, and the practices that Poetess performers and their publishers engaged in, in order to market Poetesses as celebrities, suggest

⁶ As Kurnick has shown, this desire for theatrical success was shared by male and female realist novelists from George Eliot to Charles Dickens to Henry James.

⁷ See, in addition to Rosenbaum, Richards’s account of the dilemma facing nineteenth-century American Poetess performers: “How does a woman sell her soul and still convincingly present herself as pure of commercial taint?” (17).

another important aspect of theatricality: its status as the “illusory, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial, or affected . . . critical other” of “antitheatricality” (Davis and Postlewait 4) and its related association with both feminine insincerity and frivolity.⁸ The word “theatricality” emerged simultaneously in English with the Victorian era itself, first appearing in 1837 in the second volume of Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* as a less-desirable alternative to “sincerity”: discussing “man’s” efforts to “mak[e] visible . . . the Celestial invisible Force within him,” Carlyle says “By act and word he strives to do it; with sincerity, if possible; failing that, with theatricality” (264). That the word “theatricality” should emerge in English as the opposite of “sincerity” is unsurprising given the tradition of “antitheatricality” that Jonas Barish has traced back to ancient Greece, and that Davis and Postlewait identify as a major defining force among the “limitless” valences the word has taken on since 1837. As Kurnick points out, however, critical overemphasis on the negative moral connotations associated with theatricality has obscured the significance theater held for Victorian audiences “as a publicizing and collectivizing technology” (12). This is certainly true of most critical accounts of the relationship between women poets and performance: even those critics who seek to complicate critical distinctions between sincerity and theatricality tend to ignore the collective, collaborative nature of theatrical performance. This dissertation redirects attention to that collectivity; at the same time, the artifice and “insincerity” of theatricality remain important to this project’s investigation of gendered modes of performance and reception. An appreciation for gendered artifice—from the deliberate

⁸ Pascoe points out that the “frequency with which the word ‘tinsel’ appears” in reviews of early nineteenth-century poets indicates that critics associated “showy” theatricality with femininity, artifice, and “vulgarity” (3).

use of sentimental poetic conventions to an often obvious pleasure in conventionally feminine clothing and accessories—is an important feature of the theatrical poetics this dissertation describes, while Poetess poems tend to register little interest in the question of “true” or “authentic” voices or identities. Yet readers and critics consistently have been preoccupied with the problem of the Poetess’s sincerity or insincerity—either dismissing Poetess writing as insincere, frivolous, or vapid, or laboring to detect the poet’s true feelings or desires, presumably masked by or submerged within the poem’s artifice.

For these reasons, theatrical performance necessarily haunts all poetry by women in the nineteenth century—as well as other genres in which Poetess figures “perform” live or in print. While poetry was particularly closely associated with unmediated public performance, the publicity of theatricality importantly links Poetess poetry to other print and performance genres in which feminine figures were on display. And the same questions of performance, sincerity, and artifice continue to saturate the reception of women’s writing and performance up to the present day.

If the characteristics this dissertation claims for theatricality—collectivity and visual spectacle, multiplicity and artifice, publicity and simultaneous experience—seem like unrelated terms, it may be because our cultural expectations about the relationships between gender, poetry, and politics have taught us to see feminine artifice and social reform, for example, as mutually exclusive terms. Part of the work of this dissertation is to reveal important links between theatrical spectacle, the ephemeral detritus of popular print cultures, lyric and dramatic poetry, and collective social endeavor. While not all these concepts were important to every Poetess performer, this dissertation shows that for

nineteenth-century readers and writers, they formed a recognizable constellation of ideas and concepts that can be described most accurately as Poetess theatricality.

Theatrical Form: Assemblage and Tableau

If women poets had little choice but to contend with Poetess theatricality in their work, theatricality also provided many women poets with a range of formal strategies that allowed them to meditate upon the problems, risks, and pleasures of appearing in public and in print; to analyze the role(s) of women—or Woman—that they were expected to perform; to theorize about poetic and dramatic genres; and to test out and represent alternative social configurations. Primary among these is the tableau, a form that Williams describes as “the master-convention of melodrama’s visual semiotics” (207) and that encompasses many other theatrical forms that appear in Poetess writing, including ensemble performance, the use of melodramatic “gesture” or monodramatic “attitudes,” elaborate costuming, and props. In melodramatic tableaux, the action freezes to mark the end of an act, “asking [the viewer] to read and interpret the composition”—a composition that often depicted the relationship between characters, but might also reveal a supernatural “vision scene” or a virtuosic replica of a famous work of visual art (Williams 208). In other genres, tableaux sometimes function as pure spectacle, stunning audiences with elaborately designed sets and carefully arranged crowds of gorgeously costumed performers. While the tableau evokes visual art as well as theater, the Poetess performances in this dissertation typically characterize such scenes in terms of temporarily arrested performance, suggesting an interest in the ephemeral, simultaneous experience shared by the audience and the actors participating in the tableau.

As printed texts that readers tend to encounter sequentially, reading or listening line by line, the poems discussed in this dissertation evoke the spectacle, simultaneity, materiality, and collectivity of the tableau in different ways. Many poems include descriptions of tableaux. Others, however, figure the text itself as an assemblage of textual figures and objects that has a strong formal resemblance to the tableau. The insistent replication of bodies and objects within Hemans's *Records of Woman*, for example, produces the effect of an assemblage of performing female figures, an effect that is echoed by Hemans's strategy of supplementing her lyric poems with multiple paratexts in diverse genres. The form of *Records of Woman*, meanwhile, echoes the form of the gift book, a more literal assemblage of texts and images that readers can read non-sequentially, browsing and noticing the connections between words and images as they might notice the elements of a tableau. In Webster's *Portraits*, the frequent use of the pronoun "we" serves as a constant reminder of the co-presence of reader, poet, and poem, invoking the experience shared by the tableau's actors and audience, while Charlotte Mew's poems invite the reader to consider individual lines and stanzas as extractable, quotable "tags" assembled temporarily for the purposes of the poem, but available to be repurposed in other performances and texts.

In its materiality, collectivity, and viscosity, the tableau allowed poets to test out the effects of public performance and, more, specifically, public objectification, in a way that has implications not only for feminist readings of gendered cultural power dynamics but for our understanding of poetic genres. As Isobel Armstrong has argued, replicating gendered conventions in their work offers women poets the opportunity to set the terms of their own objectification, or even to "anticipate" and "circumvent" men's

objectification of women (*Victorian Poetry* 326). Even further, however, the poets I discuss in this dissertation are interested in the meaning of objectification: what does it mean to be a feminine object on display to an audience of readers? What power does it grant or take away? What political and formal effects might objectification have? In melodramatic tableaux, the “objectification” that so often serves as a metaphor for patriarchal oppression in feminist criticism takes on a more literal function as a formal device: the bodies of actors “freeze” into objects onstage, formally equivalent to the props, costumes, and set pieces that surround them. In a tableau, and in many theatrical Poetess poems that invoke the form of the tableau, performing women almost literally become objects.⁹

Thus the spectacular, collective, embodied form of the tableau and its components—performing bodies, costumes, props, and scenery—become important figures not only for meditating upon gendered display but for considering the temporal and spatial effects that underlie our understandings of genre. In their emphasis on the visibility of theatrical display, theatrical Poetess poems allow poets to test out and analyze the effects of public objectification in a way that the metaphor of “voice,” the metaphor that underlies most accounts of the relationship between poetry and drama, does not.¹⁰

The poems upon which this dissertation focuses hold that embodiment and spectacle are

⁹ Poet and performance artist Kate Durbin’s tumblr project “Women as Objects,” and her 2012 essay/manifesto/provocation “In Favor of Women as Objects: Propositions” have been influential to this dissertation’s approach to the topic of the Poetess and objectification. A sample proposition from Durbin’s essay: “17. A woman need not consider herself other than object, but rather, instead of rescuing herself from the objecthood inscribed upon her by culture, heroically fighting ideas in the clouds, she may find freedom in the low world of things, in making love to things. Then she may laugh at anyone who thinks they can flatten her, for she knows she is not flat but multiple, trail of diamonds, mountain of dead flowers, part and parcel of all that is.”

¹⁰ This is not to say that metaphors of voice are not important in Poetess writing, any more than to say that voice is not important in theater—merely that theatrical metaphors offer a wider account of the strategies I describe here than a primary focus on metaphors of voice allows.

equal in importance to—and often in competition with—metaphors of voice and song. Meanwhile, the stasis and simultaneity of the tableau, in its ability to both contain and represent a crowd and to halt the forward motion of narrative, suggest that visual and “theatrical” techniques can achieve the collective, choral possibilities inherent in lyric stasis. A tableau creates a visual picture within which the viewer’s gaze might wander without being focused upon any individual character or object; it represents multiple figures at the same time. This is the feature of the tableau that makes it most formally similar to the gift book, the scrapbook, and the commonplace book—hybrid print forms that encompass a range of genres and encourage browsing and selection on the part of the reader.

The collective, simultaneous experience created by tableaux was especially useful to Poetess performers who were interested in the theater for its social potential. A poem that presents itself as a choral performance or a tableau—rather than as a disembodied lyric “voice” or even a dramatic monologue—emphasizes poetry’s power to represent, model, or facilitate collective action and solidarity. The stasis of the tableau also calls attention to the relationships between the figures onstage. Even as Victorian theatrical tableaux often portrayed historical or fantastical scenes, the form of the tableau invites a present-tense attention to the relationships between and among performers and audience, one that many of the poets I discuss here mobilized in order to consider the possibilities of social reform or to acknowledge marginalized or forgotten populations.

The formal strategies facilitated by the tableau and the assemblage, then, allow for varied, often ambivalent, engagements with theatricality. While for Barrett Browning public theatrical performance objectifies women in a way that makes them physically

vulnerable, it also allows for the representation of figures who might have been excluded from the first-person narrative in which *Aurora Leigh* is written; for Hemans and Landon, the Poetess's performing body is both decorative and disturbingly excessive, uncontained by the limits of an individual poem or speaking subject. For Webster, theatricality provides a model for thinking through new or revised social arrangements that might allow for a shared collective experience while accommodating the individual needs of outliers and outsiders. Meanwhile, for Mew—indeed, for all the poets I discuss here—theatrical performance provides a model for a flexible, shifting aesthetic in which a vocabulary of conventional language, citational gestures, props, and costumes can be attached, detached, rearranged, and supplemented by the voices and bodies of various performers and audiences to take on new meanings and to form new (if temporary) relationships and communities.¹¹

Critical Histories: Dramatic Monologue and Poetess Performance

Understanding this project's intervention in Victorian poetics and especially in Poetess poetics requires understanding a literary context in which Victorian poetry is already understood to be dramatic in form. My approach here builds upon existing criticism on the dramatic monologue in general, on Victorian women's dramatic poetry in particular, and on the complex rhetorical performances associated with the figure of the Poetess. In attending to the *theatricality* of these performances, however, I show that the range of strategies and techniques with which Victorian poets engaged the idea of the

¹¹ Poetess performance is not by any means always "positive" in its effects or even recognizably feminist in its politics. As Lootens argues persuasively in *The Political Poetess*, to acknowledge that the Poetess had—and has—creative and political power is to acknowledge her complicity in the creation and support of the British Empire and the global cultures of white supremacy it helped to create. This dissertation takes seriously the ways in which Victorian Poetess deliberately, creatively, and thoughtfully made use of metaphors of spectacular and collective theatricality—but certainly does not suggest that those metaphors consistently served just or feminist ends.

theater is wider than has previously been understood, given the limitations of the concepts of *drama* or the *dramatic*. In particular, this dissertation suggests that the visual spectacle of the Victorian theater provided Victorian poets with a productive metaphor for the highly gendered ways in which women's public performance was received, a metaphor that often replaced or competed with the metaphor of "masked speech" commonly associated with the dramatic monologue.

As a genre, the dramatic monologue is often defined by the examples that Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson began publishing in the 1830s: although the term "dramatic monologue" was not used widely until the end of the century, nineteenth-century readers recognized the formal resemblance between such poems as Browning's "My Last Duchess" or "Fra Lippo Lippi" and Tennyson's "St. Simeon Stylites" and first-person speeches in plays. Like dramatic texts, these poems often indicate the name of the character who is speaking as well as the location where the scene is set; they are often addressed to another character, an implied auditor who, although silent, creates the illusion that the monologist is part of a larger company, perhaps performing before a live audience. In this way the dramatic monologue certainly gestures toward the collective experience produced by theatrical performance: as Herbert F. Tucker points out, Browning's and Tennyson's dramatic monologues respond to and critique John Stuart Mill's claim that poetry is a private utterance that is "overheard" rather than "heard." As Tucker suggests, if several readers are "overhearing" the mournful utterances of the poet together, "is that not called going to the theater?"¹²

¹² Tucker 554. Browning and Tennyson themselves were no strangers to performance: Browning wrote several (unsuccessful) plays that were produced in the Victorian theater, and Tennyson was well known for his dynamic public readings of his work, including his moving renditions of *Maud: A Monodrama*.

Despite these gestures toward public performance and collective experience, however, critical interest in the “dramatic” qualities of the dramatic monologue as a poetic genre have tended to center on its depiction of an individual character, following Robert Langbaum’s 1958 description of the fascination produced by Browning’s Duke’s “hard core of character fiercely loyal to itself” (529). More recent discussions of the dramatic monologue, however, tend to call into question Langbaum’s emphasis on the genre’s virtuosic representation of “character.” Tucker argues, for example, that the fascination that Langbaum recognizes in individual character emerges in the interplay between two competing forms of collective knowledge: the historical context that, in locating the poem’s speaker among broader social and historical movements, “threatens . . . to unravel character by exposing it as merely a tissue of affiliations” (546) and the “choral dissolution that lurks in lyric voice” even in its vaunted privacy (550). But late twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers do expect key formal features of the dramatic monologue as a genre—the obvious distance between poet and speaker, the specificity of the poem’s historical setting—to produce the effect of a distinct and individual character, even if the poem ultimately undermines our belief in the stability of that character. Though Tucker launches an argument against that expectation—parodying the New Critical worship of the “Speaker King”—he does not give up the idea of dramatic character. For Tucker, even as the tension between drama and lyric in the dramatic monologue threatens to undo the speaker into a “tissue of affiliations” or “choral dissolution,” the poem simultaneously “reinstates the checking of such dissolution as the mark of the individual self . . . a distinct ‘I,’ a name to conjure against” (546).

The “classic” dramatic monologue, then, emphasizes solo performance; and criticism of dramatic monologue is frequently preoccupied with the relation between speaker and poet as much as (or more than) the relationship between speaker and auditor, poem and audience. The obvious distance between speaker and poet has made the dramatic monologue an important genre for both poets and critics struggling against biographical and expressivist reading practices in which every poem is posited as the expression of a poet’s own feelings. When writing about the dramatic monologue, both poets and critics can confidently repeat Augusta Webster’s assertion that “as a rule, I does not mean I” (155)—a claim that is particularly useful in the case of women poets. As Armstrong has shown, while readers have interpreted all kinds of poetry as “expressive” of the personal emotions of the poet or the speaker, women’s poetry is particularly vulnerable to being interpreted as excessively—even pathologically—emotional and irrational. For Armstrong, as for many other critics, the dramatic monologue has served a practical, protective function for women poets: speaking from behind the “mask” of a character offers the woman writer protection from moral censure if the poem expresses scandalous or unpopular opinions. And speaking through the gendered “mask” of an idealized woman from history or myth, or even the mask of an archetypal “ordinary” man or woman, allows the woman poet to control her own (inevitable) objectification and to make “feminine subjectivity” an object of objective inquiry and critique (*Victorian Poetry* 325 – 326).

Yet to speak of the “mask” of dramatic monologue as providing women poets with an opportunity for ““masked critique”” or subversion (372)—or even of its role in protecting women poets from the dangers of public exposure—is to direct attention to the

person behind the mask, and often to suggest that the poem might constitute a trace, a fossil or imprint, from which we can deduce—or, to borrow a word from Prins and Jackson, exhume—the body of the poet, living or dead (“Lyrical Studies” 522). The distance between speaker and poet implied by dramatic monologue has been important to discussions of women’s poetry because gendered practices of biographical reading have been so persistent, but not necessarily because the distance between speaker and poet is always an important function of the poem. In fact, many critics have noticed that in dramatic monologues written by Victorian women, the division between speaker and poet is less distinct than it is in Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” for example. Dorothy Mermin goes so far as to argue that “women’s dramatic monologue” constitutes a separate genre, one in which sympathy for the speaker replaces Browning’s ironic framing, and in which poet and speaker “blur together” (“The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet” 76). While Mermin’s reading accurately identifies several differences between Browning’s dramatic monologues and those written by women poets—indeed, besides Browning himself, few poets of any gender make the reader so acutely “aware of the poet signaling to us from behind the speaker’s back” (76)—her interpretation depends on an assumption that the identity of the speaker always tells us something about the poet. Either the speaker is *like* the poet, in which case the two “blur together,” or the speaker is so unlike the poet as to imply the poet’s ironic critique.

This assumption, in conjunction with gendered reading practices that tend to focus on the suffering of women poets, has produced significant misreadings of poets ranging from Hemans and Landon to Sylvia Plath. Readers focused on the distance between poet and speaker often describe women’s first-person poems in terms of psychological

division or repression; the consciousness of the poet herself is understood to have been fractured or divided by the paradoxes of female authorship. Poetry that makes use of dramatic monologue or that mobilizes multiple figures or personae is frequently read pathologically, as evidence of the irrecoverable psychological damage produced by the poet's adherence to conventional gender roles.¹³ The poem's speaker becomes a persona or mask that is understood either to suppress or expose the poet's true self and painfully concealed feelings—ironically contributing to the biographical, expressivist reading practices from which the model of the dramatic monologue is thought to protect the poet.¹⁴ In Mermin's reading, for example, a literary tradition that casts women not as poets but as erotic objects within poems—or even as poems themselves—makes it impossible for women poets to achieve the ironic distance from their poetic speakers required of dramatic monologue.

Reading such poems in terms of the spectacular, collective form of theatricality that this dissertation takes as its subject accounts for the obvious theatricality of Poetess performance without overemphasizing the importance of identity or “character” in poems that, as Prins and Jackson have observed, demonstrate little investment in that concept. Widening the scope of the theatrical metaphors we use to describe Poetess performance to include assemblages, tableaux, and easily detachable costumes and properties might help us let go of reading practices in which poetry—especially poetry by women—is understood as an expression of a true self or the masked performance of a false,

¹³ See, for example, Alicia Ostriker's emphasis on “self-division” within the work of twentieth-century women poets (77), as well as the critical accounts of the work of Charlotte Mew that I discuss in Chapter 5.

¹⁴ In general, overemphasis on the relationship between poet and speaker, as well as the metaphors of poetic “mask,” “persona,” and “voice,” tends to displace but not eliminate the subjectivist reading practices such criticism seeks to disrupt, acknowledging that the poet herself is not expressing her own feelings in the poem, but treating the poem's speaker as an expressive subject: as Tucker says of the contemporary tendency to read every poem as a dramatic monologue, “The old king of self-expressive lyricism is dead! Long live the Speaker King!” (556).

constructed self. Instead, we could understand the figures in these poems not as fractured but as multiple, and we could acknowledge the ways in which the poems represent the formal and social challenges and pleasures of proliferation.

In looking beyond the dramatic monologue in my consideration of the theatricality of Poetess performance, I have benefited from scholarship on other genres associated with performance and women's writing. For the phrase "Poetess performance" itself, I am indebted to Lootens's account, in *The Political Poetess*, of the public, politically haunted gestures made by seemingly private and feminine lyric verse—an account I will discuss further below. In addition, I draw upon Armstrong's concept of the double poem, as well as upon Dwight Culler's and Carrie Preston's work on monodrama. For Armstrong, any form that presents a speaking subject at a distance, including dialogues, dreams, parodies, and "framed narrative[s]," is an example of the double poem and is dramatic in form; even though such a poem can be read as the "lyric expression" of the speaker's feelings, Armstrong argues, the poem is simultaneously "reclassified as drama" by "turn[ing] its expressive utterance around so that it becomes the opposite of itself, not only the subject's utterance but the object of analysis and critique" (*Victorian Poetry* 12 – 13). Instead of interpreting a poem as *only* the subjective expression of its speaker (and its author), then, Armstrong's proposed reading practice encourages readers to consider the poem as both subjective expression and objective analysis of that expression. In Armstrong's formulation, the primary feature of dramatic poetry becomes not necessarily character, but the way in which the poem mediates between public and private, "expression" and analysis.

Meanwhile, monodrama—a solo dramatic genre that Culler and others have identified as an important influence upon the dramatic monologue, as well as upon melodrama and other popular performance genres of the Victorian era—provides an important precedent for the spectacular, often embodied form of theatricality this dissertation describes, as well as for its emphasis on performance while it deemphasizes character. In monodrama, the performer’s spoken language is punctuated by musical interludes, often accompanied by changes in the performer’s gestures or attitudes; speech, gestures, and attitudes are designed to display a wide range of changing human emotions. As Tennyson said of his literary monodrama *Maud*, “successive phases of passion in one person take the place of successive persons.”¹⁵ Culler argues that the monodrama is less interested than the dramatic monologue in the portrayal of a specific character; instead, “in pure monodrama, character is little more than a formal thread on which the beads of passion are strung” (380). Carrie Preston’s more recent work on monodrama focuses on its history as a feminine form, identifying a tradition of female solo performance beginning with the embodied “attitudes” of Emma Lyon Hamilton and continuing through the dramatic monologues of Barrett Browning, Augusta Webster, and Charlotte Mew, influencing the nineteenth-century physical culture and recitation practices inspired by François Delsarte, and ultimately shaping important works of poetry, dance, and film in the modernist era. In addition to providing valuable readings of the performance history of dramatic monologues, Preston’s approach models important ways in which nineteenth-century performance culture can be reincorporated into twentieth-century literature and art.

¹⁵ Quoted in Ricks 235.

This dissertation's choice to deemphasize the relationship between poet and speaker participates in a critical history of dramatic poetry in which the importance of the dramatic speaker as a distinct character is gradually deemphasized, moving from Langbaum's "hard core of character" in 1958 to Culler's "formal string" in 1975 to Mermin's blurred hybrid of poet and speaker in 1987. Recent work in Poetess studies has further reduced the speaker to an "empty figure," an endlessly repeated signature that is "a form of erasure" (Prins and Jackson, "Lyrical Studies" 523) or a "Nobody" (Lootens, *Political Poetess* 4.) In their influential 1999 essay "Lyrical Studies," Prins and Jackson agree with Armstrong that the Poetess figure that appears in nineteenth-century sentimental verse by women is not to be confused with the historical woman poet herself; moreover she is "not a speaker, not an 'I,' not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self" (523). In one sentence, Prins and Jackson reject both the subjectivist tradition of reading Poetess writing as expressive of the poet's personal feeling *and*—in their explicit rejection of the language of "voice" and "persona"—critical paradigms in which dramatic monologue constitutes a "mask" or "persona" through which a poet might speak, calling into question the value of the theatrical metaphors associated with dramatic monologue and other dramatic forms to describe Poetess writing. Prins and Jackson do describe the Poetess in terms of performance, but they caution against reading such performances as subversive or ironic, suggesting that to do so is to continue to try to recover the "real" poet behind the mask. Prins's *Victorian Sappho*, for example, registers skepticism of feminist critical narratives in which women poets find their true voice, find an original voice, or express or even conceal their true selves through subversive performances of gender: rather than constructing an "ironically

alienated other,” Prins argues that Poetess poetry “calls into question the very possibility” of “posess[ing] an awareness ‘of themselves’ as ‘selves’ to be identified” (183 – 184). If Poetess performance offers no possibility, through the careful indexing of biographical details or ironic framing, of unmasking the thoughts and feelings of the “real” woman poet, then, Prins and Jackson wonder, “what are we hoping to uncover by exhuming dead poetesses from a dusty century?” (522).

Instead, the performances Prins and Jackson describe are rhetorical, citational repetitions of generic and gendered conventions—enacted by a figure that does not possess subjectivity, personality, or individuality. An example is the emblematic Poetess figure of Sappho, who, as the “proper name for the Poetess” (*Victorian Sappho* 14), continually performs the same Sapphic fall in poems written by countless women poets. Instead of creating a new persona, a new or alternative “I,” through the “mask” of dramatic monologue, the poets Prins describes in *Victorian Sappho* “predict [their] own death, the impossibility of writing in the first person” (195), resigning the “I” by endlessly re-signing the endlessly repeatable signature of Sappho and becoming a “postscript” to an already endless series of Sapphic signatures. Similarly, Eliza Richards has discussed the way in which American Poetess performers encoded their own silence and obscurity into their performances in print and in the salons of nineteenth-century America, even as they influenced and facilitated the writing of individual “genius” figures such as Edgar Allan Poe.

The concept of performance is similarly useful to Lootens as an index of the inaccessibility of the feelings and intentions of the real-life poets whom she describes as “Poetess performers.” Like earlier criticism on women’s dramatic monologues, Lootens’s

discussion of Poetess writing as performance is a way of refusing the equation of the historical woman with the poem—no historical woman, Lootens makes clear, could ever actually *be* a Poetess—but with the important difference that no relationship between poet and speaker is posited. Instead, Lootens encourages us to read, with “shamefully literalizing” closeness, only the performance itself, with the understanding that the desires and frustrations of the historical woman who created the performance are not available to us (124). Further, Lootens demonstrates that attending closely to the “click of the *cliché*” in Poetess performers’ highly conventional language—language that many critics have found “unreadable” (23)—reveals that the repetitive, citational, generic performances described by Prins and Jackson are explicitly political; in “step[ping] forth” as seemingly innocent, apolitical “internal enemies” of the State (3, 87), Poetess performers provide both an “alibi” and a “refuge” for the martial masculinity they seem to critique (2, 13).

This dissertation is committed to the citational performances that remain available for analysis, and to what Lootens, citing Armstrong, describes as close, “consenting” readings of the artistry, thought, and conflict that these performances display (*Political Poetess* 124). Even as this dissertation does not seek to exhume the bodies of dead poetesses, however, it takes seriously the material circumstances, public engagements, and real or imagined bodies that these poems obsessively index and discuss. The body of the Poetess cannot be accessed in these poems—but real bodies wrote and sometimes performed these poems, and the poems imagine a presence in the world that is not *merely* “performative.” Prins and Jackson argue that the Poetess’s “performative” cries of protest “can[not] change the course of history” (“Lyrical Studies” 529), but the writing I discuss

here often does imagine performance as equivalent to, or necessary for, historical intervention and social reform—or, at the very least, as a deliberate way of making art from the material detritus that constituted and accompanied a gendered print culture intended for consumption by lower- and middle-class women readers. This dissertation attends to the “real-life” performances of that now-famously virtual figure the Poetess. It asks, along with a conference panel on the topic of “The Poetess IRL”: “what would it mean to ‘recover’ the body of the Poetess not as the corpse of a forgotten lyric subject, but as a figure and a presence that circulated in the material spaces of nineteenth-century performance culture and reform movements?”¹⁶ And how specifically do Poetess texts imagine and engage with such theatrical and social performances.

Scope and Chapters of the Present Work

To tell the story of the theatrical Poetess, it is important to strip away habitual critical assumptions about Poetess performance. In order to provide context for the way in which nineteenth-century writers and readers may have already understood the theatricality of the Poetess, this dissertation begins with a chapter on the history of the word “poetess” as it has been used in English, beginning with the word’s emergence in the sixteenth century and continuing to the present, including an overview of the changing currents of Poetess criticism that extends beyond the one sketched in this introduction. When we attend to the ways in which the word was actually used to describe real or imagined women writers, two somewhat unexpected associations emerge: the Poetess’s theatricality and her multiplicity. Chapter One, “‘A Choir of Poetesses’: The Multiple, Theatrical Poetess in English Literature and Culture,” thus explains how

¹⁶ Madden, Caolan and Lauren Kimball, “Call for Papers: The Poetess IRL.” Panel at C19 conference, State College, PA, March 17, 2016.

the term “poetess” in English has always connoted theatrical performance: like the word “poet,” it often referred to a dramatist, but with the added moral and sexual valences of the word “actress.” In addition, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Poetess, who began as an “exceptional” woman like Sappho, became increasingly synonymous with the generic “Woman”—and therefore came to represent *all* or many women. By the nineteenth century, individual Poetess performers were increasingly considered part of a larger “choir” of women poets who both competed and collaborated to represent and shape British national literature.

My second chapter, “‘These Things for the Grave’: Objects, Attributes, and Mobile Identity in the Work of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon,” considers the many interchangeable feminine figures, objects, garments, and landscapes that appear in Hemans’s 1828 collection *Records of Woman* and Landon’s 1833 gift book *Heath’s Book of Beauty*. I argue that these “attributes” create material, visual “fields” of identity that exceed the metaphor of lyric or dramatic voice, drawing on alternative visual metaphors associated with spectacular theatrical forms: costume, props, scenery, tableaux. These expansive fields of identity allow poets to comment and meditate upon the gendered objectification not only of women but specifically of Poetess performers—a commentary that is not necessarily ironic or subversive, but that takes seriously the possibility that the performer might be a “thing” among other “things,” even as it registers anxiety about how lasting such feminine “objects” might be.

In *Records of Woman*, the redundancy of potential recording “traces” of the women the “records” purport to represent—bodies, objects, landscape, song, image, writing—formally mirrors the structure of many of the poems in the collection.

Surrounded by paratextual materials ranging from prose prefaces to verse epigraphs, these poems register anxiety about the very possibility of *recording* women—or rather the impossibility of recording that ideal category of Woman. If the (insurmountable) problem posed by Hemans's poems is that of how to permanently represent or record the presence of Woman—whether through vocal or gestural performance, visual art, or written language—the vast fields of redundant bodies and objects in her poems suggest feminine identities that exceed any method of recording, but that index the presence of women who might otherwise be unrepresentable. Landon's writing, meanwhile, takes a more playful approach, creating similarly vast fields of feminine identity through casual citational gestures to objects, advertisements, book reviews, and footnotes. In Landon's work, heroines from Scott and Byron, mythic-historical figures such as Sappho and Erinna, fantasy gift-book beauties, exotic "others" ranging from Florentine brides to "Hindoo girls," talismans from Balzac, patent stickers, gorgeous engravings, laurel wreaths, ropes of pearls, and endless other names, bodies, objects, and words create a stream of associations, "hints," and identities from which the reader can choose, and in which every object seems to have the same weight.

If for Hemans a profusion of performing Poetess figures became a necessary condition for representing the identity of Woman, while Landon reveled in the casual interchangeability of different feminine figures and objects, by 1856 Barrett Browning's verse novel *Aurora Leigh* depicts the proliferations of the Poetess as dangerously, even terrifyingly, theatrical, linked to the excessive corporeality of working-class theatergoers and the crowded stages of the popular theaters they frequented. My third chapter, "'We Make a Pretty Show': The Threat of the Theatrical Poetess in *Aurora Leigh*," argues that

Barrett Browning uses theatricality in *Aurora Leigh* in order to think through the dangers, pleasures, and political potential of performing as Poetess—and in order to create a foil that allows her to develop an alternative, anti-theatrical version of the woman poet, one who might perform on the “stage of the Soul” rather than among the messy, material, artificial trappings of the Victorian theater. In casting Aurora’s cousin Romney as a theatrical Poetess figure, Barrett Browning links Poetess performance with public theatrical performance, materiality, and collectivity, in opposition to Aurora’s fantasy of a private, bodiless drama. Ultimately, Aurora and Romney reach a compromise between Aurora’s idealism and Romney’s materialism—but only through the exclusion of the crowds of “supernumeraries” that in *Aurora Leigh* index both the unruly working classes and the uneasy history of the theatrical Poetess. The poem’s ultimate rejection of these figures demonstrates that including Poetess figures in their work only to transcend or remove them was one strategy by which women poets might gain respect for their work as unmarked “poets” rather than as “Poetesses”—even as the Poetess’s insistent presence in *Aurora Leigh* reminds us of the lingering influence that Poetess theatricality continued to have on Victorian poetry.

In many ways, Augusta Webster, a distinguished poet, journalist, and translator of Greek drama, might seem to personify the anti-Poetess Barrett Browning imagined in *Aurora Leigh*: the dramatic monologues and closet dramas for which Webster is best known might be seen as drama performed on the “stage of the soul”—and as a poet writing Browningsque dramatic monologues in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, Webster is rarely considered a “Poetess figure.” In my fourth chapter, “‘We Should Be *That* Iago’: Augusta Webster’s Lyric ‘We’,” however, I demonstrate that

Webster's commitment to poetry as a collective experience, and to the politics of that collectivity, draws upon the conventions of theatrical Poetess writing that I discuss in my first three chapters. Beginning with Webster's suggestion that poets use the "editorial We" instead of "I," this chapter shows that for Webster, the writing and reading of poetry is a collective, collaborative act that models the creation of communities and can lead to social reform. Further, Webster's emphasis on the stasis and "simultaneity" of poetry figures the poem as a three-dimensional space—not unlike the theatrical tableaux imagined by Hemans, Landon, and Barrett Browning—that can accommodate multiple actors, readers, and writers. The simultaneous, collaborative, theatrical space of the poem becomes a model for social life, allowing for the generous, collaborative management of the figure of the "housewife" that Webster constructs in her essay collection *A Housewife's Opinions*—a figure that I propose as a Poetess figure engaged in material, as well as rhetorical, performance within domestic, institutional, and public spaces. Further, Webster's understanding of the "we" as primarily *lyric* helps us to understand the relationship between her most famous dramatic poems, her plays, and the more obviously lyric forms she favored at the end of her life. In emphasizing that collectivity and simultaneity are shared features of dramatic and lyric poetry, Webster shifts the focus from the questions of voice, performance, and impersonation that tend to dominate discussions of both dramatic and lyric verse and suggests new ways of understanding poetry as collective experience.

My final chapter, "'Not a Natural *Cri de Coeur*': Charlotte Mew's Quotable, Extractable Poetics" considers the dramatic monologues from Mew's poetry collection *The Farmer's Bride* in the context of the poems' history as texts for performance. Read in

the context of Mew's readings at private salons and public performances at the Poetry Bookshop, as well as the highly citational poetics described in Mew's own letters and implied in her unpublished short story "Thic Theer Kayser," poems such as "The Farmer's Bride" become visible as invitations to performance and quotation; their debt to nineteenth-century print and performance genres associated with the Victorian Poetess becomes clear. As a twentieth-century poet who integrates strategies used by nineteenth-century women poets into her work, and who has been interpreted as a confessional poet helplessly performing her own mental and sexual anguish, Mew is an example both of how the choral tradition of the Victorian Poetess persists into the twentieth century and of the twentieth-century tendency still to misread Poetess writing as pathologically fractured and divided, as well as autobiographical. A reading of Mew's work that attends to its performance history and her interest in catchphrases and extracts allows us to better understand the collective, theatrical history of the figure of the Poetess and its influence upon modernism, thus helping us to look forward to the present day.

That influence includes the practices of quotation and collage made famous by the modernist and avant-garde poets of the first half of the twentieth century; the particularly choral theatricality that informs the work of mid-twentieth-century "confessional" poets such as Sylvia Plath, whose work teems with multiplying figures (sarcophagi, plaster casts, fairy godmothers) that have persistently been read as evidence of the poet's own fractured psyche; the carnivalesque depictions of the Poetess and of white Victorian femininity in the writing of playwright Adrienne Kennedy, whose work reminds us that Poetess theatricality is inextricable from the racialized history that Lootens describes in *The Political Poetess*; and the ambivalent relationship between feminist politics,

consumer culture, and gendered, theatrical display in the work of the twenty-first-century poets and visual artists that Arielle Greenberg and Lara Glenum have identified as “Gurlesque,” a cultural category whose name derives from the nineteenth-century burlesque tradition as well as from twentieth-century sources such as Plath’s and Sexton’s “grotesque” investigations of female bodies and the 1990s punk-rock movement Riot Grrrl. Beyond the category of literature, Poetess theatricality is at play in reality television franchises such as *The Bachelor* and *America’s Next Top Model*, in which the ostensible competition between groups of (young, conventionally beautiful, television-ready) women is in tension with their status as seemingly interchangeable ensemble performers; in Internet culture, including the “selfie” culture practiced by young women, the citational assemblages of repurposed texts, images, and sounds that constitute many young women’s tumblr feeds, and the cultural tendency to dismiss such performances as vapid or to pathologize them as narcissistic; and in the conflicting reactions to Beyoncé’s 2016 “visual album” *Lemonade*, a hybrid text that combines music, poetry, and video to create what is simultaneously a confessional document of personal suffering, a theatrical spectacle replete with gorgeous costumes and eroticized female bodies, a political manifesto concerning feminism and racial justice, and a highly marketable consumer product. In debating whether it might be possible for such a theatrical, commercial, and seemingly confessional text to *also* function as a rallying cry for collective action by Black women, commentators in 2016 took up questions that have fundamentally structured the creation and reception of Poetess theatricality, and that might help us to identify relationships between the highly public, gendered, collective endeavors of

performance, popular culture, and politics that previous readings of the Poetess have not made possible.

I am not claiming a direct line of influence between these figures and the nineteenth-century poets I discuss in this dissertation—such a line would have to be developed by future scholarship. I do claim, however, that many of these feminine performances share a set of performance conventions and a gendered reception history with the poets in this dissertation, and that their engagement with, resistance to, and play with this reception history itself has profoundly shaped cultural production throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—a reception history that my first chapter, in its account of the history of the word “poetess” as it has been used in English, helps to make clear.

In directing critical attention to the theatricality of the Poetess, this dissertation works to connect recent work in Victorian poetics with the gendered, embodied experiences, performances, and *stuff* that has been the object of so much important feminist criticism, directing attention not only to the costumed performers and print ephemera that seem to litter the pages of Poetess writing but also to the casualness, the messiness, what we might even call the *junkiness* of our own public and theatrical culture. In doing so, this project might make it possible to account for the pleasure, for the serious play, that the woman artist finds in the (often commodified) world of objects and female “beauty,” or in her own complex relationship to a literary canon in which the real authors are all men and the idealized female author is often only an image. A theatrical, rather than a merely dramatic, approach to the Poetess makes room for a poetics that results in neither a well-wrought lyric urn nor a carefully constructed dramatic mask, but a set of

gendered strategies from which the poet might pick and choose, taking a stance from among any number of possible stances toward any number of possible objects, images, and words.

Chapter One

“A Choir of Poetesses”:

The Multiple, Theatrical Poetess in English Literature and Culture

My discussion of the Poetess’s multiplicity and theatricality begins with the theatrical excesses embedded in the word “poetess” itself. The word, like the Poetess, strikes many readers as fussy, outdated, and overly ornamented. For Germaine Greer, in her 1995 book *Slip-Shod Sibyls*, the word’s feminine suffix is redundant and embarrassingly decorative: like a nineteenth-century lady struggling with her voluminous skirts, the “poetess’s stride is encumbered by a train of esses.” When the Poetess is multiple, or when she possesses something, the rustling of these skirts is amplified to an unbearable sibilance: Poetesses, Poetess’s. Greer cites these excessive esses to demonstrate that “poetess,” like “poetaster,” was always necessarily a derogatory term. Since “‘Poet’ is a fine word,” any suffix dilutes its power: “to pin a tail to the word ‘poet,’ as in ‘poetaster’ ‘poeticule,’ ‘poetling,’ is to anchor it to earth, to condemn it to less than best” (36). By 2014, Greer’s preference for that “fine word” “poet”—streamlined and unmarked by gender or by unnecessary ornamentation—had manifested more generally in our most accurate indicator of cultural relevance, the Google search. Until recently, to type the word *poetess* (without quotation marks) into the Google search box was to watch it simply vanish, replaced automatically in the search results with the word *poet*. The verdict seemed definitive: there was no such thing as a Poetess. As of my final week of revising this dissertation, however—July 24, 2017—the Poetess is back, reminding us that while to call a contemporary woman poet a “poetess” might be condescending, the word has a meaning and a history that should not be erased.

These examples—the susurrations of Greer’s “train of esses,” Google’s trimming and subsequent restoration of the Poetess’s “ess”—continue a centuries-long history in which, as Virginia Jackson notes, the word “poetess” came to indicate something “more or other” than its original sense as “a woman who composes poetry” (“Poet as Poetess” 59). As Greer’s disgust suggests, the history of the Poetess is also one in which to be “more than” a poet is to be “condemn[ed]” to being “less than best.” This is a paradox that critics of the Poetess know well. The sheer numbers, the popularity, and the “stylistic excesses,” both literary and sartorial, of Poetess performers—all characteristics that led the Poetess, at different points in history, to be considered “more than” a poet—have been cited as evidence of their artistic inadequacy.¹⁷ Poetess performers themselves, as well as their admirers and apologists, also embrace the Poetess figure’s status as both “more than” and “less than.” In poems by Victorian women poets, in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthologies, and in late-twentieth-century feminist criticism, the figure of the Poetess is continually being lost and then recovered. Poetess performance simultaneously trades upon the fleshly reality of the Poetess’s (imagined) body—grotesque or glamorous or both—and dissolves that body into generic abstraction.¹⁸ As the word waxes and wanes in our Google search results, it imitates the “flickering” of what Lootens calls “Poetess parallax,” in which the Poetess “appear[s] in her most clearly defined form to those not looking directly at her,” becoming a stand-in for whatever conventional, feminized ideology a particular writer wants to critique: the “Victorian

¹⁷ As Judith Pascoe shows, nineteenth-century critics decried the “stylistic excess”—a “penchant for ornamentation” or “tinsel” (3)—of writing by women poets, and “feminine” writing more generally. Such “feminine” writing included Keats’s poems, which, as Pascoe shows, were charged with vulgarity (3); see also Susan Wolfson’s “Feminizing Keats.” For more on how Poetess popularity has been linked with poor literary quality, see Laura Mandell’s “Introduction to the Poetess Tradition.”

¹⁸ See Prins and Jackson, “Lyrical Studies” and Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, for more on the continual loss and recovery of the Poetess; see *The Political Poetess* for Lootens’s account of the Poetess’s varied performances of “decorporealization, that more or less definitive act of the Poetess” (127).

doctrine of separate spheres,” perhaps, or “femininity” in general. In doing away with the Poetess’s train of “esses,” both Greer and Google, like the critics Lootens imagines in her account of Poetess parallax, seem to tell us, “pay no attention to that shadowy form behind the curtain. That’s only the Mere Poetess” (*Political Poetess* 8), as they offer up instead the solid form, the “fine word” of “poet.”

These examples suggest how the “train of esses” that encumber the word “poetess” might indicate the theatrical excesses of the Poetess figure herself, as well as shape the “Poetess parallax” that makes describing that figure—and defining the word “poetess” itself—so difficult. Greer’s assumption that “poetess” has always been derogatory underlies many popular and scholarly accounts of the history of both the word and the figure of the Poetess, despite the fact that many critics have shown that the term “poetess” was “enabling as well as constraining.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, most accounts of the Poetess in literary studies refer to a specific *kind* of woman writer, or a “figure” with (more or less) nineteenth-century origins, even though many more writers were referred to or imagined themselves as poetesses.²⁰ While this definition of “poetess” corresponds

¹⁹ Susan Brown, “The Victorian Poetess” 180. In addition to Greer, see Virginia Blain’s 1995 article in *Victorian Poetry*, “Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Eliza Mary Hamilton, and the Genealogy of the Victorian Poetess,” which makes a similar claim about the relationship between “poetess” and “poetaster”: Blain acknowledges that that the word “poetess” has been used as a respectful, even admiring, term alongside a more “derogatory usage” in which the word might have “pick[ed] up overtones . . . from ‘poesy’ in the trite or lightweight sense of that word, or from the more trenchantly contemptuous ‘poetaster’” (32). Despite the fact that the connection both critics make between “poetess” and “poetaster” is entirely speculative, based on the fact that both words are modifications of the word “poet” rather than on any evidence that the words have been used interchangeably before 1995, the connection has taken hold in the critical imagination as an easy shorthand for explaining the derogatory sense of the word “poetess,” allowing the similarity of the sounds to make an argument that would otherwise require actual historical examples. For example, A. Joseph McMullen cites Blain’s article as the source for his 2009 claim that “similar to ‘poetaster,’ ‘poetess’ could signify a woman poet who simply imitates men or true poetry and ascends no higher” (68); similarly, Patrick Vincent’s *The Romantic Poetess* (2004) reports that “the connotation of poetess evolved during the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century into something more self-conscious, even self-consciously derogatory, closer to poetaster than to poet” (xvii).

²⁰ Jackson’s “The Poet as Poetess” provides an astute reading of the changing connotations of the word “poetess,” but focuses specifically on a shift in the word’s meaning from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, an observation that helps Jackson to tell the story of the “lyricization” of poetry during that

to the period in history when the figure of the Poetess arguably had the most cultural currency—when, as Isobel Armstrong puts it, women poets were “respected . . . as they never have been since” (*Victorian Poetry* 314)—it cannot reflect the complex history of the word “poetess” even within the nineteenth century, nor can it account for all the poets who described themselves, or were described or imagined by others, as “poetesses” over the last two hundred years. This dissertation cannot account for that either; to do so would be to touch upon all the poetry in English written by women, to begin with. Nor can this dissertation eliminate Poetess parallax: if the Poetess is a gendered figure, a kind of performance, or simply a word, she is never a real-life person; she can never be seen for who or what she “really is.” But attempting to lay aside expectations about the Poetess “herself” as the symbol of a constant, ahistorical set of “feminine” values or even as a representative figure for a particular strain of sentimental poetry can yield new insights about how the term “poetess” has been understood, in its different senses as a label, as a genre, as a set of aesthetic values, and as a name referring to a historical woman writer.

To that end, this chapter pays close attention to the history of how the word “poetess” has been used in English. In researching this chapter, I considered a large sample of texts by poets, critics, novelists, playwrights, biographers, and journalists writing from the word’s first appearance in English in the sixteenth century to the present day; my only

period. See also Laura Mandell’s “Introduction” to a special issue of *Romanticism on the Net* on the “transatlantic poetess”; Mandell covers a wider historical period but focuses on poetry that can be identified on the level of form or theme as part of an anti-modern or anti-Romantic “poetess tradition.” A more wide-ranging account of the varied meanings of the word “poetess” from the nineteenth century to the present can be found in Lootens’s introduction to *The Political Poetess*: against the received ideas of the Poetess as a figure of apolitical, domestic, implicitly white femininity, Lootens offers evidence that the word “poetess” often had explicitly political, patriotic connotations, and points to a line of African American Poetess performance from Phillis Wheatley through Frances E.W. Harper and “The Poetess” Felicia Morris (6-7, 9).

criterion was the texts' inclusion of the word "poetess." From my investigation of these texts, I recount a history of Poetess theatricality: a history that begins with highly theatrical, violently embodied solo Poetess performance and gathers, over centuries, the freight of so many citational performances that the Poetess comes to be understood as not only theatrical but unavoidably multiple, a choir of feminine performers encumbered by the endless "esses" of Poetess(es) and actress(es). In telling the story of how these excesses were embedded into the word "poetess," this chapter also tells the history of the theatricality and multiplicity of the Poetess as a figure, and provides a starting point and a context for later chapters' close readings of individual examples of the workings of Poetess theatricality.

The Early Modern Poetess: Saint, Demon, Muse, Performer

The Poetess entered English literature as a spoken-word rhymers whose anguished, rapturous, corporeal performances set the stage for centuries of debate over the Poetess's sincerity, sexuality, and mental health. The first recorded use of the word "poetess" in written English appears, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in William Tyndale's description of his contemporary Elizabeth Barton, the "Maid of Kent," in his 1531 tract *An Answer into Thomas More's Dialogue*. A key figure in the Protestant Reformation in England, Tyndale writes skeptically of the divine revelations for which Barton, a young Catholic woman, had become famous. Tyndale characterizes Barton's possession as a grotesquely physical, even sexualized, form of madness: she is "ravished from [herself]," "tormented," and "disfigured," with her "mouth drawn aside, even unto the very ears." But her madness is also intellectual, manifesting as "much high learning, which, as a goodly poetess, she uttered in rhymes" (92).

Tyndale's emphasis on Barton's rhyming casts doubt on the authenticity of her speech: if Barton is a "goodly poetess" arranging her prophecies into an appealing form, her divine madness is called into question. In this way, Tyndale manages to associate Barton's madness not only with grotesque sexuality, but also with false witness. The Maid's poetry is at once evidence of "high learning" and madness, both calculating and out of control. Further, despite her proficiency with rhyming, Barton is "clean without rhyme or reason" when it comes to her knowledge of Christ "as scripture testifieth of him"; if Barton is a divine poetess, her poetics are unorthodox, even incorrect.

In naming Barton a "poetess," Tyndale predicts the paradoxical, theatrical terms in which the poetess will be imagined in English literature in years to come: an otherworldly sibyl with a highly sexualized body, whose speech is spontaneous and compulsive yet somehow calculating or contrived; over-educated yet without "rhyme or reason." In Tyndale's focus on Barton's prophesying body, ambiguously "ravished" by sexual ecstasy or divine madness, Tyndale portrays Barton as a version of the classical Pythia, the title of Apollo's priestess and oracle at Delphi. Glennis Byron cites this figure as an important "model for the poetess," one linked to the embodied public performances of de Staël's *Corinne* (*Letitia Landon* 101); Lootens points to the paradoxical connection between embodied performances like *Corinne's* (or Barton's) and the Pythia's divine prophecies, arguing that Poetess performance "partake(s) at once of the sacred and the profane, the Pythian shriek and the striptease" (*Political Poetess* 4). Like the Pythia, too, who was subject to perhaps involuntary possession by Apollo, Barton's performance is exceptional in a way that elevates her above ordinary women, but leaves her vulnerable

to exposure and violence (the Maid of Kent was ultimately executed for treason when she criticized Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn).

Other sixteenth-century uses of the word "poetess" (or its common variant "poetress") in English are more neutral or even admiring, usually referring to Sappho and other classical women poets; one could argue that "poetess" began its life in English as a matter-of-fact feminine equivalent to "poet" used by Renaissance scholars to designate classical women poets writing in Greek and Latin. The term was most often used, however, to refer specifically to Sappho, a classical poet whose gender and eroticized, mythologized biography set her apart as a mythic, rather than merely historical, figure. In this way, neither Tyndale's ironic naming of Barton as a poetess nor other early modern writers' rapturous praise of Sappho suggest that "poetess" might refer to a real woman writing poetry. As Yopie Prins points out, Sappho was the "proper name for the poetess" in the Victorian era (*Victorian Sappho* 14), and this tradition was well established in Renaissance classical scholarship. To describe Sappho as *the* "poetess" or "poetress" is similar to describing her as the "tenth muse": it marks her as exceptional, immortal, admirable because she is not a representative or even a historical woman, but one who is, as Gabriel Harvey put it in 1593, full of "heauenly devises" (184).

Sexuality, Theatricality, Respectability:

The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century

The term "poetess" retained its sense of exceptionality in the seventeenth century, but it was used more and more to describe real-life women poets rather than supernatural or mythic figures. In the 1660s, Katherine Philips, known as "the Incomparable" and "matchless Orinda," was celebrated for her exceptionality—despite the fact that her verse

was addressed to and circulated among a coterie of female friends, figuring the Poetess not as a solitary “matchless” woman but as a member of a group of women engaged in active homosocial affection. The claim made by Abraham Cowley in his 1664 ode to Philips that, just as there had been “one female pope,” Philips would go down in history as modernity’s “one female poet” (165) applies Sappho’s status as The Poetess (as well as Barton’s ambiguous Catholic divinity) to a contemporary woman writer—indeed, Philips was often referred to as the “English Sappho” (Prins, “Poetess” 1052). Another contemporary writer, Margaret Cavendish, was understood to be the subject of *The Poetess*, a lost burlesque that was performed in 1667.²¹ J.H. Gent’s 1657 *Generall History of Women*, an early English version of the genre Alison Booth has identified as “collective biographies of women” and that Susan Wolfson calls “women’s lives,” did discuss multiple poetesses, in a chapter on “learned” women. But Gent’s examples are all classical, and as likely to be entirely or partially mythic (Minerva, Sappho) as historical.

Meanwhile, as the title of the burlesque *The Poetess* might imply, the associations with theatricality that clung to Tyndale’s account of the Maid of Kent as a “poetess” deepened throughout the seventeenth century. In keeping with Tyndale’s characterization of Barton as demonic, Gent’s classification groups the poetess most closely with “witches” (“Of Poetesses and Witches”); for Gent, the sacrilege of witchcraft belongs in the same category as the heresy of women’s public performance. The chapter also includes “women orators that have pleaded their own causes” and “women studious in divinity”—women who, like witches, would have been at home in Tyndale’s account of the Maid of Kent as a public performer, a false witness, a false prophet, and/or a madwoman as well as a “goodly poetesse.”

²¹ See Milhous and Hume 489.

By the last years of the seventeenth century, the connection between the Poetess and theatricality solidified to the degree that the figure of the Poetess could be clearly identified with the figure of the actress. Like the actress, the Poetess was associated with (ambiguously immoral) public performance; and, like “actress,” “Poetess” was becoming a role that many women could occupy. In 1660, after the restoration of Charles II to the British throne, the first professional actresses had begun performing in England’s newly reopened theaters. Not only were women’s bodies exposed to a new kind of public display, but so was the language of women poets and writers such as “Ephelia,” Elizabeth Polewhele, and Aphra Behn, whose plays were performed in the Restoration theater. In the cases of both Poetess and actress such public performance connoted immodesty, sexual availability, and artificial or commodified feeling, which further linked both figures to the figure of the prostitute. As Catherine Gallagher has shown (68), Behn herself flirts with the Poetess/prostitute comparison in her own work, joking in the Prologue to her 1670 play *The Forced Marriage* that the masked courtesans in the audience are her “spies”:

the poetess too, they say, has spies abroad
[. . .]
I’ the upper box, pit, galleries; every face
You find disguis’d in a black velvet case
. . . is her spy on purpose sent,
To hold you in a wanton compliment.²²

In the Earl of Rochester’s 1679 epistolary poem “A Letter from Artemesia in the Town to Chloe in the Country,” Artemesia mock-seriously admonishes herself for writing in verse, since “whore is scarce a more reproachful name / Than poetess” (26 – 27). Artemesia’s claim reappears in the playwright Robert Gould’s 1689 scathing attack on women writers,

²² Quoted in Gallagher 68.

“A Satyrical Epistle to the Female Author of a Poem Call’d Silvia’s Revenge,” along with the much-quoted couplet “*punk*” (prostitute) “and *Poesie* agree so Pat, / You cannot well be *This*, and not be *That*” (5).

Whether or not Gould’s couplet accurately represents prevailing cultural attitudes toward the poetess in Restoration culture, both Gould’s and Rochester’s indictments recognize “poetess” as an occupation, however reproachful, held by multiple real-life women writers.²³ And in claiming the multitude of masked female faces surrounding the (male) audience member in the theater for “the poetess,” Behn expands the image of the Poetess from that of a single, remarkable woman to a vast population of women’s bodies, observing consciousnesses, and “compliment[ing]” voices, a population that includes both the masked spies in the audience and their counterparts, the costumed, performing actresses on the stage.

By the eighteenth century, then, “poetess” was well established as a category to which many contemporary women might belong. The exceptional status implied by mocking Cavendish as *the* Poetess, or by praising Philips as the modern era’s “*one* female poet” (my italics), while it never ceased to be a feature of Poetess criticism, had begun to erode, while comic “poetess” figures became common objects of satire in print as well as on the stage. In addition to her identity as a playwright and her association with actresses, the Poetess began to be recognizable as a theatrical type. *Three Hours After Marriage*, a play co-written by Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot in 1717, imagined the Poetess in some of the same terms as Tyndale had: dimwitted, mentally unstable, potentially

²³ Catherine Gallagher uses Gould’s couplet as evidence that “the equation of poetess and ‘punk’ was inescapable in the Restoration” (69), while Derek Hughes argues that contemporary attitudes, and even the rest of Gould’s pamphlet, were more complex (151).

sexually compromised. Furthermore, this Poetess's literary pretensions get in the way of her ability to perform traditionally feminine tasks such as housework; in fact, her interest in poetry is described as a physiological deficiency that keeps her from being intelligent enough to keep house. In the play, the young "poetess" Phoebe Clinket suffers, according to her uncle, from a "procidence of the pineal gland, which has occasioned a rupture in her understanding. I took her into my house to regulate my oeconomy; but instead of puddings, she makes pastorals; or when she should be raising paste, is raising some ghost in a new tragedy." (577)

At the end of the play, the oblivious Clinket's metaphors for her own literary creativity convince her uncle that she has conceived and delivered an illegitimate child: "I am not in the least mortified . . . I know it has happen'd to many of the most famous daughters of Apollo; and to myself several times . . . I may perhaps be excell'd by others in judgment and correctness of manners, but for fertility and readiness of conception, I will yield to nobody" (636). The matter is cleared up, and Clinket's reputation is restored to that of an asexual bluestocking rather than a promiscuous poetess. But the misunderstanding, and the puns which make it possible, rely upon a culturally available construction of the "most famous daughters of Apollo" as *both* sexually and aesthetically lacking "in judgment and correctness of manners." A poetess such as Clinket can be understood as too "ready" to engage in the act of "conception" just as she is too eager to produce and share technically imperfect or tasteless work. Lacking in judgment, Clinket is excessive in her (re)production, a harbinger of the multiplying, lavishly costumed, endlessly citational, ambiguously corporeal Poetess performances to come, in which Clinket's literary daughters clog stage and page with the encumbrance of their "trains of

esses.”

Throughout the eighteenth century writers continued to imagine the Poetess as variously mad, untalented, pretentious, unwomanly, or theatrically immoral—but not in terms of the Pythia’s divine exceptionality. In a 1710 issue of *The Female Tatler*, the narrator imagines the relationship between Poetess and actress as a morally damaging, ambiguously erotic and/or professional friendship, reporting that “no Woman ever yet turne’d Poetess, but lost her Reputation by appearing at Rehearsals, and Conversing with Imoinda [and] Desdemona” (Crackenthorpe 41). A 1753 note in *The Gray’s Inn Journal* transposes the Poetess’s Pythian madness and tragic Sapphic fall into a more mundane, tragicomic key, describing the attempted suicide and rescue of “Sappho the little Poetess, that walks in the Park,” noting that Sappho “was supposed to be drunk when she committed this rash Action, as she did not resound her Verses on this Occasion as distinctly as usual” (Ranger 228). Similarly, in Thomas Holcroft’s 1780 novel *Alwyn, or the Gentleman Comedian*, Poetess madness becomes domestic henpecking as one character warns another that “I’ll pester you with nonsense worse than a mad poetess does her husband” (150 – 151).

Meanwhile, in a private letter in 1748, Lady Luxborough told the poet William Shenstone that “I am no Poetess, which reproachful name I should avoid, even if I were capable of acquiring it” (21). Luxborough seems to assume that Shenstone knows why the name of “poetess” is “reproachful.” Recent critics have interpreted her remark as a feminist protest against the unnecessary gendering of the word “poet,” but since Luxborough asks Shenstone to burn the lines of poetry she sends him, and remarks that she is only qualified to praise the beauty of his estate in prose, not poetry, this

interpretation seems unlikely to be correct. Luxborough does not seem to have thought of herself as a poet instead of a poetess; rather, her claim that she does not want the “reproachful” name of “poetess,” as well as her near-quotation of the poem in which Rochester compares the Poetess to a “whore” (“whore is scarce a more reproachful name / Than poetess”) implies that to be a poetess might be morally suspect—something Luxborough, living apart from her husband in the wake of her own romantic indiscretions, must have been careful to avoid.²⁴

These examples suggest that many women living in Britain in the first half of the eighteenth century, like Luxborough, would have wanted to avoid the title of “poetess.” But Luxborough’s assumption that Shenstone would automatically know why “poetess” was a “reproachful name,” and the fact that playwrights, poets, and humorists could assume their audiences would understand such a variety of jokes at the Poetess’s expense, is clear evidence that the Poetess was increasingly visible as a cultural category to a wide and varied audience. Ordinary women identified as or acted like poetesses: while Sappho was once, to borrow and slightly skew Prins’s phrase, the *only* “proper name for the Poetess,” the Poetess had begun to proliferate—and if poetesses were still Sapphos, “poetess” had also become a common name available to any number of women.²⁵

By the second half of the century, “poetess” was beginning to acquire a sheen of respectability. Although no women poets appear in Johnson’s *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-81), many collective biographies of poets and famous women contained admiring references to historical and contemporary “poetesses.” Laura Mandell

²⁴ Jackson uses Luxborough’s letter, and her assumption that Shenstone would understand her meaning, as evidence for her claim that by the eighteenth century, the word “poetess” meant “something more or other” than “a woman who composes poetry” (59; see note 20 above).

²⁵ See Prins and Jackson, “Lyrical Studies,” which describes “poetess” as a “common name upon which much depends” (523).

cites the fact that the 1755 anthology *Poems by Eminent Ladies* does not contain the word “poetess” as evidence that “the word is derogatory throughout the eighteenth century,” but in Theophilus Cibber’s 1753 *Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* the term is used interchangeably with “female poet” and “authoress” to describe poets as varied as Aphra Behn; Anne, Countess of Winchelsea; Anne Killigrew; and Letitia Pilkington. By the 1780s, writers such as Hannah More, Anna Seward, and Mary Robinson were well-known as “poetesses” and acknowledged as important figures in eighteenth-century print culture as the subjects of literary reviews and the addressees of admiring poetic epistles. Aware of the negative moral connotations that might cling both to the term “poetess” and the act of women publishing poetry, benevolent reviewers began to insist on an individual poetess’s personal virtue as well as her literary merit: in a 1785 review of Ann Yearsley’s poems, Samuel Badcock noted that Hannah More paid “a tribute of respect” to Yearsley’s “private character, as well as to her poetical talents; and we are taught to esteem the woman, while we are entertained with by her Muse” (219).

The poetess became so common and so respectable a figure, in fact, that at the end of the eighteenth century a young girl could aspire to be a poetess as a hobby, even as an identity, without fearing too much damage to her reputation. Writing poetry or plays—or rather being thought of as a “poetess”—was often portrayed as an impressive accomplishment. The disturbing trace of illicit sexuality attached to the Maid of Kent’s writhing or Phoebe Clinket’s “readiness of conception” was repurposed as the gentler erotic charge of an attractive, genteel young poetess-heroine in novels such as Robinson’s *Walsingham, or the Pupil of Nature*, where the heroine Arabella’s beauty and literary talent go hand in hand: ““Can the world complain that genius is not adored and cherished,

while its admiration is directed towards this lovely example?’ cried the Duke, addressing the young poetess” (347). In a similar vein, a 1797 domestic novel by Samuel Jackson Pratt imagines a young couple in pastoral terms, describing the heroine as a “poetess” merely by virtue of her being in love with an intellectual young man (75).

In this way, the term “poetess” obviously marked the author’s gender, and relegated her to a category of writer or performer that may have been distinct from “poet.” At the same time, “poetess” did not invariably connote writing with obviously “feminine” characteristics. The language used to describe the most successful women poets was often—aside from the word “poetess” itself—almost gender-neutral. In the late 1770s several different journals printed verses in praise of Hannah More’s plays; the poems all acknowledge More’s gender by apostrophizing her as a “poetess,” as well as “my sweet” or “sweet maid,” but for the most part they describe her in terms conventionally associated with (male) poets. More earns laurels; she is a favorite of Apollo; she *has* a muse, but she herself does not appear to be one; she is compared to Sheridan and Shakespeare without any reservations about her gender.²⁶ Moreover, texts that did emphasize a poetess’s gender often undid the very categories they created. A 1782 letter printed in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, for example, in identifying Seward as “a poetess of the age, in whom almost every poetical excellence seems to be united,” evaluates her explicitly only in terms of other poetesses, challenging the reader to “produce me any female writer who equals that lady” (“Philo-Lyristes” 22). But this praise of Seward appears after a list of the deficiencies of various contemporary male

²⁶ See William Tasker, “Stanzas, addressed to the Author of the Lines affecting to ridicule the Poetical Productions of Miss Hannah More,”; T. B****s, “To Miss Hannah Moore, on seeing her new Tragedy of The Fatal Falshood,”; and Anonymous, “An humble Invocation to Miss Hannah More.”

poets, each of whom appear to possess some, but not every, poetical excellence. In the context of the letter, then, Seward is remarkable among all contemporary poets, not just poetesses.

Seward's command of "every poetical excellence," as well as More's and Behn's status as "poetesses" who wrote drama, is a useful reminder that "poetess" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like its synonym "authoress," referred to a female writer of any number of literary genres, not just poetry—or rather, as Virginia Jackson points out, "poetry" as it was understood before the end of the nineteenth century encompassed a variety of genres. Before the nineteenth century, a "poetess" was as likely to write plays for the stage as she was to write odes; although the Poetess was legible as a cultural figure, it is difficult at this point in British history to locate particular genres or forms that are specific to the Poetess. Women could be mocked for writing in the public sphere, or for ignoring their domestic duties in favor of poems and plays, but even the most stinging satirists didn't describe the poetess as doing a particular *kind* of writing as much as they mocked the quality of that writing, or the woman poet herself for writing or publishing in general.

Lyric Glamour: The Nineteenth-Century Poetess

As the nineteenth century approached, however, the increasing commercial value of sentimental poetry by women, along with the developing concept of "separate spheres," led to the association of the "poetess" with particularly feminine modes and genres.²⁷ While in the 1780s the term "poetess" could refer to a female playwright, by

²⁷ Lootens's model of "suspended spheres" shows both that the concept of "separate spheres" was (and is) a fiction, and that this fiction was maintained by and constitutive of the figure of the Poetess. See Lootens's chapter "Suspending Spheres, Suspending Disbelief: Hegel's *Antigone*, Craik's *Crimea*, Woolf's *Three Guineas*" (*Political Poetess* 83 – 115).

1834 Thomas Campbell, a biographer of the actress Sarah Siddons, could separate the turn-of-the-century writer Hannah Cowley's admirable work as a playwright from the "feeble" poems she produced as a "poetess" writing under the pseudonym "Anna Matilda" as a member of the Della Cruscan circle, a group of highly popular and much-satirized male and female poets who conducted passionate dialogues through the poems they published, under "Poetess" pseudonyms such as "Della Crusca" and "Laura Maria," in the magazine *The World* in the 1780s. Campbell writes of Cowley, "I would recommend to those who despise her as a *Della Cruscan* poetess to read [her] comedy [*The Belle's Stratagem*] . . . As a matter of taste, she deserved admonition: but her sex and her services to literature ought to have screened her from gross vituperation" (70 – 71). In Campbell's view, then, although women writers could provide "services to literature" in a variety of genres, it is the despicably sentimental poetry that Cowley wrote in the last decade of the eighteenth century that makes her a "poetess."

Campbell's distaste for Cowley's verse does not necessarily imply that "poetess" was a pejorative term in 1834; his preference for drama makes sense given his role as Siddons's biographer, and his comments reflect an awareness that the Della Cruscan poets specifically, and not necessarily all writers who could be described as poetesses, were out of fashion. In fact, in isolating the role of Poetess from that of dramatist, Campbell is contributing to the consolidation of the nineteenth-century Poetess as a cultural category that, according to Armstrong, constituted a space for women's poetry to be "respected . . . as [it] never ha[s] been since" (*Victorian Poetry* 314).

In detaching "poetess"—and perhaps by extension "poetry"—from drama and attaching it firmly to sentimental lyric, Campbell also participates in what Jackson and

Prins describe as the process of the “lyricization” of poetry during the nineteenth century. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Prins and Jackson explain in the introduction to their *Lyric Theory Reader*, “neoclassical and popular verse genres began to merge into larger categories” until the wide variety of genres were reduced to narrative, dramatic, and lyric poetry; over the course of the nineteenth century, the meaning of “lyric” became increasingly abstract, so that by the twentieth century it referred primarily to first-person poems that expressed the poet’s personal feelings (1 – 3). In the eighteenth century, then, a “poetess”—or a poet, for that matter—might be expected to write in any number of verse genres, including the “epistles and hymns, ballads and elegies, drinking songs and odes” Prins and Jackson refer to in their introduction (3), as well as verse drama and even prose. By the twentieth century, the definition of “poetry” had flattened to include *only* lyric poetry—or rather all verse was now read as lyric.

In “The Poet as Poetess,” Jackson describes this process by way of the American poets Phillis Wheatley and Lydia Sigourney. Wheatley, one of the first American poets to be celebrated as a “poetess,” was born in West Africa, enslaved and taken to Boston as a child, and experienced her first poetic success during a visit to London. The American press lauded her as “the African poetess,”²⁸ a title which marked her during the eighteenth century and into our own era as both exceptional, in her ability to write poetry at all, and as a figure representative of an exotic but enslaved population. Wheatley’s reception in America and abroad contributed to the many contradicting images of the poetess as representative and exceptional, a figure of exotic glamour and domestic

²⁸ See, among others, the poem “On Reading the Poems of Phillis Wheatley, the African Poetess” by “Matilda” in *New York Magazine*; also the 30 March 1776 issue of the *Virginia Gazette*, where she is described as “the famous PHILLIS WHEATLEY, the AFRICAN POETESS.”

suffering, a demonstration of both the spontaneity of natural feeling and the triumphs of civilized education. While Wheatley wrote, like Cowley, in many different genres, Jackson argues that eighteenth-century readers interpreted Wheatley's poem in terms of the generic abstraction of "lyric." By the time Sigourney was writing, the transatlantic process of lyricization had established the Poetess as an abstract, lyric figure available to both American and British writers.²⁹

Campbell's writing, then, can be read as evidence that the process of lyricization was well underway by the first years of the Victorian era: the term "poetess" was increasingly applied only to women who wrote non-dramatic verse. In addition, the distinction he makes between Cowley's real name and her pseudonym hints at another major change that took place in the usage of the word "poetess" in the nineteenth century: the growing interest in the space between the identity of the Poetess ("Anna Matilda") and the real historical woman (Hannah Cowley) that preoccupied nineteenth-century readers and continues to dominate criticism of women's poetry today.

We can trace this preoccupation with the relationship between the "poetess" and the "woman"—not to mention the abstract, essential identity of "Woman" that the Poetess was often understood to perform—to those late eighteenth-century texts that insisted upon the Poetess's respectability, as well as those, like Robinson's novel, that emphasized her erotic allure. Many texts emphasized both, of course, and by the mid-

²⁹ A note on the transatlantic Poetess: Writing of British and American women poets circulated so readily across the Atlantic that discussions of the Victorian Poetess necessarily involve discussions of the American. Nineteenth-century American readers and writers, although they were eager to establish a stand-alone American literature, also claimed British literature as their own, often transforming it and re-exporting the Americanized version to Britain in the process, as Meredith McGill's introduction to and several of the essays in *The Traffic in Poems* make clear. For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus primarily on British Poetess performers, but in accounting for the word's history it is impossible to ignore American usage; I use both British and American examples throughout this chapter.

nineteenth century, beauty and virtue were often described as mutually constitutive aspects of the sentimental poetess figure; such writing encouraged the reader not only to enjoy the poem, but to move imaginatively beyond the poem to imagine the woman writing it—or perhaps to discover the woman *within* the poem itself. Campbell's distinction between Cowley and her “poetess” persona, however, is a direct response to the use of pseudonyms by the Della Cruscan poets, a group that included Cowley (“Anna Matilda”) and Robinson (who wrote as “Laura Maria”) as well as the original “Della Crusca,” the pseudonym of Robert Merry. Although Merry was known to be a male poet, some nineteenth-century critics referred to the Della Cruscans in aggregate as “poetesses,” a reminder that male writers as well as female writers could perform as Poetesses and contribute to the poetry of “Woman” in the abstract.³⁰ Not only did the Della Cruscan pseudonyms prompt readers to think about the disjunction between the real person writing the poem and the pastoral Poetess implied by the pseudonym, but the poems Merry, Cowley, and Robinson published in *The World* created a public intertextual dialogue—what Jason Rudy describes as an “epistolary love triangle” (26)—that implied readers were listening in on intimate conversations. The Della Cruscan language that Campbell and his contemporaries found so “feeble” and despicable was simultaneously passionate, confessional, and highly theatrical, setting a precedent for the characterization of nineteenth-century Poetesses as both totally natural and entirely contrived in their public expressions of passionate feeling. It also established the Poetess as a figure engaged in specifically collective public performance.

The Della Cruscan poets' distinct style made them easy targets for parody and

³⁰ See A., “On Miss Landon's Poetry”; also “The Poetesses of Our Own Day.”

ridicule in their own day, and by the early years of the nineteenth century they were already out of fashion, but the characteristics that made them so successful in the popular press—the mysterious pseudonyms, the public-facing poems that seemed to offer tantalizing glimpses into private passions—proved to be useful marketing strategies for the next generation of Poetess figures. Interest in the personal life of Poetess performers exploded in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, when poets such as Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, and Caroline Norton encouraged and profited from readers' fascination with their biographies as well as their personal beauty. Savvy marketers of their own work, late Romantic writers like Landon promoted themselves through the image of a young, passionate, and glamorous “poetess,” a process of branding that helped to narrow the public understanding of “poetess” from a general term for a woman writer in many genres to the lyric, conventionally feminine figure it became by the mid-nineteenth century.

Hemans and Landon both used the word “poetess” in their writing, most notably in poems about the death of women poets. Both Landon's 1827 poem “Erinna” and Hemans's 1828 “The Grave of the Poetess” exploit the tension between “woman” and “poet,” imagining that the Poetess's artistic vision makes life as a mortal woman impossible. And shortly before her own death in 1835, Hemans wrote that she regretted not having the opportunity to “concentrate all my mental energy in the production of some more noble and complete work . . . which might permanently take its place as the work of a British poetess,”³¹ suggesting both that to be called a “poetess” was a great honor and that she herself might not qualify to be one—or perhaps even that Britain did not yet have its own “permanent” poetess, a concern that predicts the nationalist rhetoric

³¹ Hemans, quoted in Vincent 142.

that surrounded the poetess for much of the nineteenth century.

By the 1840s, Hemans was routinely described as a Poetess. In the 1820s, however, while reviews of Hemans's work were full of highly gendered language praising her "strictly *feminine*" nature ("The Sceptic," 374) and the "soft graces" that have "taught" critics "to endure a female muse" ("A Familiar Epistle," 64), they rarely referred to Hemans as a "poetess." On the other hand, Landon was frequently described as a "poetess" throughout the 1820s; the word was an important part of the language Landon and her editors used to market her poems in the same decade. William Jerdan, the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, published many of Landon's early poems, and often "puffed" her volumes of poetry by emphasizing her identity as a "youthful poetess" ("Review" 785).

In addition to his "puff" pieces, Jerdan printed a long poem called "The Crowning of the Living British Poetesses" (1827), which simultaneously poked fun at and reinforced Landon's image as a glamorous, passionate young Poetess. In its depiction of the "crowning" of Poetess figures, the poem also invokes the public performances and coronation of the Poetess Corinne in Germaine de Staël's 1807 novel, which, as Ellen Moers has shown, inspired countless nineteenth-century women writers with its "fantasy of the performing heroine" (174). Unlike *Corinne*, however, "The Crowning" features multiple Poetess figures, including Landon, Hemans, Joanna Baillie, Hannah More, Mary Russel Mitford, Maria Edgeworth, and Amelia Opie, each distinguished by a different elaborate costume, all performing together. When Landon appears, the narrator offers a long description of Landon's elaborate Poetess costume, in which her gorgeous clothes compete with the beauty of her poetic song, and then declares

Her eye so illum'd, and her air so bewitchy,
That it could be none else than the Improvisatrice. (413)

The couplet playfully mocks readers' identification of Landon herself with the eponymous narrator of her most famous long poem, but it does nothing to contest that identification: Landon is indeed the Improvisatrice, and her air really *is* bewitchy. The poem is also one of the earliest texts to describe Hemans as a "poetess"; with Hemans, too, the poem focuses on her gorgeous appearance. She is depicted with "gem-braided hair" and dressed in "matronly draperies that gracefully flow . . . shot with all hues of the bow." Hemans and Landon are often associated with different strains of the Poetess tradition, strains which map roughly onto eighteenth-century claims about the Poetess's virtue and her beauty: Hemans is praised for her feminine virtues and domesticity, while Landon is admired but also maligned for her feminine passion and glamour.³² "The Crowning of the Living British Poetesses," however, demonstrates how both Landon's and Hemans's legacy as *Victorian Poetesses*—and, ultimately, the generic identity of the nineteenth-century Poetess in general—can be traced to Jerdan's canny use of the word as a marketing strategy for a very specific brand of Poetess: one resembling a young, precocious, gorgeously dressed actress, performing alongside a troupe of similarly glamorous celebrity performers.³³

As a result, later descriptions of Hemans as a "poetess," while they do tend to

³² See, among others, Blain, "Letitia Elizabeth Landon," 32.

³³ As Lootens's work on both poets makes clear, Landon's reception in the Victorian period was not comparable to Hemans's: while the "domestic patriotism" of Hemans's poems came to "symbolize Victorianism, and particularly Victorian patriotic feeling" ("Hemans and Home," 238), after Landon's mysterious death in Africa in 1838, Landon's work suffered a "decline in popularity" that, Lootens suggests, might be "inseparable from British anxieties concerning the colonies in general and slavery in particular" ("Receiving the Legend," 245). Yet Landon still appeared, through the 1850s, as a specimen of the Victorianized, if not actually Victorian, British Poetess alongside Hemans and other late-Romantic-era women poets in Poetess anthologies and collective biographies such as Frederic Rowton's 1853 *Female Poets of Great Britain* and Sarah Josepha Hale's 1852 *Woman's Record*.

emphasize her virtuous maternity and admirable religious faith, draw heavily on the image of the Poetess as glamorous, glittering celebrity created by Landon and Jerdan.³⁴ John Dix's 1846 "Memory of Mrs Hemans" rapturously catalogues Hemans's lovely home (hers is the only house on her street "adorned with flowers") (97), her "exquisitely beautiful" face (99) and "musical" voice, along with details about her clothing, accessories, and hairstyle (101). Midcentury biographers of Hemans and other Poetess performers placed especially strong emphasis on their subjects' childhood propensity toward poetry, continuing Jerdan's romanticization of the girlish poetess as an "infant genius" (Barton 89). Two years after Hemans's death in 1835, a piece on "The Poetesses of Our Own Day" in *Dublin University Magazine* recalled that "Felicia Hemans was from her youth a poetess," and that "a wild and sequestered home instructed her youthful fancy" (131). The American Sarah Josepha Hale, in her 1852 collective biography *Woman's Record, or Sketches of All Distinguished Women*, imagined the "radiant beauty" of Hemans as a "young poetess" of "only fifteen" (344); Landon as an "embryo poetess" preferring to hide "in the shadows of [a] gloomy tree" rather than play with other children (383); and Caroline Norton as a "young poetess" painfully deprived of "pen, ink, and paper" (761). Meanwhile, an excerpt from Landon forms the epigraph for Georgiana Bennet's 1844 long poem *The Poetess*, in which an unnamed, Landon-like Poetess appears to the speaker in a "wild, sequestered spot" (5) and, "to assuage her secret miseries" produces a "sweet, though untutored, sound / Even as some simple

³⁴ See the 1837 *Dublin University Magazine* piece on Hemans's work, "The Poetesses of Our Own Day," which declares that "the private life of the Poetess of Woman was worthy of her published fame . . . her exterior life was in harmony with that far profounder and more intimate existence, of which her works are the portrait and the history" (138). The author's emphatic disavowal of any interest in Hemans's "precise shade of silk in morning or evening attire" or "milliner of her choice," however, demonstrates that accounts of the fashionable adornments of glamorous celebrity Poetesses were ubiquitous (131).

flower, in secret, flings, / Uncared for, and unsought, its fragrance round” (7). Many of the same writers who celebrated Hemans and other Poetess performers for their youthful innocence and spontaneous, “untutored” outpourings of emotion also praised the seemingly much more artificial beauty of their clothing, hairstyles, and accessories, just as Jerdan and Landon had marketed L.E.L. as artlessly youthful and artfully glamorous. The *Dublin University Magazine* piece on Hemans satirizes this tendency with a description of the gorgeously ornate (and sexually titillating) material circumstances under which a “poetess” might be expected to write, surrounded by “the atmosphere of the Boudoir,” a “forest of *ormulu*,” and the “filmy phantoms . . . of a thousand gentle octavos” with “coquetry in the very play of their leaves, fascination in their gilded bindings, ruin to the peace of man in their vignetted title-pages!” (126).

By midcentury, then, what had at least partly begun as a marketing ploy to sell Landon’s poetry had become earnest praise of an essentially feminine poetess figure. While “poetess” had long implied “something more or other” than “a woman who composes poetry,” what that “something more or other” was had varied significantly from text to text, poetess to poetess. In the 1820s, a number of women cultivated public interest in the lives and work of “poetesses” to increase the audiences for their own writing, using a variety of strategies to do so. By the 1840s, popular opinion had consolidated and simplified elements of these strategies into a much more homogeneous Poetess figure, which was then retroactively applied to earlier women poets: even though Hemans’s public image in the 1820s differed significantly from Landon’s, for example, by the 1840s all Poetesses were increasingly described in the same terms.³⁵

³⁵ The fact that the word “poetess” seems to have had a relatively clear cultural meaning in the specific contexts of the British and American popular presses in the mid-nineteenth century does not mean, of

The ideal Poetess of midcentury anthologies and memoirs dazzled and moved readers by her feminine passion and her feminine virtue, her tender grief, her grave moral authority, her childlike spontaneity, her melodious (imagined) voice, her lovely (engraved) face, even her delicate and glamorous accessories. She was a woman whose verse was worth reading not in spite of her difference from male poets, but because of it. She fit neatly into the logic of “separate spheres” that was beginning to organize more and more areas of British culture, a development that created a larger audience for the poetess than ever before; to return to Susan Brown, “the mark of gender . . . was enabling as well as constraining . . . in its insistence that masculinity and femininity mattered where poetry was concerned” (180). Anthologies of women’s poetry exhibited an increasing interest not merely in showcasing women’s verse as a curiosity, but in analyzing the “peculiar and specific qualities of the female mind” (Rowton 336); in Frederick Rowton’s introduction to his 1848 anthology of *Female Poets*, he explains that “the mental constitutions of the sexes are different . . . the sphere of woman’s duty requires powers altogether dissimilar from those which are needed by man” (xiv) but he argues that that difference makes it even more imperative to understand women’s literary genius on its own terms, since “only one half of the human soul has had scope for development” (iii).

The rhetoric of separate spheres was a nationalist rhetoric, and the poetess was upheld as a model not just of femininity in general, but of ideal British femininity—an

course, that that meaning applied to every woman poet, or even *any* woman poet. Anne K. Mellor is correct in arguing that not every woman poet writing in the nineteenth century was a Poetess in its midcentury sense; but as Tricia Lootens’s work on the canonization of the Victorian Poetess implies, *no* woman poet could have been. Instead, the Poetess figure of the mid-nineteenth century was an ideal, one to which some poets may have aspired and which many women poets invoked, but which women poets only fit when, as Lootens argues, important aspects of their lives and work were ignored. Similarly, male poets, from Robert Merry to Tennyson to Swinburne, contributed to Poetess performance throughout the century.

ideal that Hemans in particular had actively cultivated in her work. In an 1840 article on “Modern English Poetesses,” Henry Nelson Coleridge expressed “a just feeling of pride” that the women poets in his review “are our countrywomen” (376), while four years later Henry Fothergill Chorley boasted in the same publication that “no land has a choir of Poetesses like ours” and “def[ied] Europe to match our songstresses” (79). Like Sappho or Katherine Phillips, the poetess was once again considered the representative of an essential feminine experience; the difference in the nineteenth century was that that essential feminine experience was particularly British, and explicitly theatrical, represented by a gorgeously performing “choir” composed of multiple, proliferating Poetesses.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Exceptionality, and Nationalism

By 1860, however, a reader could be forgiven if she thought there was only one poetess in England: Elizabeth Barrett Browning. If the new Poetess ideal was influenced by late Romantic poetesses like Landon and Hemans, and retrofitted to a range of historical women poets, it found its apotheosis in Barrett Browning, who was often singled out as the greatest living Poetess in praise that made “poetess” sound like a royal title rather than a simple description. The *Athenaeum* declared her in 1850 “probably, of her sex, the first imaginative writer England has produced in any age:—she is, beyond comparison, the first poetess of her own” (1244), and by 1881 Christina Rossetti could refer to her as “the Great Poetess of our own day and nation” without mentioning her name (“Monna Innominata” 294). Although some people considered Barrett Browning’s ambition and interest in classical subjects and languages overly masculine—one

American critic described her writing as having a “peculiar masculine force in which strength claims precedence of polish” (S.W. Williams, *Queenly Women* 204)—most reviewers connected her success as a poet to her femininity. Mary Russell Mitford remarked that the “peculiar characteristics of her writings, their purity, their tenderness, their piety, and their intense feeling of humanity and of womanhood have won for her the love of so many” (219), while multiple reviewers commented on her role as both a “poetess” and a “woman.”³⁶ After 1846, at the same time the midcentury poetess figure was being consolidated, readers were captivated by the romance of her marriage to Robert Browning and, toward the end of the century, the scandal of the couple’s elopement. Her status as a poetess married to a male poet cemented her as the representative of the feminine half of poetry; nineteenth-century criticism frequently situated her as the female counterpart to either her husband or to Alfred Tennyson. Barrett Browning herself shaped this perception: in her poem “Curse for a Nation,” for example, she insists that women’s responsibility to speak out against injustice derives directly from their gender, while the heroine of her verse novel *Aurora Leigh* emphasizes her femininity in many ways, from her pleasure in pretty clothes and adornments to her participation in highly gendered debates with her male cousin and love-interest Romney. Barrett Browning also engaged with the idea of a female poetic tradition, writing in active dialogue with predecessors such as Landon and Hemans, whom she described as “the two poetesses of our day”³⁷; in 1835, after Landon published “Stanzas on the Death

³⁶ See Lootens’s account, in *Lost Saints*, of Barrett Browning’s reception history, including contemporary and later-nineteenth-century responses to the Brownings’ courtship and marriage (see below); Lootens argues that Barrett Browning’s sanctification as “wife, mother, and poet” (132) and the increasing critical and readerly focus on *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as, simultaneously, mere Victorian “valentines” and Barrett Browning’s only important work (12), tended to obscure the significance of, and discourage reading of, her actual writing.

³⁷ Letter from EBB to Lady Margaret Cocks, November 1835. *The Brownings’ Correspondence* 3, 151–154.

of Mrs Hemans” in *The New Monthly Magazine*, Barrett Browning published her own poem, “Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon, and Suggested by Her ‘Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans’” in the same magazine as a response (*Selected Poems* 73). At the same time, Barrett Browning mourned the lack of literary “grandmothers” writing before the nineteenth century. Responding to Chorley’s claim that England had the world’s greatest poetesses, Barrett Browning argued that “previous to Joanna Baillie there was no such thing in England as a poetess.”³⁸

For Barrett Browning, “poetess” was a gendered term, but one that was interchangeable with “poet” in its designation of a high artistic calling: explaining why learned or entertaining women writers before Baillie don’t qualify as “poetesses,” she asks “is not the poet a different man from the cleverest versifier, and is it not well for the world to be taught the difference?” It is worth noting that Barrett Browning’s ideal woman poet, like Virginia Woolf’s in *A Room of One’s Own*, is a dramatist: since in the Elizabethan era there were so many “true poets whom we call the old dramatists,” she wonders, in her letter to Chorley, why “the divine breath . . . never pass[ed], even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman?” For some midcentury writers, including Thomas Campbell in his discussion of Anna Matilda versus Hannah Cowley, the word “poetess” may have been exclusively associated with lyric, but for Barrett Browning the word continued to encompass both drama and the lesser “lyrical form,” not to mention the epic form of *Aurora Leigh*—at least in theory. As my third chapter argues, Barrett Browning expressed contempt for the contemporary Victorian theater, and *Aurora Leigh* registers

³⁸ Letter from Elizabeth Barrett to Henry Fothergill Chorley, January 3, 1845. *The Brownings’ Correspondence* 10, 13 – 15.

ambivalence about theatricality—including, and especially, the Poetess theatricality represented by the work of Hemans and Landon.

“A Certain Unhealthiness”: The Poetess in the Late Nineteenth Century

It has become something of a critical commonplace to imply that, beginning in the 1870s, the figure of the Poetess was no longer useful to woman poets. Susan Brown claims that “from the 1870s onwards, the explicit invocation of the poetess is more critical than poetic,” and that even the critical category of “poetess” was becoming less useful to critics (196); toward the end of the century, Brown suggests, poets such as Amy Levy and Mathilde Blind were able to take formal and tonal risks in their work “due to a sense that women no longer need define themselves against the figure of the poetess” (198). Brown may have been expanding upon Isobel Armstrong’s claim in *Victorian Poetry* that “the category of the poetess is less secure at the end of the century than it was at the beginning,” a claim Armstrong bases on the fact that Augusta Webster “designat[es] . . . the poet in terms of the generic ‘he’” in her 1879 essay “Poets and Personal Pronouns” (373). And Virginia Jackson argues that the figure of the poetess “waned in importance and visibility after the 1880s, as the collapse of verse genres into Poetry was accomplished and there was little tension between genres for the Poetess to transcend or represent” (70). It’s undeniable that the Poetess ideal of the mid-nineteenth century lost traction after the mid-nineteenth century; and these claims are also true to the extent that the figure or category of the Poetess in the nineteenth century was constituted by a set of recognizable formal characteristics or an explicitly feminine “voice” or “persona.” It is useful to point out that women poets in the late nineteenth century didn’t always use a female speaker, or write in ballad meter, or choose language suggesting a

feminine “gush.” But it’s also useful to remember that women poets in the early nineteenth century—including those we think of as classic nineteenth-century Poetesses—didn’t always do these things either: Barrett Browning, for example, wrote in a variety of modes and genres, using male and female speakers. There are differences between the women who were described as Poetesses in the 1830s and women who were described as Poetesses in the 1870s, but if we focus on the use of the word “poetess” and not on the characteristics we have come to expect of the sentimental Poetess as a mid-nineteenth-century figure, it becomes clear that “Poetess” was a significant category through the end of the nineteenth century.

That category, however, appeared to be much less stable than it had seemed to be in the mid-nineteenth century. Barrett Browning’s death in 1861 left vacant the “proud position of the first living English poetess.”³⁹ While critics debated who would take her place, or whether any living writers even qualified to be called a Poetess at all, the vacuum left by Barrett Browning began to harden into the “papier-mâché monument” Lootens describes in *Lost Saints*; at the same time, a new, varied crowd of Poetess performers appeared. Late nineteenth-century Poetess figures mobilized theatricality and collectivity in different, sometimes contradictory ways: some harnessed Poetess collectivity for reform-minded or defiantly feminist ends; some, in their public, maudlin sentimentality, were the subject of misogynist parody; some were figured as Pythian or Sapphic performers consecrated by art; some, in their failure to look the part of a divine Poetess, were absurdly, embarrassingly profane. Further, the visibility of the midcentury Poetess figure intensified as critical narratives of Barrett Browning’s legacy became more

³⁹ Review of Augusta Webster’s *Portraits* from the *Examiner and London Review* (May 21, 1870). Quoted in Webster (2000), 418.

firmly established. Writers could make a more deliberate choice than ever before to “step forth” as Poetess (Lootens, *Political Poetess* 3) or to consciously resist or subvert the conventions associated with Poetess performance; critics could make similar choices about how to define or interpret Poetess performance. Poetess performance remained citational, repeating tropes familiar from earlier Poetess figures; but the variety of ways in which individual performers took up those tropes might provide one explanation for the critical sense that Poetess was a less relevant category after Barrett Browning’s death.⁴⁰

Oscar Wilde offered one narrative of the Poetess post-E.B.B.—one in which the monolithic Barrett Browning is replaced by new choirs of minor, but nonetheless interesting, Poetess figures—in his 1888 essay “English Poetesses.” Beginning with the claim that “England has given to the world one great poetess, Elizabeth Barrett Browning,” Wilde argues that another candidate, Christina Rossetti, was not a poetess but “simply a very delightful artist in poetry” (742). Like Barrett Browning herself, Wilde reserves the word “poetess” in this context for writers with a particularly exalted calling. Beyond the already rare pleasures of a “delightful artist in poetry” like Rossetti, wait the Poetess’s

higher and more sunlit heights of song, a larger vision, and an ampler air, a music at once more passionate and more profound, a creative energy that is borne of the spirit, a winged rapture that is borne of the soul, a force and fervour of mere utterance that has all the wonder of the prophet, and not a little of the consecration of the priest.
(742)

Wilde’s essay then turns from Barrett Browning herself to the choirs of imitators—charming, if unoriginal—she left behind: “to her influence, almost as much as to the

⁴⁰ The word “poetess,” of course, has carried a variety of meanings since the sixteenth century; the difference in the second half of the nineteenth century was that people were more aware of the term’s many meanings.

higher education of women, I would be inclined to attribute the really remarkable awakening of women's song that characterizes the latter half of our century in England. No country has ever had so many poetesses at once." Wilde is ambivalent about these latter-day poetesses: their work is derivative, but on the other hand "we in England have been prone to underrate the value of tradition in literature." He moves from the poetesses of England's future to those of England's past, none of whom were great poetesses either, but who were no worse than most male poets and who produced many interesting qualities; his final recommendation is that more women writers should take to writing prose, since "English prose is detestable" and women's "light touch, and exquisite ear, and delicate sense of balance and proportion would be of no small service to us" (742-743).

Throughout Wilde's discussion of Barrett Browning, he compares her to Sappho, claiming that "of all the women of history, Mrs Browning is the only one that we could name in any possible or remote conjunction with Sappho." Wilde acknowledges that however much Sappho's genius might have dazzled the ancients, we have almost no access to that genius—only "an echo of an echo"—while Barrett Browning's work is very much available as "an imperishable glory of our literature." Yet he persists in characterizing Barrett Browning, like Sappho, as an inaccessible classical figure: he describes Barrett Browning as "the wisest of the Sibyls" and places her in the same relation to latter-day poets as he places all women poets in relation to Sappho (743). While the late Romantic and mid-Victorian poetesses had imagined mythic female forebears, they were themselves transformed into mythic forebears for late Victorian poets. In turning from Barrett Browning's priest-like genius to the "not small" talents of

the “delightful artist[s]” she left behind her, Wilde gestures toward the kind of canonization that, as Tricia Lootens argues in *Lost Saints*, prevents a poet from being read.

Lootens has argued that Barrett Browning’s canonization necessitated the obliteration of her actual literary work: beginning with Kate Field’s 1861 obituary and continuing with Edmund Clarence Stedman’s essay in *Victorian Poets*, Barrett Browning’s poetry came to be appreciated less for its literary value and more as a symptom or artifact of the poet as a saintly, ideal woman. By the twentieth century, Lootens demonstrates, Barrett Browning’s presence in the literary canon had been effectively reduced to *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a strange, complex text that continues to be misread—or not really read but merely referenced—as a record of the Brownings’ fairytale romance, a rapturous Victorian valentine to Love in general.⁴¹

Indeed, even those late-Victorian texts that took the breadth of Barrett Browning’s work seriously tended to focus just as much on her personal life, or even to give her the status of a fictional character, a heroine in a romance. An 1875 American collection of biographical sketches by women, *Queenly Women, Crowned and Uncrowned*, includes Barrett Browning among other historical women, as well as mythic figures such as Homer’s Penelope and idealized, quasi-historical women such as Dante’s Beatrice, whose portrait graces the frontispiece of the collection. As the “songstress of Liberty,” Barrett Browning is taken seriously as the author of activist poems such as “Cry of the Children,” “Curse for a Nation,” and “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”; the essay on Barrett

⁴¹ *Lost Saints* 118. Lootens points out that popular understanding of *Sonnets* as a Victorian text is a misunderstanding of the “Victorian” as well as of the sonnets themselves; while the *Sonnets* are indeed very Victorian, they are imagined as part of the sweetly sentimental, frilly, Valentine-Victorian era of our popular imagination.

Browning, written by one of several unnamed contributors, provides nuanced readings of these poems. At the same time, Barrett Browning is also clearly a type for the Songstress of Liberty, just as Penelope is a type for the Greek Matron, and the essay's author seems less concerned with historical fact than with poetic fitness, declaring of a story about Barrett Browning's and Robert Browning's courtship "as the union of two poets *ought* to be attended with poetical romance, we are very much inclined to give it credit" (S.W. Williams 99). As the nineteenth century progressed, then, the word "poetess," especially when applied to Barrett Browning, came to be associated more and more with "heroine," an association also recognized by Christina Rossetti.

For Rossetti, who was probably the most famous living British woman poet after Barrett Browning's death,⁴² "poetess" seems to have held the same connotations of seriousness and artistic merit that it holds for Barrett Browning and Wilde: when an acquaintance sends her the work of an unfamiliar writer, "Jane Ellice," she delivers the verdict that Ellice is "a *poetess*, I think."⁴³ But Rossetti also recognized the way in which the word "poetess" could paradoxically situate the writing, often desiring, poetess as an erotic object herself. In the introduction to her sonnet sequence "Monna Innominata," she describes Barrett Browning both as "the Great Poetess of our day and nation" and as blessed by romantic "happ[iness]" that prevented her from writing "unhappy" sonnets of disappointed love; but she also displays longing for an alternative literary history in which the unnamed female addressee of medieval love poems and Petrarchan sonnets might have "spoken for herself," returning, or turning back, the desiring gaze of the male sonneteer (294). In applying the word to herself, Rossetti showed a self-deprecating sense

⁴² *Lost Saints* describes the inverse relationship between Rossetti's and Barrett Browning's canonical status, a "process whereby Rossetti's canonization was linked to the decanonization of her predecessor" (12).

⁴³ Letter to Elihu Burrett, June 1867. *Letters to Christina Rossetti*.

of humor that belied an acute consciousness that the word “poetess” carried a set of expectations about the woman writer’s body: writing to her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, she playfully complains, “If only my figure would shrink somewhat! for a fat *poetess* is incongruous.”⁴⁴ For Barrett Browning, Wilde, and Rossetti, the name of “poetess” indeed indicated a great and inspired artist (or for Wilde, tellingly, something more than—or perhaps less than!—an artist). But as Rossetti indicates in her letter to Dante Gabriel, to claim to be a “poetess” in the nineteenth century and beyond was not just to claim artistic excellence; it was also a bid to fill the role of the youthful, beautiful poetess figure created in part by Landon and Jerdan in the 1820s. Those poetesses who did not fit that image were subject to ridicule.

Proponents of Rossetti’s work, including Swinburne and her brother William Michael Rossetti, also called her a “poetess,” and seemed to think the word conferred a certain amount of cultural authority on her and her work, although it could also be somewhat condescending: William Michael used Christina’s opinion as a “member of the family and a poetess” to justify edits he wanted to make to their brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s work (“Preface,” xxxii), while after her death Swinburne praised her as a “saintly and secluded poetess” (xxv), contributing to a twentieth-century image of the Victorian Poetess as both virtuous and otherworldly.

By the end of the century, then, the word “poetess” still retained its associations with feminine virtue. William Michael Rossetti eulogized Augusta Webster as a poetess by emphasizing her virtue as a mother, as opposed to Christina Rossetti’s virtue as an unmarried, “saintly” woman. In his 1893 preface to Webster’s posthumously published sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*, William Michael echoes a critical tradition of

⁴⁴ Letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, August 4, 1881.

equating a poetess's work with her life: he explains that Webster was "as admirable and attaching in private life as she was preeminent as a poetess," and that "[n]othing certainly could be more genuine than these Sonnets . . . The theme is as beautiful and natural a one as any poetess could select" ("Introductory Note" ii). Rossetti's emphasis on the "genuine" and "natural" elements in Webster's poetry demonstrates that in the 1890s critics continued to associate the contemporary poetess, and not just Barrett Browning and her predecessors, with the spontaneous overflow of personal feeling.

On the other hand, contemporary reviewers understood that Webster's dramatic monologues of the 1860s and 70s were not autobiographical, and they still considered Webster a Poetess, often establishing her similarity to a prominent male poet such as Browning or Tennyson and going on to emphasize her more obviously feminine qualities. Interestingly, however, the traits that reviewers identify as Webster's "poetess" qualities—an ability to "fathom the secrets of the heart and to unravel their intricacies" ("Review of *Dramatic Studies*" 406), or a "consciousness of the pain that lies hidden in our modern social life" ("Review of *A Woman Sold*" 410)—are explicitly analytical as well as emotional. An interest in the "secrets of the heart" didn't mean the poetess was self-absorbed, or that her writing was always confessional or autobiographical; instead, it helped her to "translate herself thoroughly into the characters which she conceives" in her dramatic monologues ("Review of *Dramatic Studies*" 405). For these reviewers, a Poetess's work is always informed by her gender, particularly by her feminine empathy; but they recognize that a Poetess can *think* as well as feel. Although Armstrong cites Webster's work as evidence that the "category of the poetess is less secure" by the second half of the century, Webster's reviews show that critics not only considered her a

Poetess, but correctly interpreted Poetess writing according to Armstrong's criteria, recognizing that Poetess writing can be as analytical as it is expressive. Further, Armstrong's claim that Webster's use "of the generic 'he'" in her essay "Poets and Personal Pronouns" contributes to the insecurity of the category of the Poetess is complicated by the essay's publication history: as an anonymous newspaper columnist writing for the *Examiner*, Webster would have been expected to take on a "generic" editorial voice, unmarked by her gender, rather than the voice of a "poetess," but when the essay was reprinted under her own name, it appeared in a collection with the highly gendered title *A Housewife's Opinions*.

Certainly the figure of the poetess was the subject of significant negative criticism and satire in the second half of the nineteenth century. Since the midcentury Poetess had come to be associated with a certain version of sentimental lyric, changing literary fashions made backlash both easy and inevitable. Poetesses—contemporary and deceased—were recognized and increasingly mocked for the maudlin sentimentality of their poems. In the United States, an 1875 article in *Scribner's Monthly* identified "a certain unhealthiness" in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "spiritualness" which seems to have spread to contemporary women poets; the philosophical conclusion is that "women poets represent the *sadness* of life's prime, while men singers preserve more of its joyous side."⁴⁵ Less than a decade later, Mark Twain skewered popular sentimental poetesses with the character of the tragically deceased Emmeline Grangerford in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). American audiences in particular seemed to have been able to

⁴⁵ "Some Recent Women Poets" 102. This perspective was surely influenced by Barrett Browning's interest in spiritualism, an interest that may have contributed to Edmund Gosse's characterization of her work as marked by "hysterical violence, the Pythian vagueness and the Pythian shriek" (quoted in Lootens, *Lost Saints* 155).

recognize a number of Poetess “types,” including the comic figures of the maudlin, “unhealthy” sentimental Poetess and the lusty, bossy “passion poetess,” a comic figure whose preposterous demands on men formed the punchline of many humorous sketches in the scandal sheet *Town Topics* throughout the 1890s. This figure was probably based on Ella Wheeler Wilcox, whose bestselling 1883 collection *Poems of Passion* garnered her widespread popular success and critical mockery.⁴⁶ As in the eighteenth century, the Poetess of the late nineteenth century could be a familiar figure of domestic life or the urban street, a shorthand for an unruly woman who demands too much attention. And yet, of course, the Passion Poetess *does* get attention, from the men she torments in *Town Topics*, and from the thousands of people who bought Wilcox’s *Poems of Passion*.

Toward the end of the century, too, the Poetess had come to be associated with the political and literary performances of African American Poetess performers and orators such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.⁴⁷ In 1890, Harper appeared, labeled as a “poetess,” in the collective biography *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* alongside Phillis Wheatley and the contemporary Poetess performers Naomi Anderson, Anna Belle Rhodes Penn, and Mrs Josie D. Heard; the collection’s inclusion of so many “poetesses” suggests the important role that poetry played in the cultural and political “triumphs” and “activities” of African American women.

In England, too, the Poetess was increasingly understood as an emblem of feminist progress. Since at least 1840, when Coleridge wrote “Modern English Poetesses,” critics had constructed a narrative of social progress in which the literary

⁴⁶ One of the more cheerful “Passion Poetess” sketches, from March 23, 1893: “*May*: Does your husband ever kiss you after he has smoked? *Passion Poetess (with fiery zeal)*—No, but sometimes he smokes after I have kissed him” (29:8).

⁴⁷ For more on Harper’s performances, see McGill’s “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry” and Lootens’s chapter “Harper’s Hearts” (*Political Poetess* 180 – 211).

output of the Victorian Poetess represented the realization of women's true potential after centuries of neglect. In Coleridge's account, before 1800 English women had been confined to their homes by a misunderstanding of women's true spheres of influence and silenced by oppressive cultural taboos against public exposure:

There was a time—and we remember it—when . . . the disgust excited by the female smatterer of letters kept the really learned, and therefore modest, woman in retirement; when the vulgar-minded of both sexes took occasion, from the folly of a few poor unfeminine creatures, to sneer at the very notion of learning and genius in any woman. (375)

Luckily, “that time is past in England”; in the Victorian era men began to understand and value “the peculiar talents of women” as well as the “powers common to them and men (375). Coleridge's analysis, however, approves of—indeed, requires—popular and critical “disgust” at the figure of the Poetess as she was understood in the eighteenth century. In condemning the “folly” of “poor unfeminine” Poetess figures such as Phoebe Clinkett and her predecessor, the Maid of Kent, who had the audacity to perform in public as “goodly poetess[es]” despite their lack of learning, modesty, or “true” femininity, Coleridge pathologizes their performances as symptoms of a kind of gendered madness and excludes them from the “modest” popular performance he applauds. If British Poetesses belonged to a choir, the choir enforced strict codes of behavior.

Eight years later, Rowton echoed Coleridge when he argued that “only *one half* of the human soul has yet had a fair scope for development,” but noted that “during the last half-century our Poetesses have received a far healthier kind of regard” (xii). By this logic, the Poetess was a symbol not only of the quality of British womanhood, but of the enlightened gender politics of the British Empire. In contrast to Coleridge's dismissal of the eighteenth-century Poetess, however, Rowton and other anthologists seemed driven to

collect as many pre-1800 Poetesses as possible, at least partly in an effort to justify the need for a new anthology of women poets; introductions to poetess anthologies, which were published regularly in England and America from 1825 to 1921, frequently featured a review of the deficiencies of previous collections, including claims that they were poorly researched, plagiarized, or missing the work of important poets.⁴⁸ Thus the newly created Poetess ideal required that anthologists retrofit the term not only to early nineteenth-century models such as Hemans, but that they discover a long Poetess tradition that had gone unrecognized and undocumented since the Middle Ages.⁴⁹ Even as the 1840s Poetess ideal was applied retroactively to earlier Poetess performers, however, anthologists were still able to celebrate the nineteenth century as the golden age of the Poetess, since socially progressive readers and newly empowered Poetesses alike had been awakened to the particular genius of women. The Poetess anthologists invented a tradition of which the midcentury Poetess could be the apotheosis.

Later in the century, the narrative of the Poetess's progress took on an even more explicitly feminist slant, as authors as diverse as Wilde and the feminist anthologist Elizabeth Amelia Sharp, who published *Women's Voices: An Anthology of the Most Characteristic Poems by English, Scotch, and Irish Women* in 1887, saw the number of poetesses writing late in the nineteenth century—what Wilde called only half-ironically

⁴⁸ See, for example, Alexander Dyce's 1825 *Specimens of British Poetess*; Rowton's 1853 *Female Poets of Great Britain*; Sharp's 1887 *Women's Voices*; and John Collings Squire's 1921 *Book of Women's Verse*. Rowton's "Preface" laments the neglect of women's verse in part through criticism of previous Poetess anthologies, complaining that Dyce's "is the only one of merit and research" but remains "incomplete" (iii). Nearly seventy years later, Squire applies an amplified version of this same criticism to Rowton, objecting to his condescending tone ("One might imagine he was talking about some obscure and unnoticed tribe of the brute creation: badgers perhaps, or Dartford warblers") and accusing him of plagiarizing Dyce; Rowton is "a thief, a hypocrite, a most oily and prolix driveller" (ix). Squire also objects to Sharp's "feminist manifesto," "terribly dedicated 'To all Women'" and "crowded with the ephemeral productions of contemporaries" (xi).

⁴⁹ This chapter participates in that tradition, of course; Poetess criticism, like Poetess performance, is endlessly citational.

“the really remarkable awakening of woman’s song that characterizes the latter half of our century in England”—as evidence of the value of women’s higher education or of more social progress to come. According to Sharp, the decades of cultural taboos against women publishing were analogous to contemporary prohibitions against women “appearing on a public platform” (xviii). Just as respectable women could publish poetry without any stain on their character, Sharp implied, respectable women would soon be able to engage more directly in politics. If publishing as a Poetess in the early nineteenth century had seemed like a (temporary, incomplete) escape from the dangers of public theatrical performance, at the end of the century Sharp promotes poetry as a kind of gateway drug for public, political agitation.

“Super-Real, Hypnotic Heroines”: Twentieth-Century Poetess Theatricality

Sharp’s association of poetry with public speaking presaged a renewed fascination, in the first half of the twentieth century, with the Poetess’s performing feminine body. While modernist tendencies to interpret all things Victorian as outmoded, mawkish, and overly ornamented included—indeed, often centered on—the figure of the Victorian Poetess, and while these prejudices extended to twentieth-century Poetess performance, the theatricality of the Poetess figure allowed Poetess performers and audiences to reflect on changing cultural codes surrounding women’s relationship to sexuality and public space. In addition, although by the end of the twentieth century the word “poetess” had become entirely derogatory, or at least dismissive, the term remained a neutral feminine equivalent to “poet” throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, and in many contexts—particularly popular publications, particularly in the United States—it remained a term of praise. The contemporary reception of the poet Charlotte Mew

exemplifies the Poetess's increasingly explicit relationship to theatricality as well as the way in which the word continued to connote admiration into the twentieth century: in the 1920s in England, Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf both sincerely praised Mew as a great contemporary Poetess, a reputation that was shaped, at least at first, by the power of the spoken, embodied performances Mew and her friends gave of her poems at private salons and public readings.⁵⁰ Woolf, if not Hardy, emphasized the relationship between the Poetess and the theater, and seemed to take "poetess" seriously as a role to which more women writers should have aspired: wondering in *A Room of One's Own* why all the women writers on her shelf are novelists, Woolf muses that "the original impulse was to poetry" and that "the 'supreme head of song' was a poetess," but concludes that the middle-class contexts in which nineteenth-century women writers wrote made it "easier to write prose and fiction . . . than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required" (66). In this passage, Woolf dismisses the accomplishment of nineteenth-century women poets, but she imagines "poetess" as a prestigious literary category, one that might produce not only lyric but dramatic poetry, a characterization supported by her praise of Aphra Behn and the fact that the doomed, imaginary Poetess figure she imagines, Judith Shakespeare, is a dramatist like her brother (a dramatist, however, who is barred from the theater).

While calling a woman a "poetess" was not recognizable as ridicule on its own, by the second decade of the twentieth century the word contributed to the comic effect of jokes and slurs at the expense of women poets. Witter Bynner's characterization of Amy

⁵⁰ In a January 1922 letter to J.C. Squire responding to Squire's anthology *A Book of Women's Verse*, Hardy wrote that he was "rather disappointed to find you had omitted Charlotte Mew — the greatest *poetess* I have come across lately, in my judgment, though so meagre in her output" (*Collected Letters*); Woolf described Mew as "the greatest living poetess" in a 1924 letter to Vita Sackville-West (quoted in Rice 70).

Lowell as a “hippopoetess,” which was echoed and popularized by Ezra Pound, simultaneously mocks Lowell for having a body that does not fit the image of the poetess and makes light of the idea of the poetess itself. May Sinclair’s description of Charlotte Mew as a “lesbian poetess” who pursued Sinclair around her bed in a fit of passion renders Mew ridiculous (as a lesbian and a Poetess) even as it recounts an experience that was potentially traumatic for Sinclair.⁵¹ The fact that Sinclair did not tend to refer to women poets as “poetesses” in her own writing is further evidence that she intended the term as a slur. More explicitly derogatory is Robert McAlmon’s vicious 1922 prose sketch, “A Poetess,” supposedly written about Mina Loy: the poetess is “a starved woman . . . a malnutrite saint politician, but through never having realized purification, she writes songs from the urge within her.”⁵² McAlmon’s Poetess as “malnutrite saint politician” is a twisted update of Tyndale’s contemptuous account of the Maid of Kent: like Barton, this Poetess pretends to divine authority (she’s a “saint”) and the right to public performance (“politician”) but her inspiration is not divine but grotesquely corporeal, drawn from a body that is at once excessively filthy or tainted (not having achieved “purification”) and painfully lacking (the woman is “starved.”) McAlmon’s Poetess is evidence that the elements of Poetess performance present in Tyndale have remained active, and that despite changes in the connotations of the word “poetess,” these elements can be reconfigured in 1922 to create something very similar to Tyndale’s screed almost four centuries earlier.

McAlmon’s piece seems rooted in pure misogyny, but the comic effect of the other examples can also be traced to a growing sense of the word “poetess” as old-

⁵¹ Quoted in Fitzgerald 133.

⁵² Quoted in Miller 93.

fashioned, as particularly Victorian. As early as 1903, a reader of *The Academy and Literature* referred to “poetess” as “a somewhat outmoded word.”⁵³ In 1912, Ernestine Mills referred to the Victorian poetess as easily shocked: “It is difficult to realise that even in Victorian days a poetess could be shocked at those fairy dream children” (248), she said, while *Town Topics* referred to Caroline Norton as “a poetess of tears in the early Victorian days.”⁵⁴ By 1921 J.C. Squire used the word “poetess” in his anthology *A Book of Women’s Verse* only to refer to women poets writing before the twentieth century. A general sense that the Poetess was a relic of the Victorian era both encouraged and was shaped by the tendency of major modernist poets such as Pound and Eliot to reject Victorian poetry as feminized, and perhaps to reject women’s poetry as Victorian: weak, artificial, old-fashioned, overly decorative. The depiction of pathetic, affected older women in both Pound’s 1912 poem “Portrait d’une Femme” and Eliot’s 1915 “Portrait of a Lady” draws heavily on a twentieth-century understanding of the Victorian Poetess, as part of a general modernist rejection of Victorian aesthetics and values.

In contrast to the tendency to consider the Poetess “outmoded,” but consistent with nineteenth-century images of poetesses as “gift-book beauties” and with a twentieth-century understanding of the Victorian poetry as overly decorative, the twentieth-century poetess was often represented as a glamorous, fashionable young woman—or at least as a woman who aspired to glamour, fashion, and youth. *Town Topics* described the young Natalie Barney in 1901 as a “passionate poetess” who “excites amazement” by her dashing riding exploits around Paris (vol. 59); twenty years later the narrator of Katherine

⁵³ *Academy* Jan 17, 1903, p. 71. The *Academy* quote is given in the *OED* and is often used to support claims that the twentieth century brought in a new attention to gender-neutral language. But in informing the editors of the *Academy* that “Jesse Berridge is a poet, not a poetess,” the letter-writer simply meant that Berridge was a man.

⁵⁴ *Town Topics* 71.

Mansfield's story "Je ne parle pas français" described fashionable bohemian ladies at a party as "extremely comme il faut. They sat on cubist sofas in full evening dress and allowed us to hand them thimbles of cherry brandy and to talk to them about their poetry. For, as far as I can remember, they were all poetesses" (85). These examples bookend two decades of glamorous, fashionable Poetesses who might care more about their looks or their style than about their poetry. This image could benefit Poetess performers who were in fact young, glamorous, and fashionable: the famously beautiful and stylish Edna St Vincent Millay filled lecture halls for her poetry readings throughout the 1920s and 30s, and was referred to as a poetess until the day she died. But an interest in dress could also subject a woman poet to ridicule: many of the jokes in *Town Topics* at the expense of the "passion poetess" Ella Wheeler Wilcox centered on her over-the-top costumes: a gray and pink dress "wound round" the poet, who "had no corsets on" in 1895, and an "orange tea gown with a myrtle wreath on her head" in 1905. Amy Lowell got the same treatment in 1916, when she showed up late to another poet's reading, "impressively resplendent in a spangled gown" but obviously rude and inconsiderate (vols 53, 63, 74). In this context, the "hippopoetess" nickname bestowed on Lowell by Binner and Pound does not merely ridicule Lowell for being fat, but for aspiring to the potentially eroticized role of "poetess" when her body disqualified her. In the early twentieth century, the role of Poetess was more theatrical than ever; and as a Poetess, as with an actress, it was important to look the part.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the word "poetess," though frequently used by reviewers and editors, was almost always condescending, connoting either a naive, attractive young woman or an old-fashioned, sentimental, wishy-washy woman

poet, neither of whom could be taken seriously. W.D. Snodgrass ironically cast the aging Ezra Pound as a former “poetess” in a 1960 review: “I feel a little as if I had married a romantical, schoolgirl poetess, only to discover (the honeymoon safely over) that she has turned into a lady executive, much determined to save souls, mine in particular” (120). The British poet Elizabeth Jennings protested in 1964 against being called a “poetess” in her home country, and claimed women poets were better off in the United States, “where it isn’t so odd to write poetry, where one isn’t called a ‘poetess,’” and where to be an artist is not a question of sex.”⁵⁵ But in England many critics also objected to the term “poetess,” at least when applied to “serious” women writers: A. Alvarez opened his review of Sylvia Plath’s 1960 debut collection, *The Colossus*, by assuring his readers that “Miss Plath neither asks excuses for her work nor offers them. She steers clear of feminine charm, deliciousness, gentility, supersensitivity and the act of being a poetess. She simply writes good poetry” (12). And in his foreword to Plath’s next—and last—collection of poems, *Ariel*, Robert Lowell famously declared that

in these poems, written in the last months of her life . . . Sylvia Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created—hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another “poetess,” but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines. (vii)

Lowell’s alternative to being “another ‘poetess’”—or even a “woman”—bears a remarkable resemblance to the figures created by nineteenth-century Poetess performers, who often sought to recreate “hypnotic, great classical heroines” rather than to simply replicate themselves as “a woman.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Quoted in Orr 92.

⁵⁶ See Lootens’s reading, in her chapter “‘Not Another Poetess’: Feminist Criticism, Nineteenth-Century Poetry, and the Racialization of Suicide” (*Political Poetess* 55–79), of the way in which Lowell’s introduction “strikingly . . . racialize[s] and Victorianize[s]” Plath (56).

Further, Lowell's emphasis on Plath's role as a "classical heroine" and a "subtly created" self engages with another way in which the Poetess has been imagined since the sixteenth century: as a performer, or more specifically an actress. It's no coincidence that "poetess" and "actress" persisted when gendered language for other artists or professions was no longer available. The accounts of the Poetess I have described above consistently imagine Poetess performance in terms of a highly visible and performative femininity: not only the suffering visible in the face or audible in the voice of the sentimental poetess, but her rustling silks and gorgeous headdresses, the loveliness of her youthful body or the absurdity of her desire to display a body that is aging, ugly, or fat.

Despite Lowell's dismissal of the term "poetess," Plath herself may have preferred to be considered a "poetess" rather than a "super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroine." In a 1958 journal entry, she imagined herself precisely as "another poetess," one in a long line extending back to Sappho:

I think I have written lines which qualify me to be the Poetess of America . . . Who rivals? Well, in history Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St Vincent Millay—all dead. Now: Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore, the aging giantesses and poetic godmothers. Phyllis McGinley is out—light verse: she's sold herself. Rather: May Swenson, Isabella Gardner, and most close, Adrienne Cecil Rich—who will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems. (360)

For Plath, as for Wilde, a "poetess" is clearly a serious artist, the opposite of someone who composes "light verse." Even more significant than Plath's respect for the role of the Poetess is the fact that, written over a century after Barrett Browning went looking for grandmothers, Plath's account of the competition for Poetess of America engages with questions that have emerged around the figure of the Poetess since Hemans and Landon—if not before. National boundaries blur, so that the mythic, classical Sappho as

well as the historical British poets Barrett Browning and Rossetti are co-opted for the title of Poetess of America. That title itself is a royal one that can only be occupied by one woman at a time.⁵⁷ An aging poetess is formidable, but somewhat ridiculous. And, despite Plath's competitive stance toward her forebears, her idea of the Poetess is inseparable from the idea of a women's tradition, a long line of poetesses beginning with Sappho, moving through the Victorian era and modernism and touching women poets as diverse as Plath, Adrienne Rich, and May Swenson. More surprising is Plath's implication that dead poetesses are disqualified—a conclusion that might surprise critics who focus on Plath's death-wish, and one that is inconsistent with a long-standing critical tendency to read, and nostalgically celebrate, the Poetess, from Sappho to Landon to Dickinson to Plath, as doomed or already dead.

Neither the tradition of Poetess theatricality that I indicate here, nor the "Poetess traditions" invoked by twentieth-century critics, by Victorian Poetess performers, and by Plath herself should be understood as continuous or stable; these traditions take on different valuations at different moments in history. Yet—as comments by Coleridge or Wilde, L.E.L. or Webster, Plath or Lowell make clear, a set of reading practices and theoretical fictions do accompany "the Poetess," women poets, and their readers, practices that are worth tracing and considering in relation to different historical moments. Plath's sketch of the Poetess tradition is reminiscent of the Poetess anthologies that proliferated during the nineteenth century. It is also one example of the Poetess as a figure through which women writers were able to construct imaginary communities, and

⁵⁷ Plath's impulse to put many women poets in competition for the title of "Poetess of America" may itself be a Victorian project. Lootens points out that "competition" between poets such as Barrett Browning and Rossetti was "central" to canon formation in the Victorian period and in our own, comparing "conventional literary historiographers" to "judges in a beauty pageant" who "accord real victory only to one 'queen'" (*Lost Saints* 161).

re-gender not only literary history but all history. Other notable examples include Hemans's collection of women's lives in verse, *Records of Woman*; Landon's "Improvisatrice"; Rossetti's *Monna Innominata*; and Webster's *Portraits*. In this sense, the Poetess is a vehicle not only for transatlantic exchange but for time travel, a trope that allows for speculative fiction and alternative histories, as well as for fantasies of feminist collectivity and solidarity—although in practice such projects, as Lootens demonstrates in her readings of second-wave feminist criticism and as we might already suspect from Coleridge's choir of "modest" Poetess performers and Plath's imagined Poetess pageant, are as likely to result in hierarchy and exclusion. The generation of feminist writers and critics who immediately followed Lowell and Plath categorically rejected the word "poetess," but in their attention to and "recovery" of the women writers who had often been labeled Poetesses, they often engaged in a tradition of feminist fantasy historiography in which the figure of the Poetess had always been deeply implicated.

Poetess Studies: A Critical Tradition

Although literary critics wrote about individual women poets throughout the twentieth century, current Poetess scholarship has its roots in the feminist recovery project of the 1970s and 80s, when scholars worked to expand the literary canon with "forgotten" works by women writers, works that had often fallen out of print. But feminist criticism, as Laura Mandell has shown, has often had an uneasy relationship with both the word "poetess" and the women writers who often bore that name ("Introduction"). On the one hand, early feminist critics wanted to make as many women's voices heard as possible, and their commitment to uncovering or recovering a coherent tradition of women's writing required them to fill in the gaps between those

women writers who may otherwise have appeared to be solitary, exceptional women in a largely male-dominated canon. On the other hand, the work of nineteenth-century women poets could be disappointingly sentimental in tone and conventional in form, difficult to defend aesthetically or politically. Texts such as Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, with its explicitly feminist message about the value of women's writing and its self-consciously modern form, were easy to reclaim for feminism; poems by Hemans, Landon, or Sigourney, which seemingly embraced bourgeois "feminine" values of domesticity and self-sacrifice, posed more of a challenge.

One solution to this challenge was to read teleologically, creating a narrative of a female literary tradition in which women poets struggled to free themselves from the limitations placed on their writing by an oppressive patriarchal culture. Classic feminist texts such as Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* imagined a women's literary tradition culminating in mid- to late-twentieth-century texts that in many ways seem to "solve" the problems faced by nineteenth-century women writers. Showalter imagines writers such as Doris Lessing as having found a balance between the emotional and aesthetic power of George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell and the more androgynous Virginia Woolf. And at first glance, Gilbert and Gubar's practice of beginning chapters on nineteenth-century novelists or poets with epigraphs from the work of twentieth-century writers often suggests that similarities between the Victorian Poetess or novelist and poets such as Plath, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Carolyn Kizer validate the nineteenth-century writer: in using Plath's "Lady Lazarus" to explain Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, for example, Gilbert and Gubar implicitly value *Jane Eyre* for its proto-modern feminism. At

the same time, by using Plath to read Brontë, Gilbert and Gubar employ an anti-chronological approach that anticipates the self-conscious “reading backward” performed by more recent critics such as Michael Moon and Prins, offering a literary historiography that demonstrates the ways in which later texts *do* effectively change how earlier ones are read.⁵⁸ *The Madwoman in the Attic* reveals its own historically-specific cultural attitude toward women’s writing as a category, but also models a historiography based on feminist re-reading that itself echoes similar gestures made by Hemans, Rossetti, and Plath.

Later critical accounts of a female poetic tradition, including Cheryl Walker’s 1983 study of American women poets, *The Nightingale’s Burden*, and Angela Leighton’s 1992 study *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, imagine a much more linear narrative that Prins has described as “a progressive politics of feminist criticism” in which women poets’ “progress toward authorial voice and female authorship is understood to be a continuous line of historical development and gradual self-empowerment” (176). In Leighton’s narrative, for example, poets such as Landon and Hemans show encouraging signs of being close to shaking off the constraining feminine roles imposed upon them by patriarchal literary culture, but ultimately they succumb to patriarchy’s influence, leaving the struggle to be taken up by the next generation of women poets. Barrett Browning improves upon Hemans and Landon. At the same time, however, Leighton recognized the important influence that Hemans and Landon had upon Victorian women poets like Barrett Browning and Rossetti, and indeed upon Victorian poetry in general: “for all their limitations,” she says, they “are the true originators of a

⁵⁸ See Michael Moon’s essay “No Coward Souls,” in McGill’s *Traffic in Poems*. As McGill says in her introduction, “In reading Brontë as Dickinson’s legacy, Moon reverses the flow of transatlantic influence and the ordinary temporality of poetic influence” (10).

line of poetry which can be distinguished from the Romantics, on the one hand, and the modernists, on the other” (2).⁵⁹

By 1997, the “line of poetry” originated by Hemans and Landon was recognizable as “the poetess tradition,” an area of critical inquiry that, according to Anne K. Mellor, produced “the most important recent criticism of poetry written in England during the Romantic period” (261). While the term “poetess” had been considered derogatory for much of the twentieth century, critics writing on the Romantic and Victorian poetess tradition reclaimed the term as productive, or at least descriptive.⁶⁰ As Mellor points out, critics such as Leighton, Armstrong, Walker, Glennis Stephenson, Virginia Blain, and Mellor herself, “rightly recogniz[ed] that the Victorian literary establishment defined Hemans, Landon, and their female peers as ‘poetesses,’ distinctly different from the *male* ‘poet,’” identified “specific literary conventions” associated with poetess writing, and demonstrated how Poetess performers used even the most bourgeois and hegemonic of those conventions to “subver[t]” or “resist” nineteenth-century gender expectations (261). These critics differ on precisely which literary conventions characterize Poetess writing. Most of them agree, however, that “poetess” means something other than “woman poet,”

⁵⁹ As Lootens shows in *The Political Poetess*, both Gilbert and Gubar’s time-traveling historiography—which is evident in other classic texts of second-wave feminist criticism, including Ellen Moers’s 1976 *Literary Women*—and more linear Poetess narratives had a tendency to ignore or obscure women poets’ explicit investments in imperial or abolitionist politics, as well as a failure to recognize the Poetess herself when she is not white—or even the possibility of a Poetess who is not white, or for whom enslavement might be a literal, embodied condition rather than a metaphor for exclusively gendered oppression. While subsequent critics have shown increased interest in the racialized politics of Poetess performance, Lootens has identified an ongoing problem in Poetess criticism that applies to much of the criticism I discuss below and that still needs to be addressed.

⁶⁰ In addition to Leighton, Walker, Blain, Mellor, Isobel Armstrong, and Glennis Stephenson, see Kay Moser’s “The Victorian Critic’s Dilemma: What to Do With a Talented Poetess?” (1985), Stuart Curran’s “The I Altered” (1988), Margaret Morlier’s “Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Felicia Hemans” (1993), Marlon B. Ross’s *The Contours of Masculine Desire* (1989), Susan Wolfson’s “‘Domestic Affections’ and ‘The Spear of Minerva’” (1994), and Jerome McGann’s *Poetics of Sensibility* (1996), all of which were foundational to current understandings of the figure of the Poetess and the “Poetess tradition.”

at least during particular moments in history, and that we can associate the Poetess with a recognizable set of formal choices, content areas, literary genres, forms of address, and publishing formats. Mellor summarizes the consensus about the “specific literary conventions which governed the production of these poetesses” as including

the adoption of the mask of the improvisatrice, the insistence on the primacy of love and the domestic affections to a woman’s happiness, the rejection or condemnation of poetic fame, the embracing of Edmund Burke’s aesthetic of “the beautiful” as the goal of female literary desire, and the acceptance of the hegemonic doctrine of the separate spheres. (261 – 262)

Cheryl Walker, in her discussion of the “nightingale tradition” among American women poets, a tradition stretching from Anne Bradstreet to the “passion poetess” Ella Wheeler Wilcox, emphasized the additional importance of the myth of Philomela, the mute, maimed woman who is finally able to express her pain when she is transformed into a nightingale.

Neither Leighton nor Isobel Armstrong, whose *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* appeared one year after Leighton’s *Victorian Women Poets*, provide explicit definitions of the Poetess or of Poetess writing as such, but their discussions of a distinct tradition of women’s writing influenced later critical accounts of the “poetess tradition,” including Mellor’s. Further, Armstrong’s account of Victorian women poets’ use of the “double poem” makes it possible to read the most conventional Poetess poetry as potentially subversive. For Armstrong, dramatic form—a classification that includes not only the dramatic monologue, but any genre that presents the speaking subject at a distance—allows the poet to deliberately frame the “expressive” language of the poem in a way that allows her to expose that language as culturally constructed. Tennyson’s poem “Mariana,” for example, might appear at first reading to be purely expressive of

Mariana's psychological state: the poem expresses Mariana's melancholy through both her language ("I am aweary") and descriptions of the weary-seeming environment of the "moated grange" around her. Armstrong points out that the descriptions, however, are delivered by the narrator, not Mariana; the narrator's voice, and the world he describes, function as a distancing device that exposes Mariana's "anguish" not as her own, but as something culturally conditioned, induced by her environment. At the same time, however, Armstrong stresses that the relationship between the lyric "expressive mode" and the dramatic "phenomenological" or "epistemological" mode is neither "fixed" nor one-directional: the expressive model does not exist *only* as the object of critique (14). Instead, the poem is a "dynamic text" in which the expressive and analytic modes are continually commenting upon and transforming each other. In "Mariana," Armstrong continues, the "cultural reading" that exposes the inevitability of Mariana's alienation is in turn challenged and even altered by the lyric reading: the negative emotions Mariana expresses in her own speech are themselves a form of resistance that raise questions about Mariana's "autonomy and the extent of her passivity." Both the expressive and analytic modes contribute to the poem's meaning, and it is impossible to describe one mode as a commentary on the other, just as individual subjects are always "both a cause and effect" of cultural phenomena" (15).

Armstrong's choice of "Mariana" as an introduction to the double poem is appropriate for *Victorian Poetry*, which is deeply invested in Victorian constructions of gender but which, with the exception of one chapter on women poets, is a comprehensive study of canonical male poets from Tennyson and Browning to Hopkins and Meredith. Armstrong registers some ambivalence about grouping women poets together based on

their gender; her emphasis in *Victorian Poetry* is on the politics of form and language, rather than on “overt protest,” and on specific historical context rather than a model of a relatively stable, transhistorical “feminine experience” that sometimes seems to organize earlier accounts of a “women’s tradition” such as Leighton’s (320). Recognizing that most women “wrote with a sense of belonging to a particular group defined by their sexuality, and that this sense comprehends political difference and very different kinds of poetic language,” however (323), Armstrong dedicates one long section of *Victorian Poetry*, “A Music of Thine Own,” to a consideration of women poets in particular.

In this section and in her 1995 essay “The Gush of the Feminine,” Armstrong explains that while readers have interpreted all kinds of poetry as “expressive” of the personal emotions of the poet or the speaker, women’s poetry is particularly vulnerable to being interpreted as excessively—even pathologically—emotional and irrational. The “expressive tradition” to which women poets belong, however, does not depend on a spontaneous and unselfconscious feminine “gush” of feeling or a “direct account” of personal experience, but instead mounts a thoughtful cultural critique by exploring the limits of the forms and language available to women poets (*Victorian Poetry* 346). “The gush of the feminine is a fallacy,” Armstrong announces in her essay of the same name, because women’s poetry is “intrica[te]” and “self-conscious” (“Gush” 32). The conventionality of Poetess verse that had posed such a problem for earlier feminist critics is recruited in Armstrong’s argument as feminist critique: if poems by Victorian Poetess performers seem simple, even trite, it is only because they are examples of the double poem.

Armstrong describes two related ways in which Victorian women writers used the

double form: to play with the limits of and barriers to expression, and to write beneath “the mask of the dramatic monologue.”⁶¹ The first technique, Armstrong explains, is particularly characteristic of Christina Rossetti, whose work imagines the barrier to speech as also the occasion for speech; this tension plays out in a number of ways, from the riddling language of a poem like “Winter: My Secret,” in which the poem’s speaker is motivated to speak by her refusal to tell the secret, to the interdependence of the libertine Laura or the inhibiting Lizzie in “Goblin Market.” This strategy is also used by the Romantic women poets Armstrong discusses in “The Gush of the Feminine,” who use conventional Poetess language of sighs and constricted breath not to express feelings of pain and constriction felt by the woman writing, but to theorize the constricted economic and cultural circumstances of women in general. The dramatic monologue, meanwhile, allows women poets to control their own (inevitable) objectification and to make “feminine subjectivity” an object of inquiry and critique. More practically, speaking from behind the “mask” of a character offers the woman writer protection from moral censure if the poem expresses scandalous or unpopular opinions.⁶² In explaining the canny uses that nineteenth-century women poets made of double forms, Armstrong suggests that Romantic poetesses “invented” the dramatic monologue before Browning or Tennyson did—therefore securing a place for the Poetess within both feminist criticism and the male-dominated literary canon. In identifying poems by nineteenth-century Poetesses as examples of a women’s version of the “double poem,” Armstrong argues that Romantic and Victorian “poetesses” were intelligent, analytical thinkers and cultural critics, and

⁶¹ Armstrong 368. Armstrong’s discussion of women poets’ engagement with the double poem tends to end at midcentury; as I suggest earlier, her readings of a poet such as Augusta Webster tend to oversimplify, and therefore to minimize, later poets’ relationship to Poetess performance.

⁶² Armstrong 326. For a more extensive discussion of Armstrong’s account of women poets’ use of the dramatic monologue, see pages 14, 19, and 22-23 of my Introduction above.

shows how the structure of seemingly expressive language itself could be used as cultural critique and enables complex formal analysis of poetry that was once dismissed as “merely” expressive.

In an effort to avoid repeating the homogenizing gesture of Victorian critics who turned any woman writing verse, and some women writing prose, into the midcentury version of the Poetess, many critics writing on the Poetess stress that not all nineteenth-century women writers were Poetesses. For Mellor and Blain, it is important to distinguish the nineteenth-century “poetess” from women poets from the same era who do not use Poetess conventions in their writing; although Mellor acknowledges the value of studying the Poetess tradition, she proposes an alternative tradition in her 1997 article, that of the “female poet.” Mellor’s seemingly neutral division of nineteenth-century women poets into “poetesses” writing private, domestic, sentimental verse and “female poets” writing public, didactic, political poetry, however, subtly devalues the “poetess,” not only because, as Laura Mandell points out, Mellor implies that the “female poet”’s political work is more direct and effective, but because the distinction between “poetess” and “female poet” is anachronistic: the terms were used more or less interchangeably in the nineteenth century, so to apply the twentieth-century distinction is to insist upon the (derogatory) twentieth-century connotations of the word “poetess.” Greer’s *Slip-Shod Sibyls* privileges the “true woman poet” who “does not emerge until after 1900” over the “poetess” in a much more explicit way; as Prins has shown, Greer evaluates nineteenth-century poetry according to twentieth-century aesthetics, faulting Victorian women writers for failing to understand that “the distinguishing characteristic of poetry is ambiguity” (Greer 202), as if ambiguity had been equally valued and appreciated

throughout literary history—a tendency shared by many twentieth-century readers, whose aversion to engaging closely with seemingly unreadable sentimental, conventional Poetess texts Lootens describes, citing Armstrong, as a form of “terror” (117).

Whether or not all Victorian women poets were Poetesses, Lootens demonstrates in *Lost Saints* that Poetess performers did not confine themselves to what we might recognize today as quintessentially “poetess” writing. Instead, as women poets entered the literary canon, any work that didn’t support the “saint”-like image of essential femininity was expurgated from biographies, anthologies, and other posthumous collections of a poet’s writing, often in an effort to preserve the Poetess’s reputation. Through analysis of nineteenth-century visual culture and writing on famous women, Lootens shows that while famous men, including male poets, were valued for their idiosyncrasies, famous women were often represented as idealized, mythic, interchangeable figures. To remove anything that doesn’t fit the image of such a literary saint, then, is to remove almost everything; according to Lootens, as a Poetess performer’s fame grew, it was based on an increasingly smaller number of canonical works—works which themselves were misread as uncomplicated effusions of ideal feminine love or virtue, or which went unread altogether. Ultimately women poets became “papier-mâché monuments,” famous but empty female figures whose lives had more appeal than their work (67). In contrast to earlier feminist narratives in which women’s writing was lost or hidden and needed to be recovered, Lootens argues that writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning “did not merely fade out of literary historiography” but “entered it in the guise of a series of idealized—and standardized—heroines, as the center of a literary legend” (2). When scholars seek to “recover” a

Poetess performer as a serious subject for literary study rather than as a biographical curiosity—as Barrett Browning was for much of the twentieth century—we often associate her with a narrow set of genres that don’t accurately describe the range and commitments of the writing she did during her lifetime.

Lost Saints is an early example of a more recent critical focus on historicizing the nineteenth-century Poetess. The announcement for a 2008 symposium on “the Global Poetess” at Rutgers University provides a useful introduction to this approach: for the presenters, “the sentimental and genteel conventions that are the hallmark of nineteenth-century women’s lyric aren’t simply an embarrassment for the modern woman poet to overcome”; on the contrary, such conventions “served as a medium for women poets to pass between public and private spheres, a means of circulation rather than an index of constraint.”⁶³ Like Armstrong, these critics show that nineteenth-century writers made deliberate, self-conscious use of the conventions of sentimental verse; and, like Armstrong, they resist reading Poetess poems as either purely expressive or overtly political, preferring to focus on form, circulation, and reception. Further, they resist reading sentimental poetry by women as primarily subversive or ironic, a practice that often anachronistically applies a set of twentieth-century literary values to nineteenth-century texts. Instead, these critics identify the specific historical and generic contexts in which Poetess figures first appeared and circulated in print, as well as the reading practices that have shaped and were shaped by such figures.

One important consequence of such an approach is that it can redirect attention to the Poetess *as* a textual figure, potentially sidestepping some of the problems associated

⁶³ “2007-2008 Program: Historical Poetics.” Center for Cultural Analysis Working Groups Archive. cca.rutgers.edu/groups/47-working-groups-archive.

with naming specific historical women writers as Poetesses. In their 1999 essay “Lyrical Studies,” Prins and Jackson question the value of the feminist project of “recovering” forgotten Poetesses from literary history, arguing that it’s more useful to consider the “poetess” not as a dead woman writer who can be “exhume[ed]” and recovered for posterity (522), but as a rhetorical or generic figure generated by—and generative of—nineteenth-century sentimental verse. Instead of a stand-in, a mask, or a mouthpiece for the real woman writing the poem, the Poetess is a poetic device used by any number of writers with any number of aesthetic or political commitments, in order to participate in nineteenth-century verse culture. Similarly, Patrick Vincent uses the word “poetess” in his 2005 *The Romantic Poetess* not as a label that defines any particular woman poet, but as a “figure or pole” that might be identified in a range of poets’ work: “a woman poet can only impersonate, ventriloquize, translate, or parody that figure: she can never *be* a poetess” (xviii). Even if she is (only) a figure or pole, however, that figure is historically contingent, a “trope” that “worked differently” at different historical moments (“Jackson, “Poet as Poetess” 57).

This account of the Poetess as a historically contingent and textual figure might seem to make the Poetess so vague a literary category as to be almost meaningless. Letting go of the question of who the Poetess *is* as a real, historical woman, however, allows critics to attend to what the figure of the Poetess *does* or makes possible. Considering the Poetess as an “empty figure,” for example, makes visible that figure’s role as a vehicle for transatlantic and transnational exchange, as well as for the exchange of feeling and ideas among smaller communities. Eliza Richards, for instance, demonstrates how the circulation of Poetess figures through “epistolary and print

networks” as well as through more intimate salon culture (a culture that was itself reported on by print media) “enabled the exchange of ideas among individuals, within social groups, [and] between areas coded as private and public” (6), while Prins and Jackson argue that as a “form that can contain but not express feeling” (“Lyrical Studies” 529), the Poetess shuttles back and forth from England to the United States transmitting suffering or outrage among communities of poets, abolitionists, and readers of sentimental literature—suffering that, since it inheres in a set of generic conventions rather than in an individual woman writer’s feelings, can never really be described as her *own*. This exchange of feeling and ideas cannot be separated from the material circulation of texts across the Atlantic, as the essays in McGill’s *The Traffic in Poems* (2008) demonstrate; in examining how poetic texts crossed the Atlantic in the form of authorized and unauthorized editions and reprintings, anthologies, and gift books, many of these essays consider the ways in which the figure of the Poetess mediated exchanges between British and American writers and audiences. Moreover, for Vincent, the Poetess facilitates exchange between Britain and continental Europe, working across national boundaries to create “an internationalist, liberal culture bound together by sympathy” (xix).

For these critics, separating the Poetess from individual historical women writers is never to separate the Poetess from history. As both *The Traffic in Poems* and Lootens’s *Political Poetess* suggest, close attention to the Poetess’s role in transatlantic and transnational exchange has the potential to trouble received notions of national and period boundaries in literary studies, as well as the relationship between politics, sentimentality, and ideologies of race and gender up until the present day.

The Poetess's ability to facilitate and meditate upon cultural and affective exchange depended upon contemporary audiences' association of the Poetess with specific genres and generic conventions, and Poetess criticism has located the figure of the Poetess as a crucial site for the development and transformation of poetic genre in the nineteenth century. If the literary values of the twentieth century have found the work of "poetesses" wanting, recent critics have shown how the Poetess shaped those values, contributing to new twentieth- and twenty-first-century understandings of dramatic and lyric poetry.

Few critics, however, would associate the Poetess with "innovation" as it might be understood as part of either a progressive narrative of literary history or a modernist narrative of rupture with tradition. Armstrong and Glennis Byron have emphasized the formal innovations introduced by women poets, suggesting that the "masked" poems of late Romantic poetesses such as Landon and Hemans were the first dramatic monologues in English, predating the "invention" of the genre by Browning and Tennyson in the 1830s. But both critics locate this innovation as a subversive use of established sentimental conventions, rather than as a clean break with those conventions.

For other critics, Poetess writing generates new genres precisely because of its lack of originality. Jonah Siegel and Carrie Preston have both identified literary genres that complicate our understanding of literary history as a progress toward more originality; in tracing the development of these genres, both Siegel and Preston begin with the Poetess. In *Haunted Museum*, Siegel cites work by Landon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning as early examples of a nineteenth-century genre he identifies as the "art romance." Arguing that both the pathos and the aesthetic "pleasure" of Landon's doomed

“Improvisatrice” are produced not by a real woman’s suffering (Landon’s or her pseudo-historical character’s), but rather by continually repeating the generic conventions of “tales of disappointed love” in an imaginary, highly artificial Florence constructed only of paintings, statues, and songs, Siegel insists upon the intentional artifice of the Poetess figure and confronts readers with an alternative system of aesthetic values in which neither originality nor authenticity is paramount. Although we may (explicitly or implicitly) agree with the “characteristically modern notion that true creativity takes no color from convention,” the art romance reveals the potentially “embarrassing” fact that “important sources of creativity develop in the interplay of received idea and emotion” (6). Landon’s “Improvisatrice,” then, gives pleasure not *despite* its artificiality and conventionality, but because of those qualities—even as Landon’s texts continually tempt and defy the reader to speculate about the Poetess’s “varied modes of misery” (“Preface” 103). Similarly, in *Modernism’s Mythic Pose*, Preston corrects the popular critical narrative of modernism as a clean break with literary history, claiming that “modernism was rarely quite so new as advertised” (8). Preston locates an “antimodern critique” within modernism itself, focusing on a tradition of women’s solo performance that can be traced to the monologues and monodramas associated with the nineteenth-century Poetess, whose work simultaneously recalled and reimagined “mythic types” from classical literature and the Bible. The lack of originality of female “types,” from Medea to the Virgin Mary, was precisely what made it possible for them to generate new forms such as the dramatic monologue. Beginning with solo performances such as Rousseau’s monodrama *Pygmalion* and Emma Hamilton’s famous, classically-inflected “attitudes,” Preston shows how Poetess performers such as Barrett Browning, Rossetti, and Augusta

Webster took up the “complex version of gendered subjectivity” created by these performances in their own writing (9). In tracing the influence of these performances to modernist writing, dance, and film, Preston implies that the embodied performances associated with the Pythia and Corinne, as well as the Maid of Kent and Phoebe Clinket, helped to shape both Victorian and post-Victorian Poetess performance.

In addition to the Poetess’s role in shaping specific genres like the dramatic monologue, Prins and Jackson’s recent work on the history of lyric reading argues that the Poetess contributed to our contemporary understanding of poetry itself. Jackson argues in “The poet as Poetess” that the process of “lyricization” was effected “by means of the figure of the Poetess,” as over the course of the nineteenth century the Poetess was increasingly imagined as an ideally lyric figure, spontaneously expressing pure feeling in the form of verse. Individual poetesses like Sigourney participated in this process by writing poems that, although they “had all the features of an ideal, anglicized poem,” could not be classified as any particular genre (55). Instead, such poems could only be described abstractly as “poetry”; by the twentieth century, the word “poetry” was no longer understood as a “set of verse genres,” but as “an aesthetic ideal that transcended genre” (57). In this way, the Poetess figure participated not only in her own “generic obscurity” (“Lyrical Studies” 523) to the point that after the middle of the nineteenth century readers were unable to recognize that Poetesses had ever written in any genre *but* abstract lyric, but in the generic obscurity of all poetry in English.

Just as Prins and Jackson demonstrate the Poetess’s foundational role in shaping how poetry has been read and written since the nineteenth century, Lootens’s most recent work exposes the political functions of the Poetess figure and Poetess performance. In

showing how the figure of the Poetess underlies and upholds the Victorian ideology of separate—or, in Lootens’s formulation, “suspended”—spheres, 2017’s *The Political Poetess* argues that there is in fact no separation between the private, domestic, feminine sphere associated with the Poetess and the public, nationalist, militarist, masculine sphere from which the poetess seems to be both excluded and exempt. Throughout *The Political Poetess*, Lootens’s refrain “Who made the Poetess white? Nobody, not ever” reminds her reader that nineteenth- and twentieth-century lyric reading practices have made use of an apolitical, domestic, private, implicitly white version of the Poetess to erase the ways in which Poetess performance has continually commented upon and struggled with the legacy of transatlantic slavery and state-sponsored violence, often acting as an “internal enemy” of the state, a representative of divine law who nonetheless is crucial to the state’s power. In attending to the historical circumstances of the poetess’s “obscurity,” then, critics like Lootens, Jackson, and Prins are able to “recover” not individual poetesses but a clearer history of anglophone literature and politics as a whole.

Other recent critics, including Annie Finch and Laura Mandell, imagine the Poetess not as a historically specific figure that shaped lyric reading practices but as the emblem of a transhistorical “poetess tradition” stretching from Hemans and Landon to contemporary poets writing today, a tradition that developed alongside but for the most part distinct from the largely male, Romantic lineage of “canonical” Western poetry. As I discuss above, the concept of a tradition of women’s poetry is a familiar one in feminist criticism, and was practiced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Poetess performers themselves, who imagined their work in conversation with Sappho or with imagined, unnamed female troubadors and Renaissance sonneteers. As Armstrong points out, even

critics who find the idea of a “women’s tradition” overly simple must acknowledge that women writers often wrote “within a recognizable tradition understood by them to belong to women” (*Victorian Poetry* 523).

Finch’s poetess tradition, however, is defined not only by gender but by a radical lack of subjectivity. For Finch, the “emptiness” of Prins and Jackson’s “empty figure” becomes a negative capability that allows the Poetess to more accurately and selflessly record the world around her without the interference of the Romantic “I.” The conventionality of the Poetess’s language allows her to participate fully in a community rather than standing apart as an individual. According to this logic, then, many women poets who have been considered “poetesses” elsewhere are not part of the poetess tradition; Barrett Browning’s use of a highly individualized *I* in a text like *Aurora Leigh*, for example, allies her to the Romantic tradition and distances her from the poetess tradition. Finch’s exclusion of Barrett Browning is surprising, given Barrett Browning’s role as “the Great Poetess of our own day and nation.” But in order for the “poetess tradition” to be legible as a “current critical category,” critics have had to tighten their criteria for what “counts” as Poetess writing.

What, then, does the current definition of the Poetess tell us about gender and performance in the twenty-first century? As I have implied above, the resurgence in critical attention to the figure of the Poetess indicates a renewed interest in historical women writers whose engagements with literary convention and middle-class popular culture do not fit either twentieth-century canonical narratives of literary progress or feminist counter-narratives of protest and critique; this renewed interest in the Poetess also demonstrates a willingness to take these writers on their own terms. This tendency

within the academy echoes a similar tendency among third- or fourth-wave feminist writers in contemporary popular culture to reclaim often-dismissed genres and behaviors that are traditionally coded feminine; Finch, a poet-critic who describes herself as a modern-day poetess, is part of this tendency. So are African American Poetess performers such as Felicia Morris, who claim the moral and cultural authority of the Poetess for what Lootens describes as “passionate, explicit ‘Black Poetess’ art” (*Political Poetess* 7). For the most part, however, the lessons about gender, literature, performance, and tradition that the history of the word “poetess” might teach us are missing from mainstream literary and popular culture. Although the scholars I’ve discussed are doing important work on the Poetess figure, in the larger field of literary studies, “poetess” as a historical term is still often perceived as old-fashioned or politically incorrect. Meanwhile—as the vanishing act performed by Google’s search engine implies—the word itself is on the point of disappearing from our language. All but the most unenlightened speakers of English have gotten the message that it’s disrespectful to use gendered terms like “poetess” or “doctoress” or “aviatrix,” although “actress” and “waitress” persist.

Is the Poetess, then, gone from American literary culture? Consider Adam Gopnik’s essay on the Great American Novel in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*. Rejecting claims that literary values are contingent on historical circumstances, Gopnik argues that, regardless of “where it stands in the history of other books,” Mark Twain’s 1888 *Huckleberry Finn* is a “better” novel than Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* because Twain is a better prose stylist than Stowe, with a better command

over the “flow of [his] line” and a knack for the “magical simplification” of language. For example,

when Huck says of the gloomy backwoods-Gothic poet Emmeline Grangerford, ‘I reckoned, that with her disposition, she was having a better time in the graveyard,’ he writes an epitaph not just for Emmeline but for an entire strain of the American morbid confessional, right through Sylvia Plath. (104)

Gopnik doesn’t call Grangerford or Plath a “poetess,” yet in his own feat of “magical simplification,” he manages to casually dismiss the imaginary Grangerford, the real Plath, and an entire century of other real-life American women poets in a single gesture that is nastier than any barb the Earl of Rochester could dream up about poetesses and whores. The nineteenth-century sentimental poetess, of course, is anything but “confessional”; as Jackson and Mandell have both shown, “morbid” poems such as Sigourney’s “Death of an Infant” are so abstract that they feel like the private experience of the reader, not the “confession” of the feelings of the Poetess.⁶⁴ And any careful reader of Plath will find that her work is neither morbid nor strictly confessional. In insisting that Grangerford and Plath are morbid and confessional, Gopnik discards the close reading skills he celebrates as the best tool for evaluating great male novelists, basing his assumptions on the fact that Grangerford and Plath—and Stowe, for that matter—are women writers, mostly read and appreciated by other women. Gopnik believes in the Poetess, and he believes she is laughable. But because he has no word for her—because he believes that he is merely applying “universal” literary criteria to Twain, Stowe, Grangerford, and Plath—the misogyny of his argument can be difficult to see.

It isn’t really Gopnik who needs the word “poetess,” however; certainly nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions of Gopnik failed to see the misogyny of their

⁶⁴ For Jackson’s reading of “Death of an Infant,” see “The Poet as Poetess,” 67.

arguments even when the word Poetess was available for them to use. But we may still need the Poetess—if not the word “poetess” itself, the strange, collective, theatrical history of the Poetess figure—to help us unravel Gopnik’s dismissal of this “morbid,” “confessional” trio of feminine figures. I don’t agree with Finch that it’s necessary to reclaim the word “poetess” for contemporary women poets; such a move would be perversely anachronistic, a denial of the living potential of language as well as of the increasing range and flexibility of gender presentations in our culture. But as this chapter demonstrates, attention to the history and usage of this word uncovers questions that we still need to ask of contemporary culture. Following the “train” of encumbering “esses” that so irritates Greer leads through a messy, crowded, excessively adorned history of Poetess performance, allowing us to see the connections between modes of gendered public performance and collective action, objectification and erasure, that would be less visible if those offending suffixes were clipped off. To understand the Poetess(es) as necessarily supplemented—by the rustling, extravagant trains of other Poetess performers, as well as by the history embedded in that train of “esses”—is to see literary history differently than when we focus on the streamlined, solitary Poet. This train of “esses” is a crucial accessory for tracing the legacy of Poetess theatricality in general and—as I argue in my next chapter—for reading the puzzling profusion of bodies and objects that seem, in their mute redundancy, to encumber the poems of Hemans and Landon.

Chapter Two

“These Things for the Grave”:

Objects, Attributes, and Mobile Identity in the Work of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon

In the preface to her 1828 poetry collection *The Venetian Bracelet*, the poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon decries a readerly and critical tendency to conflate her with the characters in her writing:

With regard to the frequent application of my works to myself, considering that I sometimes portrayed love unrequited, then betrayed, and again destroyed by death—may I hint the conclusions are not quite logically drawn, as assuredly the same mind cannot have suffered such varied modes of misery. However, if I must have an unhappy passion, I can only console myself with my own perfect unconsciousness of so great a misfortune. I now leave the following Poems to their fate: they must speak for themselves. (103)

In contesting these biographical reading practices, Landon engages with questions of subjective expression that have long dominated critical approaches to the nineteenth-century Poetess: to what degree should we identify a woman poet’s work with the historical woman who wrote it?⁶⁵ Although we certainly may believe Landon that she has not lived the lives of her characters, her claim about the “varied modes of misery” depicted in her poems invokes another aspect of Poetess poetics, one that forms the focus of this chapter: the superabundance, perhaps even the redundancy, of seemingly interchangeable feminine figures, objects, garments, and landscapes that appear in Landon’s work, as well as that of her contemporary Felicia Hemans. Both Landon’s and

⁶⁵ In this case, Landon’s insistence on the distance between herself and her poems anticipates twentieth-century reading practices that position all poetry as dramatic monologue. See Herbert Tucker’s motto for classrooms in which this interpretive practice has taken hold: “The old king of self-expressive lyricism is dead! Long live the Speaker King!” (556).

Hemans's conception of "character" relies on an expansionary model of feminine identity with generic ties to hybrid art forms such as the gift book annual and monodrama, forms that present female figures and their "modes of misery" as insistently, extravagantly "varied" and, at the same time, curiously unvarying. This model also calls into question the possibility of individual poems—or speakers of poems—"speaking for themselves," since the presence of such figures is marked as often by silence as by speech. Responding to recent critical accounts of the influence that Hemans's and Landon's writing had on the development of the dramatic monologue, this chapter shows that both poets rely as much on visual, material aspects of theatricality as they do on the metaphors of dramatic "voice" most commonly associated with the dramatic monologue. Further, this chapter redirects attention from the relationship between "poet" and "speaker"—terms commonly associated with the dramatic monologue—to the networks, tableaux, and assemblages created within and among the figures in Hemans's and Landon's poems, in order to demonstrate the importance of the assemblage and the tableau in the development of Poetess theatricality in particular and the figure of the Poetess more generally.

As Landon implies, nineteenth-century critics tended to read, and value, the work of Poetess performers such as Landon and Hemans as sincere and spontaneous self-revelation, conflating the wistfully-smiling portrait of a Poetess in the frontispiece of a poetry collection with the moving verses printed inside. The suffering Sapphos and Corinnes, the Indian widows undergoing *suttee*, the unsatisfied artists, grieving mothers, and abandoned wives in poetry collections such as Landon's *The Improvisatrice; and Other Poems* and Hemans's *Records of Woman* were all read as versions of Landon and Hemans themselves, giving voice to the love and pain both women suffered. As I explain

in my first chapter, Landon and her publishers often encouraged this practice, promoting her as a beautiful, mysterious celebrity and conflating the “bewitchy” Landon with one of her most famous poetic characters, the performing Poetess and visual artist “the Improvisatrice.” Meanwhile, public perception of Hemans’s personal virtue and essential femininity contributed to the popularity of her writing.⁶⁶ After Hemans’s death, Landon herself encouraged readers to interpret Hemans’s work biographically, suggesting in a memorial poem that the poet’s personal anguish is just barely detectable in her “sorrowful” verse: “However mournful words may be,” Landon’s speaker says of Hemans’s poems, “they show not / The whole extent of wretchedness and wrong” (“Felicia Hemans” 43 – 44).

Yet Landon’s preface insists on the distance between poet and speaker in her own work, in terms that are familiar from twentieth-century discussions of the dramatic monologue. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century feminist critics became interested in the ways in which both Landon and Hemans made deliberate and innovative use of poetic personae. Some critics, including Isobel Armstrong, have in fact credited Hemans, Landon, and their contemporaries with developing the genre of dramatic monologue before Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, long considered the “inventors” of the form (*Victorian Poetry* 319). Further, reading Poetess poems as dramatic monologues has proved to be an effective way to counter the tendency to read women’s work as primarily expressive of personal feeling.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See Tricia Lootens’s account of Hemans’s reception as the poetic representative of ideal femininity—the poetry of “Woman”—in her chapter “Poet Worship Meets ‘Woman’ Worship: Victorian Femininity and Fictionality” (*Lost Saints* 45 – 76). Lootens’s “Hemans and Home” and “States of Exile” respectively offer readings of the importance of Hemans’s “domestic patriotism” in the construction of “Victorian patriotic feeling” (“Hemans and Home” 238) and of another poem, “Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England” in the development of “national sentimentality” in the United States (“States of Exile” 16).

⁶⁷ See Armstrong’s *Victorian Poetry* (318 – 319) as well as Kate Flint’s “‘As a Rule, I Does Not Mean I.’”

A critical desire to read Landon and Hemans as dramatic monologists in the style of Browning and Tennyson, however, is often frustrated by an apparent contradiction in the generic identity of their poems. Like Robert Browning, whose dramatic monologues provide robust historical and cultural context for the poems' speakers—establishing place, costume, customs, and vocabulary (such as “Fra Lippo Lippi”'s “Zooks”) that fix the speakers to a specific historical time and place—Hemans and Landon continually make gestures toward differentiating and historicizing the female figures in their work.⁶⁸ They do so through the use of historical and explanatory paratextual material, literary allusions, and the depiction of what I call, borrowing a term from Tricia Lootens, material “attributes” such as props, costumes, and scenery that purport to fix the women in a specific historical or cultural context. At the same time, despite Landon's claims about the “varied modes of misery” in her poems, these feminine figures and their attributes often seem to be interchangeable, marked by endlessly repeating depictions of stereotypical feminine beauty, virtues, and suffering—as well as a profusion of nearly identical jewels, flowers, lyres, crowns, and veils. Such repetition is consistent with a tradition in which, as recent work in Poetess studies has shown, the figure of the Poetess was valued for its iterability, conventionality, and abstraction rather than for its originality or individuality.⁶⁹ Its presence suggests that looking for Browningsque historical specificity in the “personified abstraction” (Prins and Jackson, “Lyrical Studies” 525) of Landon's and Hemans's Poetess performances might be futile.

⁶⁸ Tucker argues that the “Browningsque dramatic monologue” produces “character” through the tension between such historical specificity and the poem's more “symbolical, lyrical, metaphoric” elements (545).

⁶⁹ See, for example, Eliza Richards on the Poetess's “lyric mimicry” (25); Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson on the Poetess's “personified abstraction” (“Lyrical Studies” 525), and Lootens on the Poetess's “emphatically, even histrionically, citational performances” (*Political Poetess* 4); as well as Jonah Siegel's discussion of the importance of “received idea[s]” in the work of Landon and Barrett Browning (6).

Indeed, the idealized figures in Hemans's and Landon's work offer little in the way of Fra Lippo Lippi's "Zooks!" Yet the sheer volume of figures and objects that accumulate within and around Hemans's and Landon's texts—as well as the gestures these figures continually make toward contextualizing and historicizing those texts—indexes an insistent material presence that pushes against the poems' tendency toward abstraction, creating expansive and expanding material, visual "fields" of identity.

Hemans and Landon are different poets, and they use the strategies I describe here in different ways. Hemans's *Records of Woman* draws upon theatrical conventions that emphasize materiality and visual art, even as the text registers anxiety about the accuracy and effectiveness of these forms to represent and "record" the essence of "Woman," let alone the experiences of real, historical *women*; while Landon relies more on an increasingly visual, increasingly citational print and consumer culture in which texts, images, objects, and characters circulate and are constantly reproduced and repurposed. But this chapter describes a formal strategy shared by both poets, one with formal ties to the gift-book annuals in which they both published as well as to nineteenth-century theatrical practices. In considering the formal resemblances between writing by Hemans and Landon, including Heman's *Records of Woman* and Landon's "The Improvisatrice" and *Heath's Book of Beauty*; popular print genres such as the gift-book annual, which is simultaneously a gallery of images, an anthology of songs, and a collection of beautiful, interchangeable feminine identities; and hybrid theatrical forms such as the medley, monodrama, attitude, and tableau, this chapter interrogates conventional generic understandings of the lyric and dramatic form of these poems. What relationships do they

draw between the worlds of visual art, dramatic performance, and song, the registers from which we derive the metaphors of lyric “voice” and dramatic “mask” and “speaker”?

The extravagant, even redundant representations of women in many of Hemans’s and Landon’s poems—representations that invoke the lavish materiality and spectacle of theatrical tableaux in addition to the metaphor of dramatic “voice”—suggests that the theatricality of these poems is not fully accommodated by critical conventions of reading the dramatic monologue. Instead, this chapter proposes the importance of reading for metaphors of *embodiment*, *materiality*, and *spectacle* in poems that are not always dramatic monologues—or even dramatic in form—but that are undeniably *theatrical* in form. Like dramatic monologues, the texts I discuss in this chapter draw attention to the ways in which identity is constructed and maintained, but they often do so without making use of the metaphor of speech. If the bodies and objects in Hemans’s and Landon’s writing do not always “speak for themselves,” they instead represent the expansion of a self that cannot quite be contained by the Poetess’s or the heroine’s body, a hybrid or collective identity that may exceed the limits of a dramatic or lyric speaker as well as those of the essentialized role of “Woman” that the poetess often performs so self-consciously. At the same time, the visual, material texture of these poems forms an important reminder that Poetess performance, even at its most abstract and seemingly disembodied, has been profoundly shaped by metaphors of the performing body, continually evoking the highly visible and performative femininity of the figure of the actress.

Attributes and Paratext in Felicia Hemans’s *Records of Woman*

One of the most popular “poetesses” of the nineteenth century, Felicia Hemans established herself early in her career as an authority on feminine values and women’s experiences: in 1820, the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* noted that in her writing Hemans “never ceases to be strictly *feminine* in the whole current of her thought and feeling,” always displaying “the delicacy which belongs to the sex, and the tenderness and enthusiasm which form its finest characteristic” (374). Eight years later, Hemans’s publication of *Records of Woman* might have been seen as the crowning achievement of a career centered around the feminine: Hemans’s contribution to the genre of “women’s lives” that, according to Susan Wolfson, emerged in the eighteenth century and flourished during the early decades of the nineteenth, *Records of Woman* presents itself as an encyclopedia of women (Wolfson 330). The titles, along with the long, paratextual explanations in prose that precede and provide historical context for many of the poems, emphasize the women’s diverse historical and cultural locations: some, like “Arabella Stuart” and “Joan of Arc,” refer to recognizable individual historical women, while others, including “The Peasant Girl of the Rhone” and “The American Forest Girl,” suggest less clearly individuated archetypes that nonetheless can be recognized and differentiated from one another by their clear relationships to place and culture. Hemans’s emphasis on these individual differences might suggest that she intends *Records of Woman* as a portrait of the range and diversity of women’s experiences; the specificity of the geographical or historical context Hemans provides for each “character,” combined with the fact that several of the poems are first-person monologues, has influenced critics who locate Hemans as an early practitioner of the dramatic monologue. As Hemans’s use of the singular noun “Woman” in the title suggests, however, the collection tends to

emphasize the women's similarities rather than their differences. Explaining that "[w]omen's voices of all times and places" are "appropriated" in *Records of Woman* "only to dissolve difference," Glennis Byron argues that "while context may become crucial to the construction of identity as the dramatic monologue develops, at this stage it appears significant primarily as a means of reinforcing the idea that in all times and all places the nature of woman is fixed" (52). In fact, not only do the moral natures of Hemans's heroines seem fixed—in long-suffering wifely loyalty, in selfless maternal devotion, in uncompromising and sometimes vengeful virtue—but the faces and bodies throughout *Records of Woman* are often curiously interchangeable. The same long, dark hair, the same white brows, the same flowerlike cheeks appear in poem after poem, apparently regardless of national, ethnic, or cultural difference, differentiated only by objects and accessories—veils, jewels, flowers, helmets, tears, or blood—that seem to appear, reappear, and multiply from poem to poem, to the extent that they, too, become interchangeable.

Read as a precursor to Browning's and Tennyson's dramatic monologues, this lack of differentiation does seem to indicate, as Byron implies, that Hemans's poems mark an early—perhaps an inferior—"stage" in the development of the dramatic monologue. I argue, however, that the interchangeable bodies and objects in *Records of Woman* do not constitute a stylistic drawback that prevented Hemans from fully developing the possibilities of the dramatic monologue. Nor does the similarity of the figures in *Records of Woman* function exclusively to affirm the preeminence of British femininity across the globe (although this is certainly an important part of Hemans's

project as a patriotic Poetess).⁷⁰ Rather, the proliferating figures in *Records of Woman* are an alternative strategy Hemans used in her efforts to *record* and register the universal experience and identity of Woman, alongside and in addition to those strategies we recognize as consistent with the dramatic monologue. A collection of Browningsque dramatic monologues might have allowed Hemans to gesture toward the diversity of women's experiences, but it would have fallen short of the collection's stated goal of recording the universality of *Woman*. At the same time, the poems continually suggest the possibility that women's experiences and identities simultaneously exceed and fall short of the generic role of Woman. Hemans's poems acknowledge these identities through an undifferentiated material and textual excess of bodies, objects, and texts.

Hemans deploys this strategy on several levels throughout *Records of Woman*. First, Hemans represents the profusions of bodies, objects, and landscapes throughout the collection as networks of interchangeable elements—or, as I will suggest below, “attributes”—that can be assembled, detached, and reassembled, creating expansive fields of feminine identity. The poems also describe individual women in terms of several different art forms, constructing imaginary multimedia assemblages in which images, sculpture, and gestural performances compete with and are supplemented by vocal performance or text to create a composite portrait—as if to imply that such overdetermined representational strategies are the only way in which it might be possible to record both Woman and women. Finally, the assemblages of voices and objects represented in the poems are echoed by the poems' formal structures, in which first-

⁷⁰ See Lootens's “Hemans and Home,” as well as *The Political Poetess*, for accounts of the ways in which Poetess performers in general, and Hemans in particular, performed the work of maintaining British national and imperial identity.

person monologues or “songs” are framed by third-person narratives and supplemented by paratextual material providing explanations, historical context, and additional verse, or even connecting the poem to a real material object outside the text itself. In this way, *Records of Woman* constructs ever-expanding fields of representation in which the imagined materiality of the bodies and attributes within the poems manifests in the materiality of the printed page, imaginatively drawing in the still-more solid objects of the poems’ real-world referents.

In its assemblage of (real) texts and (imaginary) bodies, objects, and voices, *Records of Woman* bears formal resemblances to the spectacular tableaux of nineteenth-century theater, as well as to hybrid print genres such as the lavish gift-book anthologies in which Hemans herself often published poems—anthologies which also featured expensive engravings of beautiful women. The physical similarities between the female figures in *Records of Woman*, as well as their theatricality, connect them to the “interchangeable beauties” that Lootens describes in her account of visual depictions of Shakespearean heroines in the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ Citing Richard Altick’s work on literary portraiture, Lootens notes that while in the eighteenth century society women often posed for “fancy portraits” dressed as Rosalind or Miranda, nineteenth-century illustrations often depicted idealized, stereotyped images rather than the faces of “historical women.” These idealized figures are often visually differentiated from one another by the presence of a material “attribute”: “in a parodic parallel to the iconography of sainthood,” Lootens explains, “Rosalind is known by her shepherd’s

⁷¹ In fact, Lootens points out, Hemans herself was compared, as a Poetess who epitomized effortless, ideal femininity, to Shakespeare’s heroines: “The finest compliment we can pay her—perhaps the finest compliment that is possible to pay to woman, as a moral being—is to compare her to ‘one of Shakespeare’s women’” (George Gilfillan, quoted in *Lost Saints* 94).

staff” while “Lady Macbeth . . . distinguishes herself from one of her less sinister sisters by a dagger and a slight frown” (*Lost Saints* 84 – 85).

Reading *Records of Woman* with this practice in mind directs our attention to the wealth of decorative objects that adorn Hemans’s interchangeable heroines, as well as to the lavish scenery that surrounds them. While critics have tended to read these objects and scenery in terms of ekphrasis or as an effort to appeal to the illustrated gift-book market, in which poems were often positioned as subordinate to the gorgeous and expensive engravings they accompanied and described, considering these objects as *attributes* allows us to identify an additional method by which Hemans seems to have gestured toward contextualizing her heroines and differentiating them from one another. The “Bride of the Greek Isle” is identified first by her rich bridal attire of jewels and flowers, and then in her hour of vengeance by the burning brand she holds; Joan of Arc can be recognized by her “white banner” and “gold helm” (“Joan of Arc” 19-20) and the virtuous nun Costanza by her “shadowy veil” (“Costanza” 109).

Like the historical material that precedes each poem, these attributes can begin to seem like mere window dressing, gestures toward differentiation and individuality that ultimately affirm the essential similarity of these women. This effect is especially striking when we notice that the same attributes appear over multiple poems. Many of the women are veiled, bejeweled, or decked with flowers. Although the Greek island bride Eudora and the unmarried medieval Bolognese noblewoman Imelda are separated by time, space, culture, and language, they are dressed almost identically: the jewels that “flash’d out” from Eudora’s ‘braided hair, / like starry dew amidst the roses there’ (7 – 8) are echoed in Imelda’s “long braids of pearl” which “amidst her shadowy locks were faintly shining, /

As tears might shine” (113 – 115). Like Eudora, Imelda wears “red roses” on a brow that is itself described as a kind of ornament: Imelda’s brow is “marble” (119) while Eudora’s is “as those gems of the ocean pale” (11). Even more strikingly, both Edith, a Christian English colonist in America, and Maimuna, the Muslim pilgrim in Hemans’s “The Indian City”—two women divided by nationality, religion, and thousands of miles of land and ocean—are identified as grieving wives or mothers by the blood-soaked bandages they tear from their own garments: Edith “vainly bound / With her torn robe and hair the streaming wound” of her husband, massacred by American Indians (“Edith, a Tale of the Woods” 29-30), while Maimuna “knelt in her son’s young blood, / Rending her mantle to staunch its flood” after her son is murdered for profaning a holy Hindu site (88 – 89). In this way, the attributes that at first glance seem to help the reader to tell one of Hemans’s women from another, as Lady Macbeth’s dagger or Rosalind’s staff enabled a viewer to distinguish between identical Shakespearean heroines, can be read as yet another marker of the women’s essential similarity.

The very interchangeability of these objects, however, gives them a presence in and throughout the *Records of Woman* that becomes impossible to ignore: while they may not clearly differentiate one woman from another, they instead form expanding material and textual networks that suggest that identity may exceed the limits of each woman’s individual body. Rather than simply affirming the essential similarity of the Greek bride to Imelda to Costanza, the fields of attributes surrounding each woman indicate the impossibility of accurately *recording* feminine identity, even as they register a desire to do so. Further, these interchangeable objects attest—mutely—to the status of women as objects: often decorative, often abject. At the same time, the vast, shifting

networks they construct make it difficult to read the women in these poems in terms of simple “objectification” by the viewer’s gaze. In attending to how such objects interact within and across Hemans’s poems, it also becomes possible to reconsider the role that historical context and Hemans’s paratextual prose material plays in her conception of “Woman’s” identity.⁷²

In order to better understand how Hemans constructs these fields of attributes, it is helpful to look more carefully at how the meanings and relationships between the attributes change within and among the *Records of Woman*. Unlike the titles of the poems, which assign many of the women proper names and discrete historical identities, the attributes tend to identify the women as *types*: her finery identifies Eudora as a bride, their rent and bloody garments identify Edith and Maimuna as grieving women, and her veil identifies Costanza as a nun. Mothers are often identified by the bodies—living or dead—of children in their arms. But precisely because the women’s legibility as types is based on an object or prop that can be attached or detached from the body, the identities created by these attributes become highly mobile.

In their use of props and costumes to indicate feminine *types*, these poems evoke melodrama and monodrama—performance genres that feature a sequence of still poses or tableaux featuring immediately recognizable types. In melodrama, gesture and costume were key in identifying a character’s type. Monodrama, as both Carrie Preston and A. Dwight Culler have shown, was closely associated with solo female performance, often

⁷² Not all of Hemans’s poems figure women and objects in this way. While this chapter focuses specifically on the networks of interchangeable bodies and objects in *Records of Woman*, as well as texts by Landon that deploy similar strategies, Hemans produced a wide variety of poetic work. See, for example, Julie Melnyk’s “Hemans’s Later Poetry: Religion and the Vatican Poet” for readings of the religious poems Hemans wrote later in life. Melnyk argues that, although in the 1820s Hemans wrote “in a collective, gendered voice about women,” her later work imagined the woman poet as a transcendent, vatic figure (91).

representing a classical feminine figure moving through poses representing a succession of emotions. Preston also associates melodrama with the “attitudes” made famous by Emma Lyon Hamilton at the end of the eighteenth century, in which Lyon Hamilton’s skilful arrangement of scarves and draperies allowed her to represent a range of feminine archetypes (33).

Hemans’s “The Bride of the Greek Isle” mimics melodrama and melodrama in its movement through successive tableaux representing the “bride” both in different moods and as different recognizable “types.” At the beginning of the poem, for example, the finery with which Eudora is “rob’d and crown’d” (5) makes her legible only as a beautiful and innocent bride, the “good gift” to her husband that the meaning of her name implies. The decorative elements of her costume are evidence both of her value as a gift and of her natural freshness and innocence: the “jewels” that “flash’d out from her braided hair” are like “starry dews,” while the “pearls on her bosom quiver” and “heav[e]” with the movement of her virginal heart (7 – 10). By the end, when Eudora has been kidnapped by the pirates who slaughtered her intended husband, both her finery and the virginal timidity it registers are gone: no longer illuminated by gems but by a fire she set herself, she holds “a brand / Blazing up high in her lifted hand,” and her bridal “veil” is “flung back” leaving her “free dark hair” to be “sway’d be the flames as they rock andlare” (203 – 206). The brand is both a sign of authorship—evidence that Eudora started the fire herself—and an indication that Eudora has shifted from one “type” of womanhood in Hemans’s collection to another. Eudora transforms yet again, however, when she hears “a shriek from her mother” on the shore. “Starting, she spreads her pale arms in vain” (219) as if to embrace her mother; she drops the brand as she clasps her

hands, falls to her knees, and moves her lips “as in prayer for her pardon” (226). Without the brand that marked her as an avenging fury, Eudora is identifiable by her pious gesture and the “dim shroud” of smoke surrounding her as a doomed but loving daughter—a figure akin to, but not quite the same as, the trembling bride at the beginning of the poem.⁷³ Eudora’s transformations throughout “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” then, follow the conventions of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century theatrical genres, demonstrating that Hemans’s use of theatricality and dramatic form is not limited to the metaphors of speech and address associated with the dramatic monologue, even as Hemans draws upon those metaphors by embedding Eudora’s first-person speeches within the third-person frame of the poem.

In other poems, however, attributes become legible to the reader only after the woman’s death, in an almost supernatural manifestation of posthumous identity or character. These poems, rather than depicting the woman as an actress and the attributes as detachable props or costumes, position the woman’s body as radically, disturbingly equivalent to the objects surrounding her, constructing a tableau where human performer, props, costumes, and scenery take on the same importance. The eponymous heroine of “Imelda” is dressed almost identically to Eudora, but Hemans delays any reference to the clothes or jewelry of “that radiant girl, / Deck’d as for bridal hours!” until after Imelda’s death (111 – 112). Imelda’s jewelry becomes visible only on her corpse, just as the “recording trace” that identifies the self-sacrificing mother in “Pauline”—the “gems” that “the mother on her gentle breast” had “worn round her child’s fair image”—only appears

⁷³ The horror of this transformation is underlined, as Lootens argues in *The Political Poetess*, by the Bride’s status as a “slave” after her kidnapping, a word that, during a “moment of acute controversy around transatlantic slavery,” evokes the suffering of enslaved people during the Middle Passage (29).

in the poem among the “dust and ashes” of the fire that killed both mother and daughter (79 – 82). Such posthumous crystallizations of identity are the most extreme examples of a phenomenon that occurs throughout *Records of Woman*: the degree to which the detachable attributes I have been discussing so far—clothes, jewelry, flowers, torches—become indistinguishable from the bodies of the women they decorate.

After her death, Imelda’s body appears as one more *thing* among things: after describing the “two fair forms” of Imelda’s corpse and her lover’s as “like sculptured sleepers” (108 – 109), Hemans’s narrator exclaims “Were such things for the grave?” (111). While at first the word “things” seems to refer only to the “fair forms” of the lovers’ bodies, Hemans follows this exclamation with a detailed catalogue of the “bridal” decorations that adorn Imelda’s body, expanding the “things” whose fate the reader is encouraged to mourn to include not only the beautiful “sculptured” bodies but to other objects that might form part of a funerary sculpture:

long braids of pearl
 Amid her shadowy locks were faintly shining,
 As tears might shine, with melancholy light,
 And there was gold her slender waist entwining;
 And her pale graceful arms—how sadly bright!
 And fiery gems upon her breast were lying,
 And round her marble brow red roses dying.—
 But she died first!—the violet’s hue had spread
 O’er her sweet eyelids with repose oppress’d. (112 – 120)

Hemans’s list of “things for the grave” includes parts of the body proper (Imelda’s “pale graceful arms,” her “slender waist,” her “marble brow,” her “sweet eyelids”), the objects that decorate it (“long braids of pearl,” “fiery gems,” “red roses”), and material that is of the body but can be easily detached from it, such as hair, tears, or the blood whose presence is evoked by the images of “red roses” and “fiery gems” and by

references earlier in the poem to “heavy drops—but not of rain / on the dim violets” (10 – 11).

In a sculpture, of course—or at least in the sculptures most familiar to nineteenth-century audiences—there is no distinction between the body and its adornments: flesh, hair, tears, drapery, and jewelry are carved out of the same material, as are more symbolic attributes. Thus, in Hemans’s description of “The Queen of Prussia’s Tomb,”

The folded hands, the calm pure face,
The mantle’s quiet flow,
The gentle, yet majestic grace (12 – 14)

are all formally equivalent, as is the eagle that “stands . . . at the feet / Of the fair image wrought; / A kingly emblem” (19 – 21). Not only are the queen’s body and her mantle—both material objects that can be literally represented in marble—presented as equivalent, but so is the purely abstract concept of her “gentle, yet majestic grace” and the concretized representation of an abstraction, the “emblem” of the eagle.

While we might expect that this (con)fusion of the body, its decorations, and its non-corporeal qualities would arrest the mobility of identity that the attributes bring to Heman’s poems, and while a death tableau like Imelda’s does seem to suggest a final fixing of Imelda’s identity, the effect is often to make identity *more* mobile, to make the woman’s body one more object that circulates among the material networks of signification created by these poems. As the passage from “Imelda” goes on, for example, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate one category of “thing” from another. Rather than fixing all the objects into statuary rigidity, however, this process emphasizes the dynamism of “these things”: their meanings continually shift in relation to the other “things” in the scene. The “red roses” in line 118 begin as a decoration for Imelda’s brow,

but their status as “dying” establishes them both as equivalent to the doomed Imelda and as *more* alive, less of a “thing” than she is. In line 118 the roses accentuate Imelda’s immobile, colorless, marble *thing*-ness with their brilliantly-colored life and their organic, dynamic death. But the next two lines, although they emphasize Imelda’s own death—“But she died first!”—also break down the distinction between Imelda’s body and the flowers. Hemans’s language here is metaphorical, of course—“the violet’s hue had spread / O’er her sweet eyelids”—but the metaphor of a hue “spread[ing]” from violet to eyelid implies a kind of infection or cross-contamination between corpse and flowers. Such cross-contamination links this passage in “Imelda” to countless passages of similar cross-contamination throughout *Records of Woman*, in which things are absorbed into bodies and bodies are parceled out into things—an effect that is both grotesque and oddly decorative.⁷⁴

Trained by Hemans’s descriptions of statues and bodies-like-statues in “Imelda” and “The Queen of Prussia’s Tomb” to expand our definition of “attributes” from props and clothing to bodily effusions like hair, tears, and blood, even to feelings or abstract concepts that can be “worn” or made visible on a body, we begin to recognize the women in *Records of Woman* as continually supplemented, redefined, and reconstituted from an expanding field of ever-multiplying attributes. The jewels, brands, helmets, veils, lyres, and garlands that decorate Hemans’s heroines are joined by braided and unbound hair that *resembles* veils or “silken stole[s]” (“Imelda” 99), tears like pearls, the “rose whose root was death” on a consumptive’s cheek (“Edith” 148), the “calm joy” on a mother’s brow

⁷⁴ As Lootens suggests about Hemans’s most famous poem, “Casabianca,” the “abstract decorousness” of Hemans’s style “helps serve to channel or even incite” the “visceral” horror of poems in which bodies become “things” (*Political Poetess* 127), such as a boy’s heart which “was a *thing*, after all: a ‘noblest thing’ that is now quite literally gone” (139).

(“Pauline” 20), and a “radiant amulet” of thought (“Arabella Stuart” 123). Expressions and gestures become “tokens” and “signs.” Maimuna’s “eye’s wild flash” is more terrifying than the “banner, and javelin, and bended bow” she brings with her to the Indian city in revenge (173 – 176). The spreading identities of Hemans’s heroines expand to include the bodies of other people—lovers, corpses, babies—in the field of attributes, as well as the landscape itself.

These fields of attributes, in their material profusions, seem to be evidence of an excessive, overdetermined *recording* of Woman—and yet the poems register doubts about the staying power of such records. In “Imelda,” the cross-contamination between corpse and violets also at least temporarily returns the marble corpse to the realm of the natural and organic, hinting at the eventual bodily decay that, the narrator warns us at the beginning of the poem, will leave no mark on the landscape. The absence of Imelda from the landscape, in fact, appears to be what motivates Hemans’s narrator to tell her story. Visiting the scene of Imelda’s and her lover’s death with an unnamed auditor, the narrator marvels that the “sweet murmur” of the fountain

tells
The rich wild flowers no tale of woe or death;
Yet once the wave was darken’d, and a stain
Lay deep, and heavy drops—but not of rain--
On the dim violets by its marble bed. (7 – 11)

Hemans reminds us of this “stain” on the landscape only to tell us that it has disappeared: if the landscape once marked and was marked by Imelda, it is notable now for having forgotten her. We know Imelda died here not because of a stain on the flowers or the fountain, or because the fountain’s “music” has changed having been mingled with Imelda’s voice, but because Hemans’s narrator is telling us Imelda’s story. The fountain

is both unstained by Imelda's blood and unchanged by her voice: while during Imelda's life her voice was "met" by the fountain's "melody" (71) only one voice, that of the fountain's, is audible now: "*Her* voice is music lost!" (73).

Throughout *Records of Woman*, Hemans often draws the reader's attention in this way to the *lack* of a mark, pointing to the ephemeral nature of even the most durable-seeming attributes, and to the fact that the landscape itself, although it is easily absorbed or recruited into the expansionary field of attributes, detaches itself just as easily. Hemans's poems continually register both the desire to leave a "trace" of a woman's presence—or her genius—on earth after her death, and significant doubts about the staying power of such a trace. As Brian P. Elliott and Meilee D. Bridges have shown, in ekphrastic poems like "Properzia and Rossi" and "The Image in Lava," Hemans simultaneously foregrounds the lasting materiality of the "trace"—the sculpture that Properzia Rossi carves as her own monument, and the imprint of the mother's body in lava—and demonstrates that such material traces are ephemeral, inadequate records of Woman. Instead, according to Bridges, "the poem itself—rather than the ephemeral material object, the effaced physical image in lava—is the lasting relic" (443).

Yet to say that Hemans imagines her own writing as the "trace" that will outlast the material attributes of her subjects is to risk ignoring the more complex questions Hemans raises in *Records of Woman* about the nature of poetry as a "trace" or record. Rather than celebrating the lasting triumph of poetry over materiality, Hemans's doubts about the staying power of her heroines' bodies and attributes point to an interest in balancing and reconciling the metaphors that constructed early-nineteenth century understandings of poetry as an art form: the metaphor of material or visual "trace" and

the metaphor of poetic voice.⁷⁵ Ultimately, neither of these forms can create a lasting record of the ephemeral performance of women (or the impossible performance of Woman)—but together, as mutually supplemental, theatrical representations, they can gesture toward the totality of the performance and index its presence and loss.⁷⁶

While the attributes I've discussed so far emphasize the connection between *Records of Woman* and the visual arts, including the visual aspects of theater, Hemans's project of expanding and supplementing her heroines' identities also makes use of metaphors of music and voice. In the case of "Imelda," the voice is another attribute whose staying power Hemans seems to be testing out: if the body does not endure after death, the poem seems to ask over and over again whether the voice can impress itself upon the landscape. This concern becomes more urgent in *Records of Woman*'s dramatic monologues, poems which, if they seem to have little in common with the third-person poems I've discussed so far, make use of many of the same formal strategies.

The networks of attributes that appear in and ultimately exceed the boundaries of even an entirely narrative, third-person poem like "Imelda" provide Hemans with a hybrid, expansionary model for the creation of "character" that she uses in poems that might be more immediately recognizable as dramatic monologues, including "Properzia Rossi" and "Arabella Stuart." These monologues construct identity through assemblages of texts and paratextual material that formally mirror the fields of attributes that Hemans

⁷⁵ As Yopie Prins reminds us in "Voice Inverse," "voice" in a poem is always, and only, a metaphor. Prins asks, "Why do we insist on reading literally what the Victorians understood to be a metaphor? What is the voice we are looking for, or think we hear, when we read a Victorian poem? How can we reverse our tendency to read these poems as the utterance of a speaker, the representation of speech, the performance of song?" (44).

⁷⁶ A loss that, as Lootens shows, Hemans registers here and elsewhere, through grisly corporeal performances (see note 74 above).

depicts in her third-person poems. While the metaphor of voice is necessarily foregrounded in these first-person poems, Hemans uses that metaphor, alongside other more material “attributes,” to raise many of the same questions about identity, legacy, and art as she does in *Records of Woman*’s third-person poems. The tension between the “trace” and the “voice” in these poems—the spectacular materiality that seems to accumulate around and compete with representations of pure song—is part of a strategy of overdetermined representation, by which the poems acknowledge the impossibility of *recording* or preserving the role of Woman, or the experiences of women, in poetry, yet insist on producing more and more recording devices.

“The Poet’s Lip and the Painter’s Hand”:

Interarts Assemblages in Dramatic Poems by Hemans and Landon

A close examination of two dramatic poems by Hemans and Landon demonstrates how both poets make use of the form of the material field or assemblage in their dramatic monologues, and suggests that even poems in which the metaphor of voice is dominant still often make use of a visual, material, theatrical model similar to the one Hemans develops in *Records of Woman*. Both Hemans’s “Properzia Rossi” and Landon’s “The Improvisatrice” depict female artists. Both poems figure these artists as multimedia performers, but also as multimedia performances: assemblages of text, image, voice, sculpture, and bodily gesture. And both poems end with the artist’s death, giving the last word to a male observer who contemplates the dead woman’s art—or what may be her body, “killed into art” (Gilbert and Gubar 17). This objectification of the woman artist—along with the fact that the poems represent women artists at all—makes these poems an appealing topic for feminist criticism, particularly criticism that seeks to “recover” the

experiences of Hemans and Landon as real-life women poets through the emotions described in their work. Such criticism tends to read the poems' objectification of women as a reinscription of or a protest against patriarchal oppression, sometimes implicitly ascribing to Hemans and Landon themselves sentiments that appear in their poetic performances: that womanhood and artistry are incompatible, and that attempts to reconcile them produce suffering and silence.⁷⁷ This chapter contributes to recent criticism that resists the possibility of recovering the "real" feelings of Poetess performers in these poems, attending instead to Hemans's and Landon's deliberate use of artifice and generic conventions. Further, I suggest that the very strategies both poets use to "objectify" Properzia Rossi and the Improvisatrice make it difficult to read these figures in terms of conventional feminist understandings of feminine objectification. While both poems encourage readers to associate the performers in the poems with the poets themselves—contributing to public fascination with the Poetess as a glamorous, celebrated "actress" figure whose beauty and misery is constantly on public display—their depiction of both performers and performance as multimedia, multi-figure assemblages complicates our ability to draw a one-to-one correspondence between poet and speaker. Instead, these poems invoke the collective, collaborative, immersive experiences inherent in theatrical performance.

In "Properzia Rossi," the profusion of decorative objects and attributes—jewels, lyres, torches—that litter the bodies and landscapes of poems like "Imelda" and "The

⁷⁷ See, for example, Mellor's *Romanticism and Gender*, 110 – 140; Mellor argues that Landon's "life and . . . poetry finally demonstrate the literally fatal consequences for a woman in the Romantic period" (123), while Hemans "draw[s] on her personal experiences as subjects for her poetry" in order to demonstrate "the ways in which her culture's construction of gender finally proved destructive to women" (124). As Landon's "Felicia Hemans" suggests, contemporary readers contributed to this image of both poets. Responding to Landon's poem, Barrett Browning accepts Landon's portrayal of Hemans's misery, but argues that the misery was worth it: "Would she have lost the poet's fire for anguish of the burning?" (*Selected Poems* 73, l.18).

Bride of the Greek Isle” is replaced by a complex multiplying of voices and bodies, including those of the Renaissance sculptor Properzia Rossi; Rossi’s statue of Ariadne; Rossi’s male lover; and a narrator who can be read as Hemans herself. These multiplying voices and bodies are echoed by the poem’s form as an assemblage of three different texts. The first text is a historical note identifying Rossi as

a celebrated female sculptor of Bologna, possessed also of talents for poetry and music, [who] died in consequence of an unrequited attachment.—A painting, by Ducis, represents her showing her last work, a basso-relievo of Ariadne, to a Roman Knight, the object of her affection, who regards it with indifference. (*Records* 29)

The second text is a short, blank-verse poem printed in italics, which laments the inability of the speaker’s artistic gifts to attract love. The third and final text is the poem itself, a monologue in heroic couplets presumably spoken by Rossi as she works on her sculpture. As Byron points out, the paratextual material introducing the poem immediately creates confusion between Hemans’s and Properzia’s voices: while the historical note that precedes the poem resembles the prose explanations Hemans offers for many of the poems in *Records of Woman*, and the long poem in heroic couplets is clearly intended to be read as a monologue spoken by Properzia Rossi herself, the italicized section in blank verse—formally somewhere between prose and rhyming couplets—could be read as spoken by Rossi or by Hemans *in propria persona*. “Tell me no more, no more / Of my soul’s lofty gifts!” the epigraph begins, going on to ask “Have I not lov’d, and striven, and fail’d to bind / One true heart unto me . . .?”—echoing popular accounts, including Landon’s, of the tragedy of Hemans’s own loveless life (4 – 5). In this way, the poem encourages us to continue to conflate Properzia and Hemans in the poem proper; Byron explains that “[a]s Hemans produces mirror images of her own persona in her dramatized

female speakers, so Rossi produces a mirror image of herself through her art; Ariadne becomes to Rossi what Rossi is to Hemans” (*Dramatic Monologue* 51).

In addition to creating confusion between poet and speaker, the paratext surrounding “Properzia Rossi” echoes on a formal level what the fields of expansionary attributes enact throughout *Records of Woman*, creating an assemblage of mutually supplementing but detachable texts. As Jason Rudy argues, the historical notes or *recitatives* in *Records of Woman* allow Hemans to separate “narrative from feeling”: in isolating the historical context in a prose passage before the poem itself, Hemans places a real historical woman such as Arabella Stuart “in a lyrical space removed from her historical narrative” (“Hemans’s Passion” 553). By the same token, the *recitative* can be read as a supplement to the “lyrical space” created by the verse monologue (554)—as, to apply this chapter’s terminology to Rudy’s reading, an attribute or background that contextualizes and individualizes the ahistorical, essentialized, passionate “woman” who seems to speak in the poem. If the historical note is an attribute meant to fix the woman in history, like Joan of Arc’s golden helmet, I argue that its ability to do so is often called into question not merely by one “lyrical space,” but by several competing texts within the same poem. “Properzia Rossi,” with its historical *recitative*, its generically ambiguous epigraph—is it a lyric outburst from Hemans or Rossi? a separate monologue of Rossi’s? an inscription from the base of Rossi’s sculpture? a reference to another text outside the poem?—followed by a dramatic monologue, may be the supreme example of this kind of paratextual expansion in *Records of Woman*. But many other poems in the collection are also generically hybrid compositions of disparate texts, some of which focus on the

“voice” of the heroine while others focus on her body and its material attributes, and still others on the historical or material context in which the body appears or speaks.

In addition to the paratextual historical notes and unattributed epigraphs that precede many of the poems in *Records of Woman*, the real-life material objects and places to which Hemans’s poems often allude serve a similar function. As many critics have observed, while the titles of poems like “The Memorial Pillar,” “The Grave of a Poetess,” and “The Image in Lava” imply that Hemans will be writing in an ekphrastic mode and paying close attention to the materiality of the object she describes, the objects themselves often seem to get lost in the abstractions of the sentimental lyric they inspire: Prins points out that the note preceding Hemans’s “The Last Song of Sappho” claims the poem was “suggested by a beautiful sketch, by the design of the younger Westmacott” but that the poem itself “was published without the sketch . . . and it quickly displaces the claims of pictorial representation even when claiming to be derived from it” (*Victorian Sappho* 214), and Bridges explains that although “The Image in Lava” “is ekphrastic in the sense that its affective telling of imagined history is inspired by an artifact, Hemans never describes the material form of the lava image itself” (443). In both cases, however, Hemans has taken the trouble not only to allude to the material object’s existence, but to identify its provenance in her paratextual material: the sketch is “by the design of the younger Westmacott”; a footnote to “The Image in Lava” identifies it as “the impression of a woman’s form, with an infant clasped to the bosom, found at the uncovering of Herculaneum” (*Records of Woman* 424); and the prose *recitative* introducing “Properzia Rossi” refers to an 1822 painting by Louis Ducis depicting Rossi, her lover, and her sculpture. In directing the reader to the *real* objects that the poem illustrates or

supplements, Hemans seems to have freed herself from the need to describe them. When, in “The Image in Lava,” she refers to the “trace” that “woman’s heart hath left” (7), she does not need to describe the “material form” (Bridges 443) of that trace because it already exists in the world and is attached to the poem by association, giving it a form of historical authority by proxy in much the same way that the paratextual material does.⁷⁸

These gestures toward real-life works of art beyond the poem, as well as the poem’s insistence on Rossi’s varied artistic talents, are instances of a persistent tendency throughout *Records of Woman* to “record” women in multiple media. Although the proportions are different in each poem, an insistence on a material *and* a vocal record or “trace” recurs throughout the collection. “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” “The Indian Woman’s Death Song,” and “Costanza” all supplement elaborate visual tableaux depicting their heroines’ beauty or piety with a section in the heroine’s voice: in “The Bride,” a song sung by the bride is embedded in the poem itself, while in “Costanza” the unsigned epigraph—nearly identical in form to the epigraph to “Properzia Rossi”—appears to be spoken in Costanza’s voice. The tension between text and paratext, then, is not only rooted in mode—narrative versus lyric—but in medium—visual art versus vocal performance (or in the case of the Ducis painting, sculpture embedded in painting).

In “Properzia Rossi,” the formal characteristics of sculpture, vocal performance, and written poetry are in constant tension throughout the poem. In creating her sculpture of Ariadne, Rossi is able to leave an idealized but still material body double behind her, a figure who

⁷⁸ In “Properzia Rossi,” however, Hemans makes no claims about the existence of the sculpture of Ariadne; she refers only to a painting by a contemporary nineteenth-century artist. The painting’s authority seems to come from its material presence outside the poem, not necessarily from any verifiable tie to the historical Rossi or her work.

wear[s]
 My form, my lineaments; but oh! more fair,
 Touch'd into lovelier being by the glow
 Which in me dwells. (38 – 41)

Unlike Rossi's immaterial "deep spirit," the statue has physical dimensions and a beauty that is both visible and palpable: it "grows / Beneath my hand, unfolding, as a rose, / Leaf after leaf, to beauty" (32 – 34), and the abstract qualities of "thought, heart, soul" literally "burn" and "shine, / Thro' the pale marble's veins" (36-37). Yet Rossi creates her glorified self-portrait "line by line"—language that could refer to the sculptor's etching her own "lineaments" into the marble, but that also strongly evokes the process of writing poetry—particularly the couplets in which "Properzia Rossi" is written. The fact that "the bright work grows," too, implies a form of making that works by accumulation, as a poem in couplets does—there's always room in the form for another pair of lines—rather than by chipping away at a block of marble.

To imagine Ariadne as a poem rather than a sculpture is to invoke the oral tradition so important to the creation of the nineteenth-century Poetess figure, a tradition that includes Sappho, Corinne, and the Improvisatrice, among others. And soon after the reference to the "lines" of the sculpture, Properzia seems to become aware that Ariadne's material beauty is incomplete without the supplement of the Poetess's voice:

Oh! could I throw
 Into thy frame a voice, a sweet, and low,
 And thrilling voice of song! when he came nigh,
 To send the passion of its melody
 Thro' his pierced bosom. (50-54)

The problem with a voice, of course, is that it fades: like the voices of Imelda and the Indian Woman, Rossi's "wild fitful song" that "ris[es] triumphantly" must "die ere

long/In dirge-like echoes” (76 – 78). The performance of a song exists only for the discrete audience that witnesses it, and can’t leave a “trace” except on the memory of its auditors; if Properzia’s goal is only to reach her beloved, “winning but one, *one* gush of tears” (59), such an ephemeral performance will be enough. By the end of the poem, however, it is the sculptor’s “name”—her reputation, but perhaps the *writing* of her name on the legend below the sculpture, or as the title of Hemans’s poem—that she hopes will accomplish this work, taking over the function of voice or music:

Yet I leave my name—
As a deep thrill may linger on the lyre
When its full chords are hush’d—awhile to live. (125 – 127)

The last words of the poem, “Twas hers who lov’d me well!”, could be read as the words Properzia imagines her lover speaking when he finally recognizes the value of her love—or at least its existence. Yet the form that provoked this recognition is uncertain. Did the language of the poem convey the poet’s lost “music” to the lover’s ear, or was he moved by the sculpture’s beauty? Or was the theatrical assemblage of language, music, and gesturing, sculptural body necessary (and sufficient) to register the existence of the artist and her feeling? These are questions that “Properzia Rossi” raises but refuses to answer—indicating the urgency and uncertainty underlying the strategies of overdetermined representation that Hemans deploys throughout *Records of Woman*.

In its suggestion that Properzia’s lover might have the last word, the ending of “Properzia Rossi” echoes the end of another poem about a woman artist, Landon’s 1824 “The Improvisatrice”—the poem for which Landon is most famous, and whose eponymous, yet anonymous, speaker was strongly associated with Landon’s poetic persona. Rather than depicting a series of real-life historical women from different times,

places, and cultures, as Hemans does in *Records of Woman*, “The Improvisatrice” is presented as the speech of one fictional and anonymous character, a woman artist living in Renaissance Florence. The formal strategies Landon uses for creating that character, however, are strikingly similar to those Hemans employs in *Records of Woman*. The Improvisatrice’s virtuosity as an improviser depends on her ability to transform herself from one “type” of woman to another, a feat she accomplishes through the technique, familiar from monodrama, of attaching to and detaching from herself objects, costumes, and voices that are equivalent to the attributes of Hemans’s heroines. And like Properzia Rossi, the Improvisatrice seems to imagine visual art and song in competition, but also as mutually constitutive supplements to the woman artist’s identity:

My power was but a woman’s power,
Yet in that great and glorious dower
Which Genius gives, I had my part:
I poured my full and burning heart
In song, and on the canvass made
My dreams of beauty visible. (25 – 30)

Representations of many of these songs and canvasses are embedded within the poem. While “The Improvisatrice” is ostensibly the narrative of one woman’s life—as many critics have pointed out, the poem was an important influence on Barrett Browning’s epic *kunstlerroman*, *Aurora Leigh*⁷⁹—its form is hybrid in multiple ways. The Improvisatrice’s songs, many of which she performs while dressed as the song’s “speakers” (or rather singers)—such as “Sappho” or an exoticized “Hindoo girl”—are often differentiated from the rest of the poem by a change in the stanzaic form; rather than a univocal utterance by the Improvisatrice herself, the text reveals its generic affiliations with the medley, a poem or piece of music interrupted by “songs” in different

⁷⁹ See Linda H. Peterson’s “Rewriting A History of the Lyre” and Siegel’s *Haunted Museum*, among others.

voices and genres. Similarly, the poem contains several descriptions of the Improvisatrice's paintings; these moments of ekphrasis interrupt the narrative and provide us with yet another set of alternative identities for the Improvisatrice, from Petrarch—a “pale, dark-eyed, beautiful, and young” figure who is the subject of the Improvisatrice's simultaneous erotic desire and identification (53)—to Petrarch's Laura, to Sappho herself. Represented first in painting, then translated into song, Landon's Sappho seems lifted from the pages of the gift annuals in which Landon, by 1824, was already publishing: in most annuals, beautiful engravings of landscapes or famous female figures were “illustrated” in verse by popular contemporary poets, including Landon and Hemans. Like a gift annual, “The Improvisatrice” is simultaneously a gallery of images, an anthology of songs, and a collection of beautiful, interchangeable feminine identities. Like another hybrid form, the monodrama, the poem depicts one performer moving through a number of different states, all while attempting a complex mediation between art forms.

As in “Properzia Rossi,” this movement between art forms also encourages the reader to associate the Improvisatrice with the characters she portrays: the Improvisatrice's costumed performance as the “Hindoo girl,” for example, suggests that her costumed body is a necessary supplement to her mournful song. By the poem's epilogue, we are prepared to accept the final portrait in the poem—which appears after the Improvisatrice's death as part of a memorial to her talent and beauty and is described by a new narrator who has never seen the Improvisatrice in life—as both an image of Sappho and as a true and accurate portrait of the Improvisatrice herself. A traveler who has come upon the portrait, the narrator provides the poem's first external description of

the Improvisatrice's beauty using Petrarchan blazon: he extols her "dark flashing eyes," "a blush like sunrise o'er the rose," "a cloud of raven hair," the "laurel braid" she wears, and the "harp" she plays upon—as well as the "silvery words" that the viewer "almost heard" (1557 – 1566).

In keeping with the Improvisatrice's interarts approach, the portrait appears as part of a multimedia assemblage that also includes an urn containing the Improvisatrice's ashes and "a tablet, hung above" which is "graved" with "one tribute of sad words— / 'LORENZO TO HIS MINSTREL LOVE.'" (1576-8). This "tribute" or signature implies that this is a funerary monument to the Improvisatrice that, to use Jonah Siegel's term, has been "curated" by her beloved Lorenzo (51)—a figure who, like Properzia's lover in Hemans's poem, failed the Improvisatrice in life but fully appreciates and mourns her in death. Landon does not say who painted the portrait, and it is uncertain whether the narrator's description refers to the Improvisatrice's portrait of Sappho, seen with fresh eyes, or a new portrait painted by Lorenzo in memory of his "minstrel love."⁸⁰ In either case, as Siegel observes, the Improvisatrice's Sapphic song seems to have been removed from the assemblage (51), but several material "traces" remain: her image, the remains of her body, and a written record of the effect she has had on her lover.

Both "The Improvisatrice" and "Properzia Rossi," which ends by emphasizing the power of Rossi's "name," can be read as finally privileging written text—language with the "graved" permanence of sculpture—as the most lasting monument of the Poetess's art;

⁸⁰ Yopie Prins reads the painting as a "Sapphic self-portrait" painted by the Improvisatrice herself: "Not only has the Improvisatrice anticipated her own death in this self-portrait, but it illustrates that she was dead all along" (*Victorian Sappho* 195); while Siegel suggests that the painting "is now revised (perhaps newly painted by Lorenzo) and witnessed from the outside, not described by its maker" (51). Nonetheless, this is another moment when the Improvisatrice is explicitly identified with one of the subjects of her art: as Prins points out, "in death the Improvisatrice can finally be named 'Sappho,' but only by turning the proper into a common name, 'a Sappho,' a depersonified non-persona" (195).

but a language written by a male admirer, turning the Poetess from active artist to inspiring, but objectified, muse. Angela Leighton has read moments such as this one as a tendency on the part of both Hemans and Landon to “freeze” the woman “into a picture, a statue, an art work,” a gesture which legitimizes femininity as the subject for art, but which is also “a way of turning the woman into a form of sexual or artistic property for the man” (61).

Such a reading, however, cannot accommodate the abundance of confusingly interchangeable objects, voices, and bodies that litter both poems. In “Properzia Rossi” in particular, the confusion between Hemans’s voice and Properzia’s encouraged by the poem’s form is only the beginning of a constant mobility between the identity of the speaker and the addressee(s) throughout the poem. At the beginning, the “I” is Properzia and the “thou” is her beloved, but the narration shifts from first person to third, as Properzia describes her longing to leave a record of “What she hath been, whose melancholy love / On thee was lavishd’d” (9 – 15). Then, while Properzia remains a “she,” the referent for “thou” shifts unexpectedly: “While thou—,” the speaker begins, then interrupts herself to address her own spirit, crying “Awake! not yet within me die . . . my spirit, wake! / Ev’n for thy sorrowful affection’s sake, Live!” (18 – 20). The “thou,” suspended without a predicate, serves as a kind of referential hinge, swinging between Properzia’s lover and her own spirit. By the end of the poem’s first section, the lover has become “he,” completing the transformation of the heterosexual lovers—the conventional “I” and “you” of the love lyric—to “he” and “she,” the hero and heroine of a third-person narrative that seems entirely external to a newer and more intense communion between “spirit” and outward body or self. But in the next section the “spirit” has transformed

from a “thou” to an “it”—“It comes—the power / Within me born, flows back” (26 – 27)—while the “thou” is now the work of art itself, the Ariadne who is at once Properzia’s creation, child, and double. Toward the end of the poem, “thou” once again refers to the beloved, in a tonal shift signaled by an exclamation: “And thou, oh! thou” (107). As I have discussed, it’s possible to read the last line as the transformation of this male “thou” into the poem’s final “I”: “‘*Twas hers who lov’d me well!*’” (132). Yet the slippage between “thou”s throughout the poem makes such a reading uncertain, especially given the fragmented syntax of the poem’s final sentence: “Yet I leave my name—,” Rossi says, adding

I leave it, with a sound,
A spell o’er memory, mournfully profound,
I leave it, on my country’s air to dwell,—
Say proudly yet—“‘*Twas hers who lov’d me well!*’” (125 – 132)

Our knowledge that the male beloved is the one Properzia loved well leads us to read the last line as his, and to read the “Say proudly” as an imperative whose implied “thou” is the beloved’s. But the sentence is so difficult to parse that there is no clear subject we can assign to the verb “say.” It’s just as easy, for example, to read the sentence as “I leave it [who] say proudly,” turning the last sentence into a statement of love between any of the “I’s” and “she’s” and “thou’s” that have populated the poem—the artist and her work, or the artist and her “spirit,” or Hemans and Properzia; we may even be able to read “my country’s air” as recognizing the artist’s love. In this way, the male lover becomes one of a number of interchangeable figures within the poem, his own body feminized by association, or at least co-opted into a world where hierarchies of desire and power seem to be breaking down.

In this reading, it's much more difficult to read Properzia's "freez[ing] into a pose" as artistic death, or even as objectification as we conventionally understand it; if man, woman, spirit, and statue are all objects, how can they be objectified? How can we separate out a subject in this poem? Is it me, the reader? Or am I also another object, constantly transformed as the "you"—the auditor in a traditional understanding of a dramatic monologue—into different objects and subjects myself?

Like Hemans, Landon complicates any stable reading of the Improvisatrice as a frozen beauty or as a muse for an active poet by constantly emphasizing the interchangeability of the roles of muse and artist, lover and beloved, subject and object throughout the poem. Just as Properzia Rossi's male lover becomes as much of an "object" as Properzia or her statue, Landon's poem subjects Lorenzo to the same eroticized, objectifying descriptions that it applies to the Improvisatrice and her art. The blazon with which the unnamed male narrator describes the Improvisatrice at the end of the poem is applied to many other figures within the poem—including, unsurprisingly, the Improvisatrice's painting of Petrarch's Laura, but also her male lover Lorenzo and her painting of Petrarch himself. The Improvisatrice's description of Lorenzo is both eroticized and objectifying, breaking down his beauty into the separate elements of "dark and flashing eye" whose shadows have an "almost female softness," a "beautiful" cheek made "pale" by "toil, or care, / Or midnight study," and "raven curls . . . like the twilight's darkening hue" (422 – 430). The similarity between the "almost female" Lorenzo and the Improvisatrice's first description of her portrait of Sappho—like Lorenzo, Sappho has shadowy, dark eyes and a pallor that seems to come from "weariness" but is not incompatible with beauty (122)—creates a set of dark, weary

“interchangeable beauties” within “The Improvisatrice” who are both eroticized objects and active artists (or curators, in Lorenzo’s case), a set that also includes the “pale, dark-eyed, beautiful, and young” Petrarch, whose image

shone o’er my slumbers
When I had only slept to dream
Over again his magic numbers. (53 – 56)

As Susan Wolfson notes, this figure is a “dreamboat” who “ripples across gender codes” (*Romantic Interactions* 259); rippling across other boundaries of identity as well, Sappho/Petrarch/Lorenzo is linked to the golden, purely objectified Laura and to the exotic “Hindoo girl” through the nameless Improvisatrice herself.

Another way of saying this, of course, is that these attributes *must* be detached and reattached. If poetry is the medium best suited to record the “trace” of voice and body that Hemans and Landon both seem to want to preserve, it can only record these traces metaphorically, and, as a form that is experienced sequentially, it can only record one at a time. The memorial Lorenzo creates at the end of the poem seeks to capture the Improvisatrice’s essence in some kind of totality, and according to the amazed narrator of the epilogue, it almost succeeds. Both her living, moving body and her voice are *almost* restored: the painted woman’s “lips were opening with such life, / You almost heard the silvery words” (1565 – 1566). Neither the narrator nor the reader *do* hear the silvery words, however: we’ve been reading them, and the narrator imagines them, but the painting is an insufficient representation of the lost woman’s voice and body. It requires the supplementation not only of the urn containing her ashes—an object that represents but conceals the woman’s unseen body—but the tablet engraved with Lorenzo’s message, written language that might seek to supplement the vocal language the painting cannot

provide. Each object is static, but the effect can never be one of “freezing” because of the constant oscillation between voice and image, attribute and attribute that Landon requires of her reader.

In this way, Landon’s poem gestures toward the dynamism of the theatrical tableau: a form that connects bodies and objects in a shared but temporary pose. Unlike *Records of Woman*, which register an urgent need to “record” the nature and identities of both Woman and women for posterity, in “The Improvisatrice” this dynamism functions to create a glamorous, mysterious aura of celebrity for the poem’s decorated and supplemented Poetess figure(s). This distinction becomes more obvious in Landon’s work for periodicals such as *The Literary Gazette* and *Heath’s Book of Beauty*, where she explored the formal possibilities of the tableau or the textual assemblage for the purposes of marketing the publications themselves, their advertisers, and her own image as a celebrity Poetess figure.

Textual Objects: Landon’s “A History of the Lyre,”

“Erinna,” and “Medallion Wafers”

While the expansive, highly supplemented fields of identity in *Records of Woman* register the urgency of Hemans’s impossible project of recording Woman—and the similarly impossible task of recording the historical women who can’t be contained by the concept of Woman—the profusion of bodies, objects, images, and texts in Landon’s work constructs formally similar fields of identity that indicate the adaptability and disposability of women’s texts in popular print culture. In order to showcase that adaptability, Landon, like Hemans, presents her heroines in visual tableaux that create networks between bodies, costumes, and objects, making sure to frame all representations

of voice and song with these markers of a more visual, material theatricality. Like Hemans, Landon often supplements dramatic monologues by female speakers with either paratextual descriptions or verses, or through a framing monologue by a male narrator—as she does in the 1829 poem “A History of the Lyre.” Echoing the form of Hemans’s “A Bride of the Greek Isle,” the poem allows Landon to represent her Poetess heroine Eulalia’s voice, but also to display images of Eulalia in changing sets of attributes—a “simply gathered” robe (70), unbound hair “like a veil” (72) a lute, and “tears like pearls” (86), in contrast to a robe of “Indian red, and work’d with gold” (94) her hair “gather’d up” (96) and bound with “an emerald wreath, shaped into vine-leaves” (97)—and alongside her doppelganger, a “sculptured form” (431) that can scarcely be distinguished from her own dying body: “twas hard to say/Which was the actual marble” (434-5).

Another strategy is to begin the poem, as Landon begins both “A History of the Lyre” and 1827’s “Erinna,” with an ekphrastic reference to a material “trace” the heroine has left behind, indicating with a deictic gesture that the “trace” might be a real object that the reader can see and hold. In the case of “A History of the Lyre,” the reader or auditor is described as actually holding the trace: the narrator begins the poem by referring to “This face, whose rudely-pencilled sketch you hold” (5). The face is Eulalia’s, and the sight of it inspires the narrator to try to reproduce Eulalia’s voice and image for his auditor. In “Erinna,” Landon employs a structure quite similar to Hemans’s in “Properzia Rossi” in order to move from literary-historical source to (imagined) material “trace” to representation of the woman’s voice. Landon begins with a prose “introductory notice” in which she explains that the literary source for her poem is a brief note from the play “The Brides of Florence”: “Erinna was a poetess from her cradle, and she only lived

to the completion of her eighteenth year. – Of Erinna very little is known; there is in the Grecian Anthology a sepulchral epigram by Antipater on this young poetess” (*Selected Writings* 87). The introduction is followed by two unattributed epigraphs in verse: four lines wondering whether Erinna “was of spirit race,” and a longer ekphrastic section describing an “antique gem” that has survived Erinna:

There is an antique gem, on which her brow
Retains its graven beauty even now. (1 – 2)

At first it’s uncertain *how* the gem has retained the beauty of Erinna’s brow: is this gem engraved with a portrait of Erinna, a record of her lost beauty made by another artist, or is the gem something she wore on her forehead, which somehow retains a trace of her presence as Hemans’s “image in lava” retains the shape of the dead mother and child? Subsequent lines make it clear that the “antique gem” is engraved with a portrait of Erinna—“her hair is braided, but one curl behind / Floats as enamour’d of the summer wind” (3 – 4)—but the initial ambiguity raises the possibility that the antique gem is a piece of classical “vertu” like the image in lava, one that could serve as a material link to history and to the lost body of the Poetess.

Landon does not, however, seem to share Hemans’s desire for authenticity. Unlike the image in lava or Ducis’s painting of Properzia Rossi, the “antique gem” does not seem to have actually existed. And when Landon does base a poem on an existing art object, the object’s historical value or status as fine art seems irrelevant to her. As she explains in the “introductory note” to “Erinna,” the “short quotation” she came across in “The Brides of Florence” was

sufficient for my present purpose . . . A poem of the present kind had long floated on my imagination; and this gave it a local habitation and a name. There seemed to me just enough known of Erinna to interest; and I have not attempted to write a classical fiction . . . The feelings which constitute poetry are the same in all ages, they are

acted upon by similar causes. Erinna is an ideal not a historical picture . . . (*Selected Works* 87)

Although Landon's claims that she has "not attempted to write a classical fiction" and that the poem is "an ideal not a historical picture" can be read simply as a way of forestalling critical complaints about the poem's historical accuracy, they also point to a career-long enthusiasm for casual, popular sources for poems ostensibly composed on classical or historical themes. Early in her career, Landon based a series of poems entitled "Medallion Wafers," published over several issues of *The Literary Gazette*, on an advertisement printed in the back of the January 4, 1823 issue of the magazine. The advertisement ran

We think we are right in classing among the *Fine Arts* one of the prettiest, and not the least useful inventions of the present period: we allude to what are denominated Medallion Wafers. These are Seals of a particular composition . . . They are all of all sizes, colours, and devices; many of them beautiful as copies of the finest gems, cameos, and intaglios of the antique. Thus these specimens not only serve an every day purpose with facility, but are calculated to spread abroad an acquaintance and admiration of the most graceful forms of taste and genius. The composition is, we take it for granted, a secret to the inventors, Messrs. Thomson, of Wellington-street. We suspect isinglass and white lead to be ingredients; but however made, they are certainly exceedingly beautiful, and as fit for love-letters as any thing that could be imagined. ("Advertisement" 11 – 12)

Three weeks later, in the January 25 issue, Landon published the first "Medallion Wafers" poems, with a brief preface explaining that

the hint for this series of Poems (to be continued occasionally) has been taken from the account of the Medallion Wafers in the *Literary Gazette*. These slight things preserve many of the most beautiful forms of antiquity; and they are here devoted to verse, on the supposition that they have been employed as seals to lovers' correspondence. (*Selected Works* 43)

Just as the "short quotation" in "The Brides of Florence" about the birth and death of a poetess was "sufficient for [Landon's] purpose" in writing "Erinna," she considers the "slight" form of the medallion wafer sufficient to "preserve many of the most beautiful

forms of antiquity.” Like the “antique gem” in “Erinna” and unlike the image in lava, the wafers have no direct material relationship to the “forms of antiquity” they represent; instead, they are disposable consumer products made through a “secret” and presumably modern process. Landon’s “Medallion Wafers” poems do not identify the artist or origin of the images the poems describe; instead, the titles refer to familiar, generically classical images such as “Head of Ariadne” and “A Nereid Floating on a Shell.” Even Landon’s identification of the wafers as “seals to lovers’ correspondence” is not quite authentic: rather than taking the seals from actual historical or contemporary love letters, Landon is fully accepting the suggestion in the *Literary Gazette*’s advertising copy that the medallion wafers are “as fit for love letters as any thing that could be imagined.” In fact, there may be no direct relationship between Landon’s poems and the real-life medallion wafers; she has taken her “hint for this series of Poems” not from the wafers themselves, as the title of each poem implies, but from “the account” of the wafers in the advertising section of the magazine.

As a poet who published extensively in popular magazines such as *The Literary Gazette* and who contributed to and edited gift-book annuals such as *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap-Book* and *Heath’s Book of Beauty*, Landon could not afford to ignore the commercial aspects of writing and publishing poetry. For Landon to base a series of poems in *The Literary Gazette* on an advertisement in the same magazine was for her to do her job of making money for the magazine. As a popular contributor, she was already influencing readers like the young Edward Bulwer-Lytton and his friends to keep buying *The Literary Gazette*; in a review of Landon’s novel *Romance and Reality*, Bulwer-Lytton reminisced about his days at college when “there was always in the reading-room

of the Union a rush every Saturday afternoon for the ‘Literary Gazette’; and an impatient anxiety to hasten at once to that corner of the sheet which contained the three magical letters ‘L.E.L.’” (546). In connecting her own poetic brand with products manufactured by Messrs Thomson of Wellington Street, Landon participated in a brilliant cross-promotion that benefited the Thomsons, the magazine, and herself.

A resurgence of critical interest in both Landon and the rise of the popular press—and that of the gift-book industry in particular—has resulted in many useful studies of the relationship between Landon’s writing and the literary marketplace in which it appeared; while many of these essays have focused on the ways in which Landon distances herself and her writing from the bald capitalism in which it participates,⁸¹ it’s worth thinking, too, about Landon’s embrace of the casualness, the ephemerality, perhaps even the crassness of consumer culture as a way of constructing and organizing fields of feminine identity in her writing. In situating these textual objects—an advertisement for a “medallion wafer,” a casual note in a literary text, or an imagined artifact like Erinna’s “antique gem” or the sketch of Eulalia’s face—as the authority for her poems, in a role Hemans assigns more commonly to a true archeological object like the image in lava or a contemporary painting of a true historical figure, Landon simultaneously gestures toward the material “trace” that is the desiderata of many of her poems and foregrounds the ephemerality of that trace. A mass-produced, disposable seal that is imprinted with “many of the most beautiful forms of antiquity,” but that obscures the art-historical origins of those forms in order to repurpose them in the service of imagined “lovers’ correspondence,” the

⁸¹ In “Bijoux Beyond Possession,” for example, Cynthia Lawford shows how Landon’s poems for the gift annual *The Bijou Almanac* showcase female figures whose enthralling passion “contest[s] the capitalist forces at work in the gift-book economy” (102), while in “Buyer Beware,” Jill Rappaport explains that “the guise of a gift economy” allows Landon to separate herself from the capitalist forces she criticizes in some of her poems (456).

medallion wafer is a fitting aesthetic model for the process by which attributes accumulate around and are detached from the feminine figures that, in both Landon's and Hemans's poetry, those attributes seem to define and identify. The fact that Landon appears to have been inspired by an advertisement for the medallion wafers rather than the material objects themselves only further reminds us that the materiality Landon gestures toward in her poems is itself only a metaphor, like the metaphor of voice. In addition, the casual nature of Landon's sources frees her from the responsibility of historical authority, a problem that plagued nineteenth-century women poets who wanted to write in a classical tradition but whose gender barred them from a University education, and whose need to earn a living in the literary marketplace discouraged private study. While Hemans's elaborate textual apparatus can be read as a bid for such authority, Landon's blithe disregard for the authenticity of her sources suggests that this model of the mobile, expansionary identity is gendered feminine not only because women are decorated and decorative, but because women's education and knowledge are often by necessity hybrid, cobbled-together, unanchored.⁸²

Shape-Shifting Sorceresses:

Landon's Literary "Illustrations" for *Heath's Book of Beauty*

If "Medallion Wafers" serves as an early model for Landon's aesthetic of detachable feminine identities, one developed in the literary marketplace of a weekly periodical, we can trace the development of this aesthetic into her later work in another marketplace, that of the gift-book annual. For the remainder of this chapter, I consider Landon's 1833 editorship of the first volume of *Heath's Book of Beauty*, in which

⁸² Melnyk argues that Hemans sidesteps the problem of women poets' lack of access to classical learning through an emphasis on the Christian God as a "male muse" ("Hemans's Later Poetry," 83 – 84).

Landon uses gift-book conventions including illustration, ekphrasis, quotation, and extraction to develop theatrical feminine figures that could be repurposed and reimagined throughout the volume. In doing so, I demonstrate the mutually constitutive formal influence between the gift book as a popular print genre and the theatricality of the tableaux and assemblages in Landon's earlier writing, including "The Improvisatrice" and "Medallion Wafers," and Hemans's *Records of Woman*. Understanding the relationships between the portable, citational feminine figures in Landon's *Book of Beauty* as inextricable from the assemblages in Hemans's and Landon's earlier work suggests the extent to which the "empty" figure of the Victorian Poetess was shaped by the messy, multiplying fields of feminine identity that this chapter has discussed so far.

One of many annual publications produced by Charles Heath, who served as the engraver and art director for the first British literary annuals before launching his own enterprises in 1827, *Heath's Book of Beauty* was a lavishly illustrated gift book designed for middle-class readers, particularly women, to exchange with friends and lovers at Christmastime. Unlike most earlier literary annuals such as 1822's *Forget-Me-Not* and Heath's own *The Keepsake*, whose illustrations spanned a range of themes and genres from pastoral landscapes to historical scenes to celebrity portraits, the first volume of *Heath's Book of Beauty* paved the way for later Heath publications—including the *Heroines of Shakespeare* collection Lootens discusses in *Lost Saints*—by focusing exclusively on one type of "beauty": idealized portraits of fictional female characters. Formally, then, *Heath's Book of Beauty* accomplishes literally what many of the texts I have discussed in this chapter represent figuratively: it presents a series of portraits of beautiful women, accompanied by text describing or "illustrating" the lives or

circumstances of those women, often giving “voice” to the women in prose or verse.

While both *Records of Woman* and “The Improvisatrice” exclusively use printed text to represent the competing claims of (visual) image and (spoken or sung) language, the illustrated annuals make the tension between art forms visible (if not audible) by juxtaposing the printed word with the engraved image.

This tension is intensified by the hierarchy of image over word that structured the literary annuals as a genre. Heath’s innovative use of steel- instead of copper-plate engraving made it possible for publishers in the 1820s and 1830s to reproduce images on a much larger scale than ever before, and the annuals—like the medallion wafers in the *Literary Gazette*—were designed and marketed primarily as visual pleasures for a middle-class public who had never before had access to such high-quality reproductions of fine art. Most of each volume’s budget was devoted to the engravings, which were usually selected before the literary contributions were solicited; in many cases, the fiction and poetry that appeared in an annual was provided as an ekphrastic or explanatory “illustration” of the images, rather than the other way around. In the case of Heath’s publications, of course, his reputation as a prominent engraver gave the images even more primacy. As the “editor” of a literary annual, Landon’s creative freedom was limited to providing stories and poems to “illustrate” the engravings, a task that, as Cynthia Lawford suggests, she may have found frustratingly “mechanical” (103). In Landon’s preface to the 1832 volume of *Fisher’s Drawing Room Almanac*, for example, she complained that “it is not an easy thing to write illustrations to prints, selected rather for their pictorial excellence than their poetic capabilities, and mere description is certainly not the most popular species of composition,” while in a later edition of the

same almanac she rebelled against the primacy of the engravings and introduced “several fugitive pieces . . . in the hope of giving greater variety” (quoted in Hoagwood 5). In the case of *Heath’s Book of Beauty*, however, Landon is merely self-deprecating about the value of her own contributions compared to that of Heath’s engravings:

In the following tales I have carefully endeavoured to concentrate the interest of the story, and to shun digression . . . I feel it almost an impertinence to speak of the beautiful embellishments of the present Work: the novelty of the design, the taste and splendor of the execution, may well be left to plead their own cause; and I am selfish enough to trust that their merits may, in some measure, atone for the imperfections of their illustrations (v – vi).

Far from introducing “fugitive pieces” in this volume, Landon’s “illustrations” are “carefully” constructed to “shun digression,” presumably to better allow the “taste and splendor” of Heath’s “beautiful embellishments” to shine forth; Landon appears to have structured each tale or poem meticulously around one or more of the engravings, making certain that her contributions not only captured the mood of the images, but that the appearances, attributes, and even the names of her characters match the engravings.

Landon’s editorial fidelity here may seem to be the ultimate subordination of word to image. But as her preface reminds us, if the tales and verses are “illustrations,” the images are themselves merely “embellishments”: the primary function of both words and pictures in the annual is decorative. The names of literary annuals—*The Keepsake*, *The Amulet*, *The Bijou Almanac*—often emphasized their status as beautiful objects that might appeal to holiday shoppers; in calling this annual a “book of beauty,” Heath is making an even balder claim about its decorative value.⁸³

⁸³ Leigh Hunt, in the *Keepsake* of 1828, imagined the ultimate gift annual as a text that could not be distinguished from a jewel: “we would pamper one of these keepsakes into such a book, that the beholder of it on a friend’s table should not know whether it were the book itself, or the casket that contained it . . . the cover should be thick with emerald and crystal: keepsakes of all kinds should glitter without and within . . . there should be illuminations, and miniatures, and crowds of sculpture and arabesque in the

Moreover, a glance at the list of plates at the beginning *Heath's Book of Beauty* reveals a particularly complex relationship between art forms, in which "illustration" is a long and recursive process. A note at the bottom of the page indicates that "the Plates marked * illustrate Lord Byron's Poems," while "those marked [+] illustrate Sir Walter Scott" (iii). Of the nineteen plates listed, five illustrate Byron and two illustrate Scott; through a cross-media chain of citation and imitation, more than a third of the images Landon "illustrates" with her writing are already "illustrations" of female figures from well-regarded and popular literature, relying on the fame of Scott and Byron's characters as a powerful supplement to the beauty of the image itself. Through the exigencies of gift-book publishing conventions, these characters are folded back into text through Landon's own "illustrations." The other images are engravings of stand-alone paintings or drawings by popular artists of the day; many of the artists who contributed to Heath's annuals, including John William Wright and the sisters Louisa and Eliza Sharpe, were known both for their illustrations of the work of famous poets and for painstakingly researched "costume pieces," portraits of beautiful women that evoked a particular historical era but made no direct reference to any historical woman or literary work. These images, too, are given a new life and context in Landon's written "illustrations," which put figures that were once unmoored from historic or literary context on a level with some of the most recognizable and well-loved figures from British Romantic literature.

The use Landon makes of these repurposed figures varies throughout the annual. In some pieces, the women she describes are recognizably the same characters as those in

smallest compass: a border of the exquisitest flowers on ivory should run round it; and, the easiest thing of all, there should be a crystal with a key to it in the midst, that when the heart was full, the locks of hair might be kissed" (quoted in Erickson 909).

Byron and Scott; rather than pairing an engraving of Donna Julia from *Don Juan* or Lucy Ashton from *The Bride of Lammermoor* with an extract from the relevant work, as the editors of Heath's 1841 collection of heroines from Scott would do, however, Landon offers a new perspective on the character or embellishes back story that the original work does not provide, creating a version of what we might call "fan fiction" today. Landon's short story "An Evening of Lucy Ashton's," for example, is an invented episode from the time period covered by the middle of Scott's novel.

Similarly, the poem "The Choice" stages the deliberations a "Spanish lady" makes between two suitors, the brave Don Felix and the romantic Don Guzman, before humorously revealing that the Spanish lady is in fact Byron's Donna Julia, who at the end of the poem makes the purely mercenary choice to marry the rich and elderly Don Alonzo—and who presumably deserves all the erotic difficulties she encounters in *Don Juan*. Because the plate labeled "Donna Julia" comes before rather than after the poem, however, and because the plate has already been identified at the beginning of the volume as an illustration of Byron, Donna Julia's identity isn't quite the surprise that it would have been for a reader who encountered the text on its own. Instead, the surprise lies in the fact that Landon's Donna Julia is indeed *that* Donna Julia; put another way, the surprise is that Donna Julia appears to have a more or less stable identity as she moves from Byron's mock epic to a painting by "F. Stone" to an engraving by "H. Robinson" to a serio-comic lyric by "L.E.L."

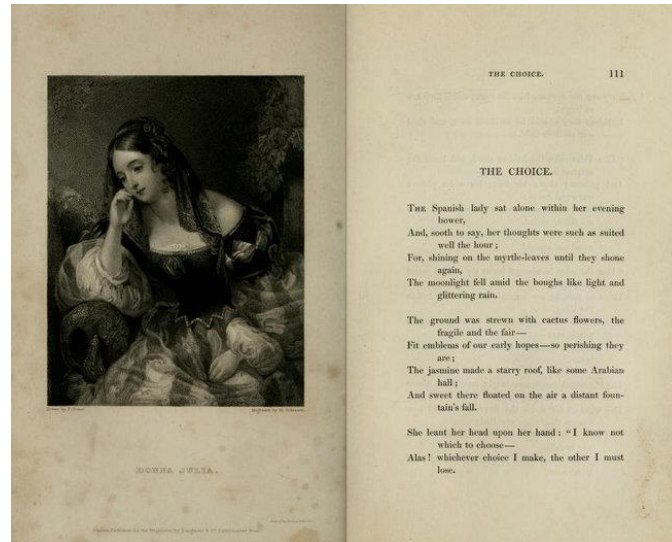


Figure 1: "Donna Julia." *Heath's Book of Beauty*, 1833.

That the relative stability of Donna Julia's identity might come as a surprise to Landon's reader is one indication of the much more mutable identities of the other literary "beauties" who appear in the annual. In some of her textual "illustrations," Landon tempts her reader to identify her characters with Scott's or Byron's only to frustrate that identification in a way that allows Landon to comment on or critique the original text. The other plate illustrating Scott, an image of *Ivanhoe*'s Rebecca that closely matches Scott's description of Rebecca in the novel, appears in the middle of Landon's short story "Rebecca," and the language Landon uses to describe Rebecca not only matches the illustration but echoes Scott's original text: in *Ivanhoe*, Rebecca wears a "sort of Eastern dress" including ostrich feathers and a "turban of yellow silk" that "suited well with the darkness of her complexion" (131 – 132), while Landon explains that "the Oriental dress suited well" her Rebecca's "proud, dark beauty: a crimson turban was folded round her head, ornamented by the plume of that strange bird they call of paradise" (209). But while Scott's Jewish heroine wears her "sort of Eastern dress" as an

authentic marker of identity—it is “the fashion of the females of her nation” (131)—Landon’s Rebecca is an actress wearing a costume for her role in a play. Rather than identifying Rebecca the actress *as* Rebecca the medieval Jewish healer, then, Landon’s visual and textual citation of Scott foregrounds the artificiality of Rebecca as a character, calling into question the authenticity both of Rebecca’s astonishing virtue and her dazzling exoticism. Landon’s Rebecca is an Englishwoman whose status as an actress exposes her to moral ruin, and at the end of the story she puts on the “Oriental dress” that first attracted her lover in order to poison herself in his arms.



Figure 2: “Rebecca.”

The effect is not necessarily to impugn the virtue of *Ivanhoe*'s Rebecca, but rather to suggest—as writers of sensation fiction would do later in the century—the contingency of female vice and virtue.

If Landon reimagines Scott's Rebecca as a less virtuous figure than in her source text, she does the opposite with Byron's Gulnare. At first reading, Landon's poem "Gulnare" appears to be an elegy for the beautiful but desperate anti-heroine from Byron's "The Corsair": like Byron's Gulnare, Landon's falls in love with and rescues a handsome captive in a dungeon. While Byron's Gulnare is a harem slave whose unfeminine murder of her master horrifies Conrad, the eponymous Corsair—having seen a spot of blood on her forehead, he can only think of her as "Gulnare the homicide!" ("Corsair" 463)—Landon transforms her into a faithful daughter who is willing to nurse and ultimately free her father's captive, but not to abandon her filial duty: "I may not, for a stranger's care / Forsake my father's side" ("Gulnare" 43 – 44). In revising Gulnare's story, and in shifting the poem's genre from Byronic "tale" to sentimental elegy—"The shadow falls on many graves," the poem ends, "but not on one so dear!" (78 – 80)—Landon humanizes Byron's Gulnare, suggesting the traumatic history that must predate her appearance in *The Corsair* as well as the trauma that she undergoes in freeing Conrad; Landon's sympathetic poem also implicitly critiques Byron's assessment of her as a "homicide."



Figure 3: “Gulnare.”

The potentially subversive valences of Landon’s moral recontextualization of these female figures from the works of male authors coexist with the texts’ casual stance towards the figures’ identities as vague but recognizable racialized “types.” Reading Landon’s “Rebecca” alongside and against *Ivanhoe* suggests the contingency of feminine vice and virtue; but reading Landon’s ambiguously Eastern “Rebecca” on its own only confirms readerly assumptions that “proud, dark beaut[ies]” in “Oriental dress” are deceptive and sexually compromised. Landon’s revision of Gulnare, meanwhile, enacts what Lootens has identified as a common tendency among nineteenth-century Poetess performers to “change the subject” (*Political Poetess* 40 – 42): in erasing Gulnare’s status as an enslaved woman who hates the “Pasha” responsible for her bondage, and recasting her as a faithful daughter, Landon renders Gulnare more sympathetic but also

erases her anger, as well as the way in which the poem might suggest, especially to a reader in 1833, the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade.⁸⁴ Landon's alterations can invite critique of her source texts, but they can also flatten those texts' nuances. The only consistent effect is that Landon's decontextualizations make these figures available to "embellish" new stories and poems. Like Landon's actress version of Rebecca, they take on identities, costumes, and attributes for their decorative effect, not because these attributes say anything about their fundamental character.

In her "illustrations" of the engraved illustrations of Scott and Byron, then, Landon refers to the source text only to assert the instability of such a reference. As in *Records of Woman*, the attributes—material, historical, linguistic—that surround the women in Landon's *Book of Beauty* pieces seem to fix them in a historical or literary context, but simultaneously demonstrate the ease with which such a context can be detached or expanded beyond recognition. Even Landon's most faithful portraits, of Donna Julia and Lucy Ashton, are situated in a newly expanded field—of additional experiences, added material attributes, women's faces engraved by Heath's workshop or described by Landon herself on the pages of the annual—that threatens to exceed the identities established by the literary works in which the characters first appeared.

The most remarkable example of this phenomenon in *Heath's Book of Beauty* is the first story to appear in the annual, "The Enchantress." Landon appears to have arranged her text to "illustrate" three engravings. The first, labeled "The Enchantress," is the annual's frontispiece and seems to be an original composition; it depicts a dark-haired woman looking coyly down and to the side, dressed in a turban and veil, with pearls

⁸⁴ See Lootens's discussion of Hemans's "Bride of the Greek Isle," first published in 1825: "When is a 'Greek slave' not necessarily a Greek slave? At a moment of acute controversy around transatlantic slavery, it would seem" (*Political Poetess* 29).

strung in her hair and around the neck of her dress (Figure 4). The other two images are of female characters from Byron's poems. One is Medora, Conrad's beloved wife and Gulnare's romantic rival from *The Corsair*. In that poem, Conrad escapes from captivity only to find Medora mysteriously dead, and the engraving shows her beatific, fair-haired corpse wreathed in roses (Figure 5). The other is Lolah, a minor character from the seraglio in *Don Juan*. Her attributes are similar to those of "The Enchantress": dark hair, a veil, ropes of pearls, lots of bracelets, a richly-textured dress with flowing sleeves (Fig. 6). We might expect Landon to invent three distinct characters for her story to fit these three illustrations; conversely, especially since Lolah and the Enchantress both look a bit like the illustration of Gulnare, Medora's romantic rival in "The Corsair," we might expect Landon to combine the two dark-haired figures into a rival for "Medora" in Landon's own story "The Enchantress." And at the beginning of the story, that seems to be the case: Medora interrupts the hero, Leoni, who is pining after his beloved Lolah, to arrange an assignation, telling him she will make him rich enough to be considered a valuable suitor by Lolah's father. But if we are expecting Landon's Medora, like Gulnare and Rebecca, to be a clear revision of or commentary on Byron's original, Landon surprises us by making Medora disappear.



Figure 4: “The Enchantress”



Figure 5: “Medora”



Figure 6: “Lolah.”

Throughout the works I’ve discussed in this chapter, Landon has used the self-transformations of female artists from the Improvisatrice to Eulalia to Rebecca as a metaphor for the mobility of female identity; in “The Enchantress” she takes this practice to its logical extreme by making the Enchantress a literal shape-shifter. When Leoni meets Medora in her tower sanctuary, she sheds the body Leoni has come to recognize as Medora’s and reveals her true identity as the Enchantress of the frontispiece:

The face had that high and ideal cast of beauty which made the divinities of Greece divine; for the mind was embodied in the features. The large blue eyes were the colour of the noon, when heaven is full of light . . . Her garb and turban had an Oriental splendor; a silver veil mingled with her rich profusion of hair, which was bound by strings of costly pearls. Round her arm was rolled a band of gold, and on her hand she bore a signet of some strange clear stone, covered with mystic characters. Her height and step were like a queen’s. (14 – 15)

With these attributes—the “strings of costly pearls,” the “Oriental splendor” of her “turban,” the “silver veil”—the Enchantress resembles many of the other dark-haired

figures in *Heath's Book of Beauty*, including Rebecca, Gulnare, and Lolah, reinforcing the sense that these characters from Romantic literature are interchangeable with the purely decorative figures designed by the *Book of Beauty's* artists and "illustrated" by Landon's text. The engraving of Byron's Medora serves in Landon's story not as a rival or foil to these figures, but simply as an illustration of the Enchantress's story of how she came to be known, temporarily, as Medora. After witnessing Leoni's cousin Medora's death from illness and her family's grief, the Enchantress decided to comfort the family by taking on the dead girl's identity, hiding her corpse on a remote island: "Human eye has never since dwelt on that lovely and lonely shore," she tells Leoni, "but beneath the shadow of that cross lie the mortal remains of your cousin Medora" (26).

In this way, Medora is reduced to nothing but an image: the sentimental image of a beautiful dying girl. The Enchantress encounters Medora at the moment of her death; her history and personality are irrelevant to the Enchantress's decision to take on her image. Instead, the Enchantress is moved by the generic conventions of sentimental literature, responding appropriately to the pathos of the scene just as the reader of *Heath's Book of Beauty* might respond to the engraving labeled "Medora." Detached from her role in *The Corsair*, Medora becomes an attribute or set of attributes that the Enchantress can put on and take off at will, even as the Enchantress also seems capable of appearing without a form at all: at the end of the story the Enchantress appears as "a faint silvery outline of a form" who walks on water without leaving any trace (49).

The themes and images that Medora's role in *The Corsair* might seem to dictate for Landon's story become equally detachable: Medora is not the Enchantress's rival but her costume, and Lolah—a virtuous heroine who becomes a loving wife to the

undeserving Leoni—seems to have little in common with the Enchantress herself or with the harem girl in Byron’s poem. Medora’s and Lolah’s names are present in the story, and their images are on the page; they are recognizable to the vast numbers of readers who devoured both *Don Juan* and *The Corsair* in the decade before *Heath’s Book of Beauty* was published. But in Landon’s story those names and images have been all but severed from the popular characters from Byron’s poems; they circulate within the *Book of Beauty* only as names and images, visible but difficult to differentiate from one another in the table of contents, the list of plates, and the engravings, poems, and stories themselves.

In reducing Medora, Lolah, Gulnare, and Rebecca to names and faces, Landon is reenacting a process that both Lootens and Prins have identified as crucial to the history of the nineteenth-century Poetess: the emptying out of a female figure into what Lootens describes as a hollow “literary monument” (*Lost Saints* 66) and what Prins calls a “name in quotation marks, cited by a long tradition of poets” (*Victorian Sappho* 182). In 1833, Byron’s characters had not, of course, accumulated anywhere near the “long tradition” of poetic citation that, as Prins argues, shaped the Victorian understanding of Sappho. And unlike Sappho—unlike, too, Landon’s Improvisatrice, Erinna, and Eulalia—Medora and Lolah were never figures for the woman artist or the Poetess. Yet Prins’s reading of Sappho as a “name in quotation marks” that “survives because it cannot be attached to an ‘I,’” and therefore cannot be attached to a stable identity, is a useful account of the way in which Landon empties out the names of the familiar figures she cites for use in the *Book of Beauty* (182). As Prins points out, Landon names the Improvisatrice as Sappho “only by turning the proper into a common name, ‘a Sappho,’ a depersonified non-persona”; in

“The Improvisatrice,” “the name of Sappho survives only in . . . a long series of Sapphic signatures that includes L.E.L. but neither begins nor ends there” (195). In *Heath’s Book of Beauty*, “Medora” is the only proper name we get for the Enchantress, but it also becomes a common name in Prins’s sense of the term, a citation that survives in the pages of the gift book but “neither begins nor ends there”: although we can trace Medora’s origin to Byron’s text, Landon’s transformation of Medora into the entirely generic figure of a dying girl reminds us that Byron’s Medora herself is one more iteration of a figure or figures with a long and recursive literary history.

If Landon’s “Enchantress” is a figure for the citational, portable Poetess, this chapter shows that Landon arrived at that figure not only through the process Prins describes but through the theatrical, visual strategies that characterize so much of Landon’s earlier work, as well as Hemans’s *Records of Woman*. Landon’s contributions to *Heath’s Book of Beauty* suggest that the collectivity and theatricality of Landon’s and Hemans’s assemblages and tableaux were an important influence on the formation of the figure of the nineteenth-century Poetess, prompting us to consider a model of the “Poetess tradition” in which the Poetess figure accumulates not only over time, through the repeating postscripts of Prins’s “long series of Sapphic signatures” (195), but also (at least metaphorically) in space, through Hemans’s and Landon’s accumulating, deteriorating, shape-shifting assemblages of real and imagined bodies, objects, and texts. Although Medora is the only one of the Enchantress’s secret identities that Landon explicitly names, the interchangeability of the attributes and iconography throughout the engravings in *Heath’s Book of Beauty* blurs the boundaries between “The Enchantress” and “Gulnare,” “Lolah” and “Rebecca” in a way that recalls the cross-contamination of

bodies and objects in *Records of Woman*. We might read the Enchantress, like the Improvisatrice, as a figure for the theatrical Poetess, a Poetess-actress continually expanding, detaching, and re-assembling identities from among the words and images surrounding her, trying on new costumes, new poses, new bodies. At the same time, the sheer quantity of feminine figures in the volume's pages invokes theatrical collectivity, a troupe or tableau of interchangeable actresses that includes Rebecca, Gulnare, Lolah, Medora, and the Enchantress herself.

The degree to which readers would have recognized the Enchantress's shapeshifting, of course, depends on the reading practices they brought to *Heath's Book of Beauty*. A casual reader browsing through the annual, enjoying it as an aesthetic object, might recognize the famous names and images without reading Landon's story or appreciating the ways in which she has transformed Byron's characters; a reader deeply absorbed in the plot might ignore the references to Byron and Scott completely. But these elements, like the *recitatives*, epigraphs, and notes Hemans provides in *Records of Woman*, are all available to the reader, allowing the reader herself to mobilize the competing narratives, images, and histories presented in the volume in different ways. Like Hemans's paratextual apparatus, the textual and visual history of the heroines in Landon's edition of the *Book of Beauty* provides an expanding context for each character, a way in which Gulnare or Rebecca can be fixed in actual or literary history even as she is simultaneously detached from that context.

Where Landon's approach differs most significantly from Hemans's is, again, the casualness of her source material: while Hemans may, as Rudy points out, quarantine the historical authority or narrative background of her poems within the paratext, the

authority and accuracy of that paratextual material seems important to her conception of the poem itself. In contrast, Landon's approach to the *Book of Beauty*, as with the other texts I've discussed, demonstrates a cheerful disregard for the authenticity of her sources; just as she is unfazed by the lack of historical data available about Erinna, she reports that "the hint" for her *Book of Beauty* story "The Talisman" "is taken from M. de Balzac's *Peau de Chagrin*. I have not read the tale itself, but saw a notice of it in *Le Globe*" (110). The stories and poems in *Heath's Book of Beauty*, then, are assembled from second-hand "hints" and images whose distance from an "original" source seems to have been enabling for Landon, allowing her to generate dozens of feminine figures that, together, constitute a rich field of identity. Like an isinglass seal stuck to a letter, this field is simultaneously beautiful, material, and highly disposable.

Both Landon's and Hemans's emphasis on materiality—on the props and scenery that surround, construct, and survive the metaphor of the speaker's vocal performance—constitutes a reminder that inasmuch as the lyric "voice" is accessible through text, it is as a printed page—a body or object in itself, one that, in the case of a gift annual, might be richly ornamented, gilt-edged, encased in a silk cover. We might read the interchangeability of the feminine figures in *Heath's Book of Beauty* as evidence of Landon's playful exploitation of a print culture in which she made her livelihood; we might read the similar interchangeability and permeability of the bodies and objects in *Records of Woman* as an index of the insistent presence of the historical women who can't be entirely contained by the Poetry of Woman, as well as the horrors of those bodies' ultimate destruction and decay. Reading these texts together makes the overlap between these two strategies more apparent, suggesting how assemblages and tableaux

might be used, here and in later texts, to celebrate consumer culture and feminine artifice even as they gesture, as I argue in my next chapter, toward the representation of people and “things” often excluded from poetry. As readers trained by the legacy of the dramatic monologue, literary modernism, and New Criticism to understand poetry in terms of dramatic or lyric “speakers,” the silent sprawl of Hemans’s and Landon’s women and objects may be difficult for us to read, but it may also provide us with a new way of understanding the spectacular, theatrical history of the performing Poetess—a history that haunts even the most individualistic poetic performances in Victorian literary history and beyond, entangling in its bloody, bejeweled tentacles even those minds with—to return to the language of Landon’s “Preface”—the most idiosyncratic “modes of misery,” those poems that wish most ardently to “speak” only “for themselves.”

Chapter Three

“We Make a Pretty Show”:

The Threat of the Theatrical Poetess in *Aurora Leigh*

Theatricality is dangerous in *Aurora Leigh*. As Aurora puts it in Book V of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse novel, this danger lies in the theater’s dependence on “the public taste” (V.269): like a performing dog, the dramatist might be rewarded by applause, but he might just as easily be “hissed at, howled at, stamped at” by an audience of “some five hundred nobodies” whose ranks might swell to include the “five thousand and five thousand more” of the “whole public” (V.276, 279, 288). To participate in a theatrical production, then, is to risk public exposure and all its attendant dangers, including mob violence; further, the poem makes it clear that this danger is not only one posed by playgoers to playwright, but more generally a multidirectional danger inherent in the crowds of bodies required by theater as a form. In dreaming of a purified English theater, and endorsing contemporary beliefs about that theater’s decline, Aurora imagines it cleansed of the materiality and collectivity that differentiates theatrical performance from closet drama or dramatic poetry—a theater that has eliminated “the simulation of the painted scene, / Boards, actors, prompters, gaslight, and costume” (V.338-339). Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, public performance exposes actors, authors, and spectators alike to risks as varied as humiliation, ridicule, sexual objectification, loss of identity, loss of authorial control, immobility, violence, fire, maiming, and blinding. For Aurora, a crowded theater is literally and figuratively a fire hazard.

Rather than risk such obliteration, Aurora declares, “I will write no plays” (V.267), choosing instead the solitary, entirely textual work of writing a verse novel, or

modern epic, for print publication. Yet the very characteristics that make the theater so dangerous—its collectivity, its artifice, and the embodied materiality that makes both artifice and collectivity possible—are crucial to the poetics and ethics that undergird Barrett Browning’s vision for her poem as an epic that can display the “full-veined, heaving, double-breasted age” of Victorian modernity (V.215). And the text’s inclusion of highly theatrical set-pieces invokes the material and corporeal spectacles of Victorian melodrama, as well as the crowds of working-class bodies that made up its earliest audiences. At first, theatrical performance in *Aurora Leigh* is associated with the materialist, collectivist vision of Aurora’s cousin and love interest Romney Leigh, but as the poem progresses such performance becomes a vehicle by which Barrett Browning synthesizes Romney’s values with Aurora’s individualism and idealism. Meanwhile, those aspects of theatricality that the poem does not assimilate into its poetics—particularly the crowds of “nobodies” who “hiss,” “stamp,” and perform throughout the poem—remain present in the poem, registering the existence of alternative poetic traditions in which choral, embodied performance is as important as written language.

This chapter attends to the importance of theater and theatricality in *Aurora Leigh*, both as metaphor for textual performance and in scenes of embodied performance represented within the text—an importance that heretofore has been underexamined. While many readers have criticized the plot of *Aurora Leigh* for its “melodramatic” qualities, they tend to use the word “melodramatic” somewhat crudely, as a synonym for “sensational” or “implausibly dependent on coincidences,” or as a way of reading the poem through what Carolyn Williams describes as the “modal lens” of one or two of melodrama’s “familiar, persistent concerns, such as . . . the central place of the suffering

woman in the melodramatic plot” (194). Few critics have discussed the poem’s relationship to the specific dramatic genre of melodrama, or to other theatrical forms associated with live performance. Those critics who do discuss *Aurora Leigh* and drama have focused on the poem’s similarity to literary dramatic forms with solitary speakers, such as the dramatic monologue and monodrama, or on Aurora’s self-crowning as solo performance.⁸⁵ My own focus here is *Aurora Leigh*’s stance toward the choral, spectacular performances associated with Victorian theatricality—a term I use here and throughout this dissertation to indicate the theater’s “publicity” and “collectivity” (Kurnick 7) and tendency toward outrageous bodily and material spectacle, distinguishing it from literary drama and, to some degree, from less spectacular forms of dramatic performance.⁸⁶

This chapter argues that the collectivity and materiality of theatrical performance are significant forces in *Aurora Leigh*, forces that run in tension with the solitude and textuality of the poetry and literary drama that the text explicitly valorizes. Barrett Browning’s use of theatrical metaphors to describe *Aurora Leigh*’s teeming crowds of poor and working-class people, as well as the similarity between the language she uses to describe those crowds and to describe the theater, suggest that she was keenly aware of, if ambivalent about, the potential for social change and political resistance offered by the collectivity of theatrical performance, which in Kurnick’s formulation “indexes the collective horizon that is the necessary ground of any meaningful political engagement” (18). In addition, theatrical performances in *Aurora Leigh* often involve extravagant

⁸⁵ Carrie Preston reads *Aurora Leigh* as a dramatic monologue (45) and discusses Barrett Browning’s monodrama “Aeschylus” (45 – 51). Ellen Moers describes Aurora as “performing heroinism” (173 – 210); see also Tricia Lootens’s reading of the same scene in *The Political Poetess* (45 – 48), and note 100 below.

⁸⁶ See Michael R. Booth’s *Victorian Spectacular Theatre* for an overview of the ubiquity of spectacle in mid- to late-nineteenth-century theater.

material and corporeal spectacles that recall the extralinguistic excesses of “illegitimate” theatrical genres such as melodrama, in what Williams has characterized as a generic tendency to “challenge the law and press beyond language, to express what is disallowed or cannot be said in words.”⁸⁷ The presence of such spectacles in the text challenges the authority of Barrett Browning’s language, just as the actor’s voice and body challenge the authority of the playwright’s written text. Further, this extralinguistic display invokes a tradition of Poetess performance in which the role of “Poetess” is indistinguishable from that of “actress”—a tradition that deeply influenced *Aurora Leigh* despite the poem’s many gestures to reject or erase that tradition.

Aurora Leigh’s ambivalent stance toward Victorian theater is an index of the text’s ambivalence toward the embodied theatricality of early nineteenth-century Poetess performance. Jonah Siegel describes a similar ambivalence on Barrett Browning’s part about the art romance, another genre associated with performing Poetess figures and the aestheticized suffering of the woman artist. Siegel argues that “the deep importance of the art romance for Barrett Browning is demonstrated by her constant recourse to its elements, even as she emphatically deflects the outcomes that characterize the mode” (73). Barrett Browning’s continual use of theatrical metaphors and representations of theatrical performance in *Aurora Leigh* reflects a similar investment in the intertwined history of poetry and theatricality. This investment coexists with the text’s development of Aurora as an antitheatrical model of the woman poet, an anti-Poetess who exerts significant authorial control over the printed text of her book and who manages to avoid, as Siegel points out in his discussion of Aurora and the art-romance tradition, the tragic

⁸⁷ Williams 198. See also Jane Moody’s *The Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770 – 1840*, in which Moody argues that, despite prevailing narratives that the late Georgian theater was apolitical, illegitimate genres did major political work.

end that awaits so many Poetess figures in literature (81). Indeed, the presence of Poetess figures actually enables the creation of Aurora as an anti-Poetess. Including representations of and references to Poetess theatricality in the text allows Barrett Browning to transcend those representations in her portrayal of Aurora, a process which may have contributed to some recent critics' tendency to label Barrett Browning herself as a "woman poet"—or even just an unmarked "poet"—instead of, or in addition to, a Poetess.⁸⁸

In turn, acknowledging Barrett Browning's debt to theatricality in *Aurora Leigh* will help us better understand the influence that actual performance genres have had on the development of what Tricia Lootens calls "Poetess performance," and upon the degree to which the nineteenth-century figure of the Poetess was understood to be embodied, collective, and engaged in social change.

***Aurora Leigh* and the Decline of the Victorian Drama**

Is *Aurora Leigh* an antitheatrical text? Aurora's claim that she will "write no plays" implies that it is—especially since this claim appears in Book V of the poem, which is generally considered the poetic "manifesto" or *ars poetica* declaring Barrett Browning's intentions for *Aurora Leigh* itself. Aurora hopes that the drama will

outgrow
The simulation of the painted scene,
Boards, actors, prompters, gaslight, and costume,
And take for a worthier stage the soul itself. (V.338-340)

Aurora's ideal drama, performed on the "stage" of the "soul," is both solitary and immaterial, purged not only of the multiplying "nobodies" who dictate "public taste" (V.269, 276) but of the distracting presence of actors and the material trappings of theater

⁸⁸ See, for example, Mandell's "Introduction to the Poetess Tradition."

as a physical space: the “painted scene,” the “boards” of the stage, the “costume” that adorns the actors’ bodies, and the “gaslight” that focuses attention on the spectacle of actors and “scene,” in addition to producing spectacular special effects. Aurora’s objection to gaslight, as well as to the “simulation” of the “painted scene,” also implies an objection to the insincerity or artifice of the theater—an objection that might seem more natural to readers who think of nineteenth-century antitheatricality in terms of Victorian mistrust of artifice.⁸⁹ For Aurora, however, the artificiality of the theater seems inseparable from her concerns about theater’s publicity and excessive materiality. And Aurora’s concerns echo antitheatrical sentiments that were common in the mid-nineteenth century, as Barrett Browning’s contemporaries engaged in debates over the “decline” of the British drama and the possibility of theatrical reform.

Aurora’s vision of a dematerialized, depopulated, solitary theater seems to privilege the act of solitary reading that many critics associate with the novel—as does the poem’s generic status as a “verse novel.” At the same time, many of the theatrical elements that Aurora hopes to eliminate from the drama, including “costume” and “actors” themselves, are important elements in the poetics Aurora outlines in Book V and elsewhere in the poem. Ultimately, *Aurora Leigh* is a text shaped by its ambivalence toward the Victorian theater. Placing *Aurora Leigh*’s stance toward theatricality in the context of nineteenth-century antitheatrical criticism makes it possible to see both what Aurora rejects about the theater and how theatricality frames the text’s complicated positioning of the figure of the Poetess.

⁸⁹ As Kurnick points out, “[c]ritics, especially of the nineteenth-century novel, have tended to thematize theatricality as another name for duplicity, pretending, and self-difference: the ambivalent Victorian romance with theatrical artifice has long been perceived as central to the period” (11 – 12).

While in Book V Aurora rejects larger cultural accounts of Victorian belatedness and degeneration, arguing for the continued relevance and value of an epic of modern life, she happily embraces the mid-nineteenth century critical commonplace of the “decline of the drama.” She dismisses modern theater for its “menial” dependence on “the public taste,” but waxes nostalgic for the literary drama of the past, mourning the death of Aeschylus and agreeing with many of Barrett Browning’s contemporaries, including James Cooke and Richard Hengist Horne, that Elizabethan drama is the pinnacle of English literary achievement.⁹⁰ After claiming that she will “write no plays,” Aurora acknowledges that the “rulers of our art . . . sit in strength” in “the Drama’s throne room” (V.306-308). But if the seeming reality and embodiment of Shakespearean characters—who *seem* to “be men / As we are” (V.314-315)—constitute dramatic success, the real bodies onstage and off get in the way of this success. Like Barrett Browning herself, who wrote to Robert Browning during their courtship that

you are not to think that I blaspheme the Drama, dear Mr. Browning, or that I ever thought of exhorting you to give up the “solemn robes” & tread of the buskin. It is the theatre which vulgarizes these things; the modern theatre in which we see no altar!—where the thymele is replaced by the caprice of a popular actor⁹¹

Aurora’s poetic manifesto in Book V distinguishes between the glorious history of drama as a literary form and the vulgarity of the theater as performance practice.

For many of Barrett Browning’s contemporaries—as well as for Aurora and for Barrett Browning herself—the vulgarity of this performance practice arises from the interrelated demands of theater as a popular, corporeal, and material form. The emphasis that popular, “illegitimate” nineteenth-century theatrical genres placed upon crowd-

⁹⁰ In 1845, Barrett Browning wrote a monodrama in the voice of Aeschylus, which went unpublished during her lifetime. See *Selected Poems* 179 – 186.

⁹¹ Quoted in Reynolds, “Critical Introduction” 154.

pleasing spectacles required that theaters be crammed with vulgar and vulgarizing bodies and things: seats had to be filled, with audience members from all classes of British society, and audiences' taste for spectacle demanded stages crowded with elaborate set pieces, costumes, and props, as well as enormous "processions" and tableaux composed of dozens of supernumeraries.⁹² Antitheatrical critics claimed that the legitimate theater was falling prey to the same pressures. In linking her disapproval of the audience of "five hundred nobodies" with the materiality of the "painted scene," "boards," "actors," and "costume," Aurora echoes contemporary antitheatrical criticism, which often bemoaned the degree to which the material elements of the theater distracted from the drama's imaginative language. Many commentators saw this shift in the Victorian theater's focus from dramatic language to visual, material representation as inevitable: in 1857, the year after *Aurora Leigh* was published, William Bodham Donne, the Examiner of Plays, declared that audiences now needed "not the imaginatively true, but the physically real. The visions which our ancestors saw with the mind's eye, must be embodied for us in palpable forms."⁹³

⁹² As Michael Booth points out, despite the fact that many intellectuals blamed theaters' focus on spectacular effects on the "vulgarity and tastelessness" we might associate with working-class audiences (29), the taste for theatrical spectacle was "homogeneous" and "ubiquitous," "cut[ting] across all social classes" and shared by theatrical managers (*Victorian Spectacular Theatre* iii). While the age of the greatest Victorian spectacles was still to come, by the 1850s London theaters routinely mounted productions with elaborate sets and masses of supernumeraries onstage. For example, Booth cites Charles Kean's 1853 production of *Sardanapalus* at the Princess Theatre: Kean intended to "render visible to the eye . . . the costume, architecture, and the customs of the ancient Assyrian people, verified by bas-reliefs"; the set included "huge winged lions," began with "a huge procession . . . of spearmen, musicians, dancing-girls, archers, nobles, officers, eunuchs, standard-bearers, and Sardanapalus himself in an authentic chariot drawn by two cream horses," and ended with a woman leaping into the flames of a funeral pyre (20). Similar crowds of supernumeraries and spectacular special effects also characterized midcentury productions of Shakespeare; productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, borrowed elements from theatrical pantomime to stage elaborate fairy ballets and "transformation scenes" complete with maypoles dropping garlands of flowers and fairy choruses of seventy dancers (38 – 39).

⁹³ Quoted in Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre* iii.

In particular, Aurora's complaints about the theater echo the criticisms made by Barrett Browning's correspondent and sometime collaborator Richard Hengist Horne. The author of the epic poem *Orion* and several masques and "lyrical dramas," as well as a critic and a vocal advocate for theatrical reform, Horne argued, in the introduction to his 1840 tragedy *Gregory VII*, that "the propensity of modern times to reduce everything as much as possible to a tangible reality . . . has done incalculable mischief in its sweeping application to the ideal arts" ("An Essay on Tragic Influence," xvi). Hoping to encourage more productions of "ideal," literary drama and to discourage popular forms of "illegitimate" drama such as melodrama, extravaganza, and burlesque—forms that relied on musical performance as well as the "tangible reality" of costume, tableaux, special effects, and dancing—Horne campaigned for the repeal of the Licensing Act, which banned the performance of "legitimate" drama in theaters other than Drury Lane and Covent Garden. If more theaters were permitted to stage productions of "legitimate" literary drama, Horne reasoned, illegitimate forms would have less room to flourish, and there would be more opportunities for literary works by modern playwrights to be staged.

Like Aurora and Barrett Browning herself, who objected to the dangers posed to a dramatic text by the "caprice of a popular actor," Horne's objections to modern theater were rooted in two tendencies that, he argued, were directly linked: one, the fact that, even in the legitimate theater, star actors often controlled the management of theatrical companies, and two, the increasing emphasis such companies placed on visual spectacle and the "tangible" materials required to produce that spectacle. Horne tended to agree with mid-nineteenth century antitheatrical movements such as the Syncretic Society, whose members argued that dramatists, not actors, should have control over theatrical

repertoire—or with Robert Browning himself, who engaged in power struggles with the popular actor-manager William Macready over Macready’s 1843 production of Browning’s play *The Blot in the Scutcheon*. As Richard Pearson has shown, Browning and Macready differed in their understanding of the dramatist’s role in a theatrical production: Macready, for example, considered Browning’s desire to revise the text of the play between performances “a sickly and and fretful over-estimate of [Browning’s] work,” ultimately ascribing this unreasonable demand to Browning’s ignorance of the practicalities of Victorian theater production.⁹⁴ Horne’s 1844 essay collection *The New Spirit of the Age* contains a scathing critique—probably written by Horne, but possibly written by Barrett Browning herself—of Macready in particular and of actor-managers in general. The essay declares that the primary cause of the “decline of the acted drama” can be traced to the fact that

the actors, who never did, and never can, originate or contribute to a Dramatic Literature, have got the exclusive power of the stage—that authors of genius have no free access to the stage . . . There is a body without a soul; and the body has got the visible position. (260)

Like Aurora, who sees actors as elements that drama must “outgrow” before it can achieve the “worthier stage” of the “soul itself,” Horne believes that when actors have too much control, the “soul” of the drama suffers. Here the “soul” of the drama appears to be language—the literary dramatic texts produced by “authors of genius.” In characterizing the actor as the “visible” “body” of the theater, one that obscures the importance of and discourages the production of quality dramatic texts, Horne suggests that the problem with modern theater is its materiality and visuality: in presenting audiences with the appealing spectacle of the actor’s physical performance, modern theater distracts

⁹⁴ Quoted in Pearson 65.

audiences from dramatic language, privileging visual spectacle at the expense of spoken poetry, the “tangible” at the expense of the ideal.

In fact, Horne associates the primacy of the actor in modern theater with the “tangible” material extravagance of nineteenth-century production design, including elaborate sets, costumes, and props, which—Horne implies—all serve to decorate and glorify the body of the actor. “[I]nstead of enlarging the sphere of the drama,” Horne explains, an actor-manager

is sure to narrow it to his own exclusive standard. Instead of rendering it universal, he will make it particular. Instead of a reflexion of humanity, it will become the pampered image of an individual. “I cannot see *myself* in this part,” is a favourite expression of [popular comedic actor] Mr Farren’s when he does not like a new play; and may be taken as a general characteristic of all the “stars.” The stars, however, are disappearing, and with them the long suite of their retainers, the scenery-mongers, decorators, restorers, tailors, antiquarians, upholsterers, who have had their day. Capitalists have backed them with unbounded wealth; experience has lent them all her aid; trickery all her cunning; puffery all her placards, bills, paragraphs, and the getting up of “stories”; the press all its hundred tongues . . . and what has been the result? Bankruptcies, failures, dispersions . . . (261-262)

In Horne’s narrative, a stage crowded with bodies is, paradoxically, a symptom of a too-narrow focus on the individual. The “caprice of the popular actor” necessarily elicits a spectacular excess of both bodies and *stuff*: in describing theatrical craftsmen such as “scenery-mongers,” “upholsterers,” and “tailors” as “the long suite of [the stars’] retainers,” Horne implies that those “retainers” are there to decorate and glorify the actor with the “costume” and “painted scene” that Aurora longs to eliminate from modern theater. Horne’s use of the word “retainers” also summons up the image of the crowds of supernumerary actors that often filled nineteenth-century stages—extras who populated spectacular court scenes in the roles of “spear-carriers” (a term that came to be used as a synonym for “supernumeraries”) and who, by the end of the century, came to be regarded

as an important part of “the necessary plasticity of the stage” (Mayer 154 – 156). For Horne, then, the tyranny of the star is inseparable from the star’s corporeal presence, a presence that multiplies into the “long suite” of supernumeraries, professional craftspeople, and the “hundred tongues” of the press, as well as into the material surplus of “painted scene[s]” and “costume[s]” produced by his “upholsterers” and “tailors.” Here, as in *Aurora Leigh*, the collectivity and publicity of the theater is vulgar, artificial, and dangerous; dangerous in this case not only because it destroys literary drama, but because it is expensive. Horne’s list of “retainers” are all theatrical professionals who require payment; “puffery” and the “press” are part of an expensive, commercialized marketing system. For Horne, the material excesses of actor-managers lead both to the decline of drama as a form and to financial disaster.

In her fantasy of a bodiless theater performed on the “stage” of the “soul,” *Aurora* carries Horne’s distrust of actors and “the long suite of their retainers” much further, extending it to the crowds of “nobodies” who make up theatrical audiences. *Aurora*’s distrust of the “public taste” seems to echo Barrett Browning’s. In an 1841 letter to Horne, Barrett Browning refused to sign his petition to extend the licenses for “legitimate theater” beyond Drury Lane and Covent Garden, explaining that

There is a deeper evil than the licenses or the want of licenses—the base and blind public taste. Multiply your theatres, and license every one . . . and the day after to-morrow . . . there will come [the theatrical manager] Mr. Bunn, and turn out you and Shakespeare with a great roar of lions . . . If the great mass in London were Athenians, I might hope too. But I do *not* like giving my name to anything about the theatres . . . At their best, take the ideal of them, and the soul of the Drama is far above the stage; and according to present and perhaps all past regulations in this country, dramatic poetry has been desecrated into the dust of our treading. (*Letters* 46 – 47)

When he published his correspondence with Barrett Browning in 1877, sixteen years after her death, Horne declared that, in retrospect, he believed she was correct. When the Licensing Act was repealed in 1843, the “legitimate drama” did not take the place of the illegitimate theater but continued to succumb to its superabundance of scenery, fabric, and bodies.⁹⁵ In his introductory note to Barrett Browning’s letter, Horne complains that “‘legitimate drama’ has been smothered for the last twenty-five years by costly scenes, costly dresses, costly decorations, and licentious dancing; and by burlesques and clap-traps which are an insult to the human understanding.” Horne still holds out hope for the British playgoing public, declaring that “the public never craved for such stuff; it was forced upon them, till they came to believe that the British stage was intended to hold the mirror up to Folly and Vulgarity” (45). Aurora, however, agrees with Barrett Browning: the drama can’t be saved through licensing, or the writing of better plays, or the education of the public taste—only by eliminating actors, audience, and the spectacle of “costume” and the “painted scene,” until all that is left is the immaterial, disembodied “stage” of the “soul.”

Yet many of these aspects of theatricality—performance, the actor’s body, the theatrical spaces created by the “painted scene,” and costume—appear to be crucial to Aurora’s poetic project. In particular, both the poetics of “doubling” that Aurora develops throughout *Aurora Leigh* and the poem’s attention to clothing, especially women’s

⁹⁵ In fact, the legitimate theater became increasingly spectacular in the second half of the nineteenth century. While large “processions” and groupings of supernumeraries were common in the 1850s, Mayer shows that by the end of the nineteenth century stages were “decorat[ed]” with “lots (& lots & lots) of live bodies”—crowd scenes routinely included over 70, and sometimes as many as 300, extras (1550). Booth’s *Victorian Spectacular Theatre* describes the Victorian stage throughout the nineteenth century as a progression towards more and grander spectacle produced by costume, lighting, scenery, supernumeraries, and special effects, encouraged by “rapidly improving technology” which “inevitably impelled the stage to greater and greater heights of spectacular effect” (26).

clothing, evoke costume, performance, and the figure of the “actress”—as well as the theatrical materiality of early-nineteenth-century Poetess performances, in which the Poetess is depicted as an extravagantly decorated and multiplying figure. As my second chapter demonstrates, in texts such as Felicia Hemans’s *Records of Woman* and Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s gift books, material “attributes” such as hair, jewels, veils, helmets, and flowers purport to differentiate individual female characters from one another, but in fact the profusion of interchangeable objects throughout the collection produces the opposite effect: in Hemans’s poems, women’s bodies, including their hair, tears, and blood, often become indistinguishable from their clothing and accessories as well as from the surrounding landscape, while in both poets’ work the recurrence of similar objects and attributes across several poems blurs the boundaries between individual speakers’ identities. Instead, these texts produce sprawling group identities, tableaux of feminine and feminized bodies and objects that exceed the limits of a single self, or of one lyric or dramatic speaker. These visual, material tableaux invoke elements of theatricality—including props, “costume,” and the “painted scene”—that compete with the metaphor of “voice” most commonly associated with both lyric and dramatic poetry.

Aurora’s rejection of the theater might be read as a disavowal of this kind of visual, material Poetess performance, and an assertion of the primacy of the metaphor of dramatic “voice”; after all, in dismissing “actors,” “costume,” and the “painted scene” Aurora does not dismiss the actor’s voice. Her fantasy of a disembodied theater might be a theater in which *only* the dramatic voice remains—or in which the real or imagined voice is the conduit in an intimate exchange between the poet and an individual reader or auditor. Even as *Aurora Leigh* explicitly disavows the theater and implicitly disavows

this tradition of Poetess performance, however, the importance the text places upon costume, as well as Aurora's use of metaphors of *doubling* to describe her own—and the poem's—poetics, invoke the elaborate costuming and extravagant tableaux, as well as the multiplying bodies, of Hemans's and Landon's Poetess poetics.

If *Aurora Leigh* is not immediately obvious as a text preoccupied with theatrical costume, its investment in clothing is evident. The text abounds with rich descriptions of feminine clothing, as well as sartorial metaphors. Some of these, to be sure, draw an analogy between the restriction of women's clothing and women's intellectual liberty, as when Aurora wishes that, having “drop[ped] my cloak” and “unclasp[ed] my girdle, loose[d] the band that ties / My hair,” she could “but unloose my soul!” (V.1037 – 1039). Elsewhere, costume—particularly the act of dressing up as another person—is figured as an important way to connect to other women, as well as to participate in the circulation and creation of poetry. Aurora's admirer Kate Ward writes to her to ask for the “model of my cloak” (V.53); later, Kate's fiancé Vincent Carrington paints her wearing a cloak like Aurora's and carrying Aurora's book in a gesture that connects Kate's admiration of Aurora's writing to her style of dress. And Aurora herself initiates her career as a poet by crowning herself with a wreath of laurel leaves, participating, as Ellen Moers and Lootens have noted, in a long tradition of performative Poetess coronations from Corinne onward. To become a Poetess necessitates costumed performance.⁹⁶

Most importantly, perhaps, Aurora's description of “modern epic”—the poetic genre to which *Aurora Leigh* itself belongs—is not only intensely corporeal but

⁹⁶ See Moers's discussion in *Literary Women* of Corinne's and Aurora's coronations as examples of “performing heroism” (173 – 210) and Lootens's account, in *The Political Poetess*, of the same scenes—in addition to the dance performed by Poetess performer Fedalma in George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*—as “parallel scenes of interrupted Poetess performance” (21).

insistently feminine and lavishly costumed. While Aurora may agree with contemporary theories about Victorian theatrical decline, she rejects analogous arguments about Victorian poetry: citing Carlyle, Aurora refutes the idea that the Victorian era is “unheroic” and therefore an unsuitable topic for epic. Recalling the “philosophy of clothes” Carlyle describes in *Sartor Resartus*, Aurora places particular emphasis on clothing both as an index of modernity and as the embodied symbol of a particular age: “to flinch from modern varnish, coat, or flounce / Is is fatal, - foolish too” (V.208 – 210), Aurora declares, before exhorting the poet to

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
That, when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
‘Behold, - Behold the paps we all have sucked! . . .’ (V.212-218)

This famously corporeal passage, which horrified contemporary reviewers with its graphic description of the feminine “full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age,” seems a far cry from the “stage of the Soul” Aurora idealizes in her discussion of drama. Further, the phrase “double-breasted” suggests not only the bare and heaving breasts (or the more fleshly, even vulgar, “paps”) of the Age’s feminized body, but the “double-breasted” modern “coat” that might conceal it. The passage emphasizes the importance in *Aurora Leigh* both of costume as a motif and the significance of the poetics of doubleness that Aurora develops throughout the poem—a poetics that in its focus on the relationship between internal, spiritual truth and external appearance and action continually evokes the possibility of performance.

According to Margaret Reynolds, “a sense of doubleness, inside and out” pervades *Aurora Leigh*, both in Aurora’s own descriptions of her poetic theory and on the level of character and theme (11): the poem abounds with characters—Marian Erle, Lady Waldemar, Romney, Aurora’s dead mother—who function as doubles for Aurora herself, while debates between Aurora and Romney dramatize the conflict between the materialist and idealist sides of human nature. In Aurora’s poetic theory, the poet must exert a “double vision” that includes the “twofold world” of “natural things and spiritual” in accordance with the “twofold” nature of humanity, in which “nothing in the world comes single” (VII.762, 777, 804) and the “spiritual significance burns through / the hieroglyphic of material shows” (VII.860 – 861). By the end of the poem, this poetics of doubling allows *Aurora Leigh* to synthesize the seemingly incompatible philosophies of Aurora, the idealist poet, and Romney, the materialist activist.

As Linda K. Hughes has shown, Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* had a significant influence upon Aurora’s conception of this “double vision.” Aurora’s claim that “spiritual significance burns through” the material world to become visible to the poet echoes Carlyle’s fictional philosopher Teufelsdröckh’s assertion that everything produced by humans “bears the visible record of invisible things” and “is, in the transcendental sense, symbolical as well as real” (166). Aurora’s choice of the word “hieroglyphic” to describe the material world as a language or code to spiritual truths can also be traced to *Sartor Resartus*’s characterization of nature as a “volume written in celestial hieroglyphs” (195). While many critics have pointed out Carlyle’s influence upon *Aurora Leigh*, however, few have discussed the degree to which Barrett Browning’s “double vision,” like Carlyle’s, centers upon clothing. And none have pointed out the theatricality inherent in

the poem's preoccupation with both costume and *doubling* in general. While the connection to Carlyle's own hybrid essay-novel is a reminder that neither clothing nor "doubleness" is theatrical by definition—for example, to use clothing as an index or symbol of the modern age is as much a gesture toward novelistic realism as it is toward costumed performance—*Aurora Leigh*'s treatment of these Carlylean concepts is haunted by the doubling, multiplying bodies and objects of Hemans's and Landon's heroines and, in the poem's acknowledgement of the distance between *being* and *doing*, performance itself.

Close attention to the language of "doubling" in *Aurora Leigh* reveals not only the importance of costume as an analogy for the relationship between the material and the spiritual, but that performance is necessary in order to represent that relationship. The interrelatedness of costume, body, and soul is reinforced by the text's many metaphorical references to bodies as "doubled" clothing: the sartorial sense of "double-breasted," in which the body is imagined as clothing for the soul, recalls Aurora's earlier observation that "'I,' means in youth / Just *I*, the conscious and eternal soul . . . and not the outside life, / The parcel-man, the doublet of the flesh" (III.283 – 286). Here, Aurora gently mocks her own youthful disregard for the importance of the body: she once saw the body as *merely* a conveyance (a "parcel-man") or a piece of clothing (a doublet) to be treated casually, not the sacred repository of the soul. Yet the presence of the word "double" in both "doublet" and "double-breasted" strongly recalls the "two-fold" nature of humanity and strengthens the analogy between garment and body, body and soul. The figure of the "double-breasted age," then, becomes a *mise-en-abîme* of bodies and costume, a poetic striptease in which peeling away one "hieroglyphic of material shows" might reveal both

“spiritual significance” and more hieroglyphics. As *Sartor Resartus* implies, the soul can no more “outgrow” costume than it can outgrow the body. Instead, bodies and costume in *Aurora Leigh* can come to seem as unavoidably “doubled” and layered as the doubling, multiplying female figures and attributes in Hemans’s poems, in which “spiritual significance” is inextricable from the sentimental heroines’ mourning, dying, or dead bodies, and in which those bodies are indistinguishable from the jumble of crowns, tears, jewels, flowers, statues, and fountains that constitute the poems’ visual, theatrical spaces.

Aurora acknowledges the performativity suggested by such doubling of body and costume when she describes the “twofold life” of the poet, whose “part is both to be and do,”

Transfixing with a special, central power
The flat experience of the common man,
And turning outward, with a sudden wrench,
Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing
He feels the inmost: never felt the less
Because he sings it. (V.367 – 373)

This is an image of an expressive, even confessional, poet sincerely performing his feeling, “never felt the less / Because he sings it.” In its emphasis on the poet’s translation of interior feeling into the exterior performance of “sing[ing] and the gesture—however metaphorical—of “turning outward, with a sudden wrench,” this passage also acknowledges that writing poetry is *acting*—acting in the sense of “doing” or “gesturing,” but also in the sense that even when outward song is generated by inmost feeling, the feeling and performance are still distinct phenomena.

In this way, *Aurora Leigh*’s poetics of doubling is linked to the theater by its associations not only with costume but with performance itself. Discussing the

relationship between Victorian theater and the realist novel, David Kurnick identifies crucial moments when “the novel imbues its characters with the double aspect every character enjoys as a matter of course in the theater,” a “dual status as performer and as character” (14 – 15). The “making-explicit of this duality” is known as parabasis, a term taken from classical theater to designate the moment when the chorus addresses the audience without wearing a mask. Kurnick argues that in novels parabasis “heightens the spectators’ awareness of the fiction’s spatial and social grounding” and “socially substantiates the performance”; although the novels Kurnick discusses are, like *Aurora Leigh*, printed texts and not embodied performance, he shows that “in these moments the intimacy of novel reading is aerated with an idea of public space: we suddenly sense not only the crowd of spectators of which we are an imagined part but also the architectural fact of the space we imaginarily share with them” (15). In her discussion of the artist’s “twofold life,” of course, Aurora emphasizes the unity of what the poet *is* with what he *does*: her actor is one with the role he performs. Masking itself appears to be irrelevant to the problems that theatricality poses in *Aurora Leigh*—when Romney boasts that he and his working-class bride Marian will “wear no mask, as if we blushed” (IV.368), Aurora responds that self-delusion is more dangerous than social disguise. In acknowledging that “being” and “doing” are distinct, if related, activities, however, Aurora opens a space between the poet and his performance that creates the possibility of parabasis. In *Aurora Leigh* the unmasking implied by parabasis is less important than the duality created by the space between the actor’s feeling and the embodied gesture he makes toward his audience; but this gesture, like those in the novels Kurnick describes, invokes the “crowd of spectators” and the “architectural fact” of theatrical space. Throughout *Aurora Leigh*,

moments such as this one signal the insistent return of the “painted scene” Aurora hopes the drama will “outgrow.”

The terms in which Aurora imagines epic, then—doubled, even multiplying, embodied, costumed, intensely corporeal and material—owe as much to the embodied publicity and collectivity of theatrical performance as they do to print literary genres such as the novel (and indeed, as Kurnick argues, the novel itself owes many of its most familiar characteristics to the Victorian theater). Aurora’s poetics appear to be consistent with both the theatrical metaphors of early nineteenth-century Poetess performance and the actual performance practices of the Victorian theater. When Aurora discusses drama directly, however, both the heaving embodiment of the “double-breasted age” and the material adornment of “varnish, coat or flounce” suddenly become liabilities to be “outgrown” in favor of the “worthier stage” of the “soul itself.”

How are we to reconcile Aurora’s disgust for the collectivity and artificiality of the theater with the persistence of doubling and multiplying bodies, costumes, and objects throughout *Aurora Leigh*, particularly within Aurora’s fully embodied conception of epic? Can we read Aurora’s disgust for the theater as evidence of a misguided youthful fastidiousness, linked to the class-based disgust Aurora registers in her descriptions of the poor and working-class crowds she encounters in London—a distaste that Margaret Reynolds argues shows the skilful psychological realism of Barrett Browning’s portrait of Aurora as a sexually-repressed young poet whose ethics and aesthetics are still developing?⁹⁷ To some degree, perhaps; although the similarity between Aurora’s

⁹⁷ See Reynolds’s note on p. 124 of the Norton edition of *Aurora Leigh*: “Aurora’s (and EBB’s) unflattering picture of the mass of the poor has attracted a great deal of criticism from modern liberal critics who accuse them both of lack of sympathy. But that view does not allow for the stated fact that Aurora is troubled and disturbed here by her own unacknowledged erotic impulses, nor the very obvious fact that part of her

perspective and Barrett Browning's own professed opinions on the Victorian theater makes such a reading more complicated, my argument in this chapter assumes that Barrett Browning is aware of the contradictions in Aurora's attitude toward the theater, and that the poem's ambivalent stance toward theatricality allows Barrett Browning to work through some of these contradictions.

Could Aurora's disgust be explained merely as a preference for textual, rather than fleshly, representation? As readers, we receive both the modern epic *Aurora Leigh* and the Brownings' dramatic monologues as printed matter, detached through the printing process from the body of the poet(ess)—Aurora or Barrett Browning—who performed the physical gestures of writing the poem's words upon the manuscript page: the "I, writing thus" (l.9). Through the private and silent, and therefore interior, act of reading, both drama and epic play out upon the "stage" of "the soul itself," without the intermediary of "the caprice of the popular actor." Such a stance is consistent with Barrett Browning's interest in dramatic monologue and monodrama, textual forms which invoke performance but can be appreciated by a solitary reader—and which situate drama and multiplicity within the language of a single speaker or a single, disembodied "voice." Thus Carrie Preston has connected Aurora's description of her dead mother's portrait, which in Aurora's childhood seemed to shift from one mythic feminine archetype to the next, to nineteenth-century genres of solo performance, including the physical gestures of "attitude performance" and the textual "attitudes" of monodrama (45), while Barbara Barrow argues that *Aurora Leigh* "claim[s] disembodiment as a poetic and political strategy," emphasizing the "denial and disappearance" of the body in the service of a

"lesson" includes losing her own artistic arrogance and acquiring a more generalized capacity for understanding."

“revitalized political poetics” that compensates for the poem’s “disassociat[ion]” of “women’s language from women’s physical experiences” (243).

Yet *Aurora Leigh* insists so emphatically on the physicality of the act of reading and writing, as well as on the interconnectedness of soul and body, that performing bodies seem to linger even on Aurora’s imagined “stage of the Soul.” Siegel has remarked upon *Aurora Leigh*’s “deep commitment to the physical body” (73), while Jason Rudy has shown that “Barrett Browning’s poetic model” in *Aurora Leigh* and elsewhere “resonates with the physiological poetics of the Spasmodics” (181); in “telegraph[ing] a spiritual ideal through the palpitating, eroticized flesh of the poet’s physical body,” her work produces “a fully realized and corporeal electric poetess” (183). The poem’s insistent corporeality makes it difficult to read its performances as purely textual or disembodied.

Despite Aurora’s vow to “write no plays,” the book that she so performatively claims to be writing—*Aurora Leigh*, the book we are reading—is full of public, embodied theatrical performances that allow Barrett Browning to consider the problems and opportunities posed by theatrical collectivity and spectacle. Close attention to scenes of real or imagined performance in *Aurora Leigh* reveals that, although in Book V Aurora seems to reject theatricality on the grounds of its vulgarity or its artificiality—the “simulation of the painted scene,” or, as Carlyle might put it, theatricality’s insincerity—she is more concerned by the way in which theatrical spectacle renders the poet—especially the woman poet—vulnerable to exposure, misinterpretation, and exploitation at the hands of her audience. If, as Lootens suggests in *The Political Poetess*, and as Aurora herself implies in Book VII, Poetess performance is a striptease, to what dangers

might it expose the body or the soul?⁹⁸ Metaphors and representations of theatricality in *Aurora Leigh* allow Barrett Browning to test out such questions, even as theatricality itself often seems to threaten to exceed the limits of the text's testing ground. As the examples in the next section show, even the most solitary or textual Poetess performances in *Aurora Leigh* have not "outgrown" the dangers and pleasures of public theatrical spectacle; the Poetess has not moved to the "worthier stage" of the "soul itself" but lingers at the edges of the "simulation of the painted scene," unable or unwilling to get entirely offstage.⁹⁹

Performing as Poetess in *Aurora Leigh*

When we read *Aurora Leigh* with theatricality in mind, its seemingly solitary scenes of poetic creation tend to multiply into choral performances. Barrett Browning begins *Aurora Leigh* by staging a performance of the scene of Poetess writing, one that invokes crowds of actors and audience members even as it insists upon the total, almost overdetermined privacy of the scene of poetic composition. Aurora—whom we know, at this point, only as the performative writing *I* who has "written much in prose and verse / For others' uses" declares that she

will now write for mine, -
Will write my story for my better self,
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is. (I.2 – 8)

⁹⁸ The Poetess "partake[s] at once of the sacred and the profane, the Pythian shriek and the striptease" (*Political Poetess* 4); Lootens notes that Edmund Gosse described Barrett Browning's later poetry in terms of the "Pythian shriek" (216n23). See also *Lost Saints* 127 – 128 and 154 – 157.

⁹⁹ This description of *Aurora Leigh*'s theatrical Poetess recalls Lootens's account of "Poetess parallax," in which the Poetess is "obliquely seen, though never actually quite offstage" (*Political Poetess* 8).

Into the solitary act of autobiographical writing—an act in which we might assume there is only one I, the “I, writing thus” who reappears in the next line of the poem—Barrett Browning here inserts a dizzying array of actors. These include the present writer (the “I, writing thus”); the “better self” who will read or appreciate the poem as it unfolds; the second-person reader; the hypothetical “you” who paints her own portrait; the countless potential readers and writers indicated by the more colloquial sense of “you,” which refers to “one” or “anyone”; the portrait itself, a representation of the “you”; the reader’s “friend,” who no longer loves the reader, but who keeps the portrait as a tool for maintaining his own coherent identity; and finally the past identity of the friend (“what he was”), an identity that constantly threatens to detach from the friend’s present identity (what he “is,” now that “he has ceased to love you”) but that remains integrated into the friend’s present self by virtue of the portrait.

Discussing this passage in their essay “Lyrical Studies,” Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins argue that, although both Victorian readers and twentieth-century feminist critics may have been tempted to read “I, writing thus” as Barrett Browning herself—or, more generally, “as a woman”—“the gendering of this subject is complicated in *Aurora Leigh* by its overt juxtaposition of literary genres, making ‘I’ the symptom of conflicting conventions rather than the expression of a coherent self” (524). This juxtaposition of genres allows Barrett Browning to “meditate on the production of that generically gendered figure,” the Poetess (523). Prins and Jackson’s emphasis on the passage’s textuality is helpful: it is important to remember that this passage tells us nothing about Barrett Browning herself, or about the experience of any identifiable real-life “woman.” And many of the figures this passage invokes are metaphors or abstractions: the “friend”

who is in fact only a metaphor for the Poetess's "better self"; the "portrait" that is in fact the poem; and, as Prins and Jackson argue, the writing Poetess herself. Concentrating on these abstractions makes it possible to read the passage as an example of drama performed on the stage of the soul: a drama that encompasses emotion and conflict, without the dangerous personality of the star actor or the crush of real-life bodies required by a physical stage.

Despite the intense privacy suggested by the confines of the locked drawer and the intimate relationship between friend and portraitist, however, this passage also refers to an embodied action of writing that takes place in the presence of so many (imagined) figures that the performance comes to seem oddly public. As we read the passage identities collapse into one another and suddenly differentiate, shimmering between past, present, and future, evoking the presence of writer, reader, "friend," "portrait," and the many other figures represented in or suggested by the text. To the "collage" of print genres and texts that Cora Kaplan, along with Prins and Jackson, identifies within Aurora's writing (Kaplan 14), this chapter proposes adding performance genres such as melodrama and extravaganza—and the crowds of actors and audience members those genres require. The physical act of writing described in this passage, and the many identities it invokes and brings into being, is an important link between the figurative, textual performance we tend to discuss in Poetess studies and the literal, embodied performances onstage that Aurora claims to find so distasteful.

In this way, Barrett Browning hints at the possibility that *Aurora Leigh* is shaped by the choral, ensemble Poetess tradition, even in those moments when the text seems to epitomize private, solitary poetic creation. Despite the fantasies of authorial control

Aurora puts forth in Book V, Barrett Browning demonstrates throughout the poem that a Poetess, like an actress, never works alone, but travels with, to borrow Horne's phrase, the "long suite of [her] retainers"—the fellow actors, upholsterers, and audience members that make theatrical performance such an expansive, expensive, collective, and dangerous public endeavor. Nor does the relative privacy of the scene of writing protect the writer from anxieties about audience: the "I, writing thus" is keenly aware of the potentially changing affections of her audience, the "friend" who will one day "cease to love you." That this audience is described as masculine gives a gendered dynamic to *Aurora Leigh's* anxieties about audience. This is not to say that audiences in *Aurora Leigh* are always masculine, or that the poem's erotics are always heterosexual. But these gendered and sexualized relationships seem to play an important role in the appeal and the dangers of theatricality in the poem.

The gendered dynamic between feminine performer and masculine audience—and the anxieties and pleasures such a dynamic can produce—become more explicit in Book II, when Aurora the narrator—the "I, writing thus"—gives an account of perhaps her earliest performance as a Poetess, a performance which turns out to have been witnessed by her cousin Romney. The performance takes place on the morning of Aurora's twentieth birthday, when she playfully decides to "crown" herself with leaves "in sport, not pride, to learn the feel of it" (II.33 – 34). Musing aloud about what kind of leaves she should choose for her crown, Aurora decides on ivy; in addition to its boldness, strength, and seriousness—"as good to grow on graves / As twist about a thyrsus" (II:51 – 52)—ivy serves as a beautiful and flattering costume element for Aurora's debut performance:

“. . . pretty, too,
 (And that’s not ill) when twisted round a comb.”
 Thus speaking to myself, half singing it,
 Because some thoughts are fashioned like a bell
 To ring with once being touched, I drew a wreath
 Drenched, blinding me with dew, across my brow,
 And fastening it behind so, turning faced
 My public! - cousin Romney - with a mouth
 Twice graver than his eyes. (II.53 – 60)

Aurora’s playful, spontaneous birthday performance seems in some ways the antithesis of the artificial Victorian theater she derides in Book V. It takes place in the natural world “among the acacias and the shrubberies” (II.23) not in front of “the simulation of the painted scene.” Aurora is not an actor playing a part written by someone else, motivated by “prompters,” but a young woman moved by forces described in terms of their naturalness and interiority: “the June was in me, with its multitudes / Of nightingales all singing in the dark, / And rosebuds reddening where the calyx split” (II.9-11). However natural and spontaneous it might be—and however linked to the private, enclosed “dark[ness]” within Aurora, or to the secret eroticism of the not-quite-blossomed rosebuds—Aurora’s performance is still a performance, and a deliberate one. With its allusions to the crowning of poets in ancient Greece and Rome and to the “thyrsus,” a decorated wand carried by votaries of Dionysus, this passage recalls Greek religious ritual and classical drama. Aurora may sing out of necessity rather than affectation, “because some thoughts are fashioned like a bell”—but Barrett Browning’s choice of the word “fashioned” not only reminds us that these thoughts are themselves the product of artifice, but chimes with Aurora’s “fastening” of the ivy wreath she has “fashioned” herself to highlight the preoccupation with sartorial “fashion” and costume that runs through *Aurora Leigh*. Finally, Aurora turns, deliberately and playfully, toward an

imagined “public” in a replication of the very public crowning of *Corinne*, the germinal Poetess figure from Madame de Staël’s 1807 novel; this reference to *Corinne* is both another instance of the highly citational intertextuality of *Aurora Leigh* and an indication that Barrett Browning was well aware of the trope of Poetess as public performer. As a costumed, musical performance in which the speaker inhabits the immediately recognizable, even stereotypical role of Poet(ess), Aurora’s crowning also strongly recalls the highly conventional artifice of Victorian melodrama.

This association with melodrama is strengthened when, under the gaze of an actual spectator—her cousin, love interest, and intellectual sparring partner Romney Leigh—Aurora’s musical performance freezes into tableau:

I stood there fixed, -
My arms up, like the caryatid, sole
Of some abolished temple, helplessly
Persistent in a gesture which derides
A former purpose. Yet my blush was flame,
As if from flax, not stone. (II.60 – 65)

Lootens has shown that not only Aurora’s crowning, but the interruption of this crowning—the “scene of interrupted performance” (48)—is an important trope in Poetess performance.¹⁰⁰ By 1856, that interruption had a recognizable analogue in contemporary theatrical performance: Aurora’s gesture here is consistent with what Carolyn Williams calls the “pointed visual style” of melodrama, in which, “on the level of the acting body,

¹⁰⁰ For Lootens, Romney’s interruption of Aurora in this “joyfully citational pose” (*Political Poetess* 45) echoes similar moments in both *Corinne* and *The Spanish Gypsy* in which “a Poetess figure, poised on the verge of apotheosis, finds herself startled into responding to a masculine gaze and, thus interrupted, thrust into life-altering, artistic, erotic, familial, and national conflicts” (43). In this way, Romney’s gaze not only marks Aurora’s crowning as a public performance with an audience, but initiates a “crisis” within the poem over its own engagements with the “as-yet-unfulfilled promises of earlier British antislavery efforts” (45); the publicity of Aurora’s performance leads to a vexed turn toward the Poetess’s relationship to the public, political commitments and failures that underlie the Poetess’s seeming “privacy.”

sweeping gestures come to a point in the body's brief pose or 'attitude,'" while "on the level of the play as a whole, dramatic action climaxes in the frozen moments of the tableaux" (194). Aurora's melodramatic gesture begins as a brief "attitude" but is arrested by Romney's presence into a longer, more elaborate tableau invoking the additional, if currently absent, figures of caryatids—classical female statuary figures that Aurora imagines as supporting the "abolished temple" of poetry with an identical gesture to her own. Williams explains that music and tableaux in Victorian melodrama serve as

punctual markers of the narrative structure as well as guides for the audience's affective response . . . Audiences experience melodramatic rhythm as periods of suspenseful absorption pierced by intensified moments of shock, terror, or sentiment. (193-194)

The tableau of Aurora-as-caryatid elicits all three sensations. As an adolescent audience to her own now-embarrassing performance, Aurora expresses her shock at finding herself observed; her blush indicates her embarrassment, but it also marks this particular tableau as an occasion for sentiment, a turning point in the verse novel's marriage plot. In this moment, the reader and Aurora both inhabit Romney's amused, pleased male gaze, and the reader, at least, recognizes the erotic potential of Aurora's "pretty" costume, classical pose, and youthful blush—linking the scene to another important melodramatic genre, the drama of recognition.

For Aurora, however, this erotic recognition is inseparable from the terror produced by the recognition of a physical and sexual vulnerability that threatens her autonomy both as a woman and as a poet. "Fixed" in position, "helpless," and alone, Aurora describes herself in terms more appropriate for an encounter with the villain of the melodrama than the hero. The most immediate threat Romney poses is not to

Aurora's body but to her identity as a poet: having been observed rehearsing her own crowning as poet laureate, Aurora's gesture is exposed as both archaic and unearned. In comparing her crowning to the "persistent . . . gesture" of a caryatid supporting the nonexistent roof of a ruined temple, Aurora highlights the futility of that gesture: without the weight of a body of poetic work, Aurora's crowning is meaningless, and under Romney's amused and skeptical gaze the gesture is transformed from harmless play to a delusion of grandeur.

The link between the threat Romney poses to Aurora's poetic identity and the threat he poses to her legal or bodily autonomy becomes clearer later in the scene, when Romney finally proposes marriage: incensed that Romney thinks she could be "incompetent" as a poet but "competent to love," Aurora scoffs, "it's always so. / Anything does for a wife" (II.363 – 364, 366 – 367). Romney's gaze, simultaneously condescending and desiring, freezes Aurora into a "thing" unfit for poetry but perfectly "competent" to serve as a passive support for Romney's work as a reformer. Still later, Aurora imagines marriage with Romney as a purely transactional relationship in which he purchases her with the family fortune he controls and

might cut
My body into coins to give away
Among his other paupers (II.790 – 792)

or

set
My right hand teaching in the Ragged Schools,
My left hand washing in the Public Baths." (II. 795 – 796)

For Aurora in Book II, the loss of her vocation as a poet implies not only marriage but a transformation into theatrical publicity and passivity, in which she becomes one of the pieces of costume or painted scenery that she hopes to eliminate in Book V.

The figure of the caryatid also expresses Aurora's anxiety about the status of poetry in the modern era—especially about the status of poetry by women. If the female poet is now, like a melodramatic heroine, left alone and unsupported onstage, the fact that she is the “sole” remaining caryatid of “some abolished temple” implies that at one time in history poets—*women* poets—proliferated, and that Aurora's playful gesture once carried the weight of a robust feminine literary culture. Now these figures are nowhere to be seen; their presence is only implied by Aurora's gesture, and even in her imagination she can only see them as frozen statuary. This image—a solitary feminine figure in the pose of a Poetess, in the ruins of a temple where other Poetess figures should be but are not in evidence—recalls Barrett Browning's famous 1845 complaint in a letter to Henry Fothergill Chorley that “I look everywhere for grandmothers, but see none.”¹⁰¹ What has happened to the caryatids who should be Aurora's grandmothers? Unlike Aurora's mother, they have not even left a portrait behind. As performing Poetesses—like Sappho, Corinne, and other semi-mythic Poetess figures imagined by nineteenth-century writers—have they been first frozen into statuary immobility and then destroyed by the dangers of public exposure or the vicissitudes of public taste? Prins and Jackson would say that this is a moment where Barrett Browning reflects, as a Poetess, upon the “theory of her own apparent historical obscurity” (523)—a history in which the Poetess is continually being erased and recovered, and which is itself a product of the nineteenth century. After all, Aurora's self-crowning is actually modeled not upon a historical poet or a figure from

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Reynolds, “Critical Introduction” 557.

classical literature but upon de Staël's nineteenth-century fiction. For Margaret Reynolds, the disappearance of the caryatids might be further evidence of Barrett Browning's "experience of a personal anxiety of influence" which requires "allusions to works of female writers" to be "implicit" and not explicit ("Critical Introduction" 554). I want to further suggest that the abolition of the temple might constitute not only a rehearsal of the Poetess's obscurity and a reluctance to name individual "foremothers," but a specific disavowal of the choral nature of Poetess writing, of the many-bodied history of the performing Poetess as a figure—a history in which, as my second chapter shows, the Poetess was often represented as posed motionless in a tableau, a "thing" equivalent to the "things" around her. In insisting upon her identity as the "sole" remaining caryatid, Aurora distances herself from the ways in which nineteenth-century writers imagined the Poetess as proliferating figure engaged in collective, public performance, as well as from the real-life history of English women dramatists—a history that brings the roles of "Poetess" and "actress" in closer proximity than Aurora would prefer them to be.

This choral, theatrical Poetess tradition, however, reenters the poem through the figure of Romney Leigh. Despite Romney's avowed hostility toward poetry, as the poem's advocate for socialism and materialism, he also becomes, somewhat unwittingly at first, its advocate for theatricality. Like Aurora herself, Romney responds to her performance by invoking a classical past richly populated by creative femininity; unlike Aurora, however, he does so in an attempt to direct Aurora's attention from crowds of forgotten poets to crowds of living, suffering people. For Romney, relegating the age of Poetesses to the past supports his claim that as a modern woman, Aurora should abandon

poetry altogether. Conceding that Aurora may write “a little better” than “other women,” he explains that, in the modern era, “a little better” is not enough:

We want the Best in art now, or no art.
The time is done for facile settings up
Of minnow gods, nymphs here and tritons there;
The polytheists have gone out in God,
That unity of Bests. (II.149 – 153)

Here is a vision of a literary culture “polytheist” in its worship of minor poets alongside minor gods, one with room for the profusions of femininity represented by “nymphs” and Aurora’s caryatids along with the playful masculinity of “tritons” and the prolific, androgynous indeterminacy of squirming schools of “minnow gods.” The monotheist culture of Victorian England, however, has no room for anything but a bleak and monolithic Best. In her implied critique of Romney’s utilitarian aesthetic, Barrett Browning here anticipates Swinburne’s and Wilde’s complaints about the gloomy aesthetics of suffering privileged by Christian thought: the closest Romney comes to imagining a (male) poet for modern times is Jesus Christ himself. “We get no Christ” from the ranks of women, Romney declares, and “verily / We shall not get a poet, in my mind” (II.222 – 225). Yet Romney seems to have no great interest in monotheism or in Christ, either, at least in his divine form: he declares that “I, I sympathize with man, not God” and “feel with men / In the agonizing present” (II.294, 304).

This impulse to “feel with men” marks Romney’s rejection of poetry (and femininity!) as an embrace of theatricality. Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, Romney’s insistent turning toward the *crowd* links him—despite his stated impatience with the frivolity of art and the insincerity of “masks”—to the materiality and collectivity Aurora distrusts in theatrical performance. Despite Romney’s lack of interest in crowds of gods or poets, his

strongest arguments against Aurora's poetic career are made in the name of crowds of living people, of "men / In the agonizing present," and the material circumstances of their suffering. He invokes the "heap of generalised distress" as more urgent than Aurora's individual calling as a poet (II.383). While Aurora argues that the spiritual work poetry can do is just as valuable to the improvement of humanity as bodily necessities, telling Romney that "a starved man / Exceeds a fat beast" (II.473 – 474), Romney describes the "social spasm / And crisis of the ages" as a purely material problem whose solution lies in the easing of physical suffering. Despite his contempt for poetry, Romney is *Aurora Leigh's* poet of human bodily suffering: his descriptions of the enormity of human agony make use of some of the poem's most intensely, inventively, and grotesquely corporeal language. Romney's belated Victorian world is crowded with dead, dying, and suffering human bodies: it is "swollen hard / With perished generations and their sins" (II.262 – 263), where "the civiliser's spade grinds horribly / On dead men's bones" (II.265 – 266) and where

men alive
Packed close with earthworms, burr unconsciously
About the plague that slew them. (IV.386 – 388)

Romney uses this vivid language to argue against the value of poetry and, indeed, of the purely aesthetic pleasures of poetic performance; instead, he advocates the strenuous physicality and collectivity of work. In the belated Victorian age, where human suffering has reached such a fever pitch that "the sweat of labor in the early curse / Has (turning acrid in six thousand years) / Become the sweat of torture," there is no "time . . . to sit upon a bank / And hear the cymbal tinkle in white hands" (II.168 – 170). In this account, all poetry is feminized; by rejecting the delicate "tinkle" of a "cymbal" in the

“white hands” of a female performer, Romney suggests that the age of Poetesses is past precisely because the age of both poetry and conventional femininity is past. Romney believes that Aurora must transcend her attachments to both in order to focus on the more urgent work that the modern world demands of both men and women.

In asking Aurora to turn her attention from her individual vocation as a poet toward the larger “social spasm” of widespread human suffering—to “feel with *men*”—Romney acknowledges that this is work that feeling with *women*, or at least *as “woman,”* has not prepared her to do. Women, he complains,

generalise
 Oh, nothing - not even grief! Your quick-breathed hearts,
 So sympathetic to the personal pang,
 Close on each separate knife-stroke, yielding up
 A whole life at each wound, incapable
 Of deepening, widening a large lap of life
 To hold the world-full woe. The human race
 To you means, such a child, or such a man,
 You saw one morning waiting in the cold,
 Beside that gate, perhaps. You gather up
 A few such cases, and when strong sometimes
 Will write of factories and slaves, as if
 Your father were a negro, and your son
 A spinner in the mills. All's yours and you,
 All, coloured with your blood, or otherwise
 Just nothing to you. Why, I call you hard
 To general suffering. (II.183-198)

Prins and Jackson read this passage as a direct attack on Poetess poetics as practiced by Barrett Browning herself, noting that Romney's claim that “all's yours and you” is “a shrewd commentary on the gendering of sentimental lyric as a ‘feminine’ genre . . . and on the equally shrewd manipulation of its generic conventions by EBB in her own earlier poems” (“Lyrical Studies” 524). Prins and Jackson ascribe this “shrewd commentary,” of course, to Barrett Browning, not to Romney; they go on to argue that the seemingly

individual example of the enslaved, matricidal woman in Barrett Browning's "runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is in fact a highly abstract figure who does indeed personify "general suffering" (525)—as do the speakers of "Cry of the Children" and "Curse for a Nation," whose powerful political claims about "factories and slaves," as Romney puts it, are nonetheless made in the name of collective and not individual suffering.

Yet if Romney is, as Prins and Jackson suggest, a more "naive" reader of Poetess writing than "its seemingly unsophisticated female practitioners" (524), I argue that, despite his dismissal of poetic femininity, in Romney's focus on the material and corporeal he is himself an often unsophisticated practitioner of Poetess poetics. Romney is the representative within *Aurora Leigh* of the messy, crowded, theatrical, "polytheist" Poetess tradition that this dissertation takes as its subject—a tradition in which "Poetess" is always imagined as an embodied performer, as an actress. *Aurora Leigh*'s resistance to theatricality often seems linked to this aspect of Poetess poetics—the possibility of Poetess as multiplying choir, as endless retinue filling the stage with the relentless materiality and corporeality of bodies, clothes, sets, props, and other *stuff*. Both Romney and Aurora invoke this tradition when they contrast the rich creativity of classical culture with the belated, impoverished cultural landscape of Victorian England.

Although Aurora and Romney associate it with the distant classical, even mythic, past, the trope of a divine pantheon or a heavenly "choir" of Poetesses was common in nineteenth-century literary criticism, from William Ball's 1827 poem describing the "Crowning of the Living British Poetesses" by the muse Calliope to Henry Fothergill Chorley's 1845 boast in the *New Quarterly Review* that "no land has a choir of Poetesses like ours" (75)—a boast with which Barrett Browning disagreed, and which in fact

inspired her statement that “I look everywhere for grandmothers, and see none.” Despite Barrett Browning’s resistance to the suggestion that Chorley’s “choir” of English women writers were in fact worthy of the term “poet,” these references reflect a developing belief that Poetess was not a title for one famous female poet, but a role that could be taken on by a number of women for the furthering of national pride and prestige. And, as Chapter Two of this dissertation argues, these proliferating Poetesses tended to populate their own work with proliferating, interchangeable female bodies and objects that exceeded the limits of an individual speaking subject.¹⁰²

Like Barrett Browning, Romney registers skepticism that choirs of women performers might deserve the name of poet; but his embrace of these same “general” and “anonymous” crowds ties him to the theatricality with which Aurora seems so uncomfortable—and, as I hope to show, to the theatrical proliferations of the Poetess. To extend Prins and Jackson’s reading of Barrett Browning’s “shrewd commentary” on Poetess poetics, we might read Romney’s “all’s yours and you”—a “you” that might be simultaneously singular and plural—both as Romney’s naive misreading of the Poetess’s

¹⁰² These proliferating subjects include the ghosts and bodies of the enslaved women and imperial and colonial subjects that, as Lootens has shown, haunt Romney’s claims about “general suffering” and Aurora’s fears that Romney will “cut” her “body into coins”—fears which Lootens characterizes as “fantasies of white husbands whose violent corporeal expropriations link commodity Gothicism to crazed philanthropy” (*Political Poetess* 48). Aurora’s fear that marriage with Romney will objectify her—that she will become a thing that can be bought and sold, or violently “cut into coins”—already participates in a transatlantic white feminist tradition in which marriage is compared to slavery. The fact that in the same passage Aurora also imagines Romney might “change my sons for black babes” (II.792 – 793) makes this connection painfully direct, recalling what Lootens describes as “Poetess performance’s troubled, ongoing (self)location at the haunted, fragmented, ambiguously racialized ‘heart’ of empire” (48). The disgust Aurora registers, in this passage and elsewhere in *Aurora Leigh*, at the working-class crowds that the text links to unruly theatrical audiences suggests that the proliferating subjects of Poetess theatricality might also include these working-class “nobodies”: the “Paupers” in the “Ragged Schools” and “Public Baths.” A bodiless drama performed on the “stage of the soul,” after all, can neither produce “general suffering” or turn women into objects, because it has “outgrow[n]” both crowds and objects themselves. The victims and accomplices of British and American imperialism and of the slave trade, as well as the British working-class women who are more obviously visible in *Aurora Leigh*, form part of the choir of Poetess performances I describe in this dissertation, a choir that *Aurora Leigh* simultaneously erases and invokes.

inability to generalize and as a manifestation of Aurora's own horror at the sprawl of bodies that the Poetess can absorb or be absorbed into. The phrase serves as an ambivalent description of the leaky boundaries between Poetess and audience, Poetess(es) and actress(es), Poetess and living poet. If, as Prins and Jackson claim, the Poetess is an empty figure, she is also, as Lootens has suggested, an echo chamber that no writer ever inhabits alone—in which case the Poetess can also become a haunted house, a haunted theater.

To read Romney's sprawl as invoking a theatricality, even a brand of Poetess poetics, that Aurora resists further destabilizes the already unstable terms in Aurora's and Romney's debate—including Romney's own highly gendered worldview, which might not seem to have room for a materialist Poetess. The terms of this ongoing debate, beginning in Book II, can be mapped onto the contemporary debates Aurora addresses in Book V about whether the theater should be controlled by playwrights or actor-managers. Aurora's sympathies throughout *Aurora Leigh* seem to lie with the playwright, while Romney's investment in managing crowds links him to Horne's discussion of the actor-manager, who turns the theater into a "body without a soul" and who surrounds himself with a "suite of retainers" whose function is to embellish the actor and the stage with excessive material luxury. Horne's account of the actor-manager, however, reverses Romney's complaint against Aurora: in his extravagant attention to crowds of both bodies and material, Horne claims, the actor-manager only succeeds in glorifying his individual talent, and misses the universality achieved by the poet.

Romney Leigh is an activist, then, but also the type of the actor-manager described by Horne: a "body" to Aurora's soul, a materialist to Aurora's idealist, and a

practical reformer to Aurora's artist—but also an artist in his own right. Romney invokes the crowd in the name of “general suffering,” but by the end of the poem, several characters, including Romney himself, agree with Horne that Romney's interest in crowds indicates a preoccupation with the self that is characteristic of a “star” actor; in his efforts to provide an alternative to what he considers Aurora's Poetess worldview, Romney has become a Poetess figure himself, and has made himself vulnerable to the same criticism he leveraged against the Poetess in Book II. Rather than entirely condemning Romney's theatrical version of the Poetess, however, *Aurora Leigh* makes space for contradictory models of Poetess poetics. Understanding the relationship between competing versions of the Poetess in *Aurora Leigh* requires attention to Barrett Browning's staging of crowd scenes, and to the way the poem imagines collectivity and the conflict between the poet-dramatist and the actor-manager.

A Choir of Poetesses: Doubling and Multiplying Onstage and Off

When, in adulthood, Aurora becomes a well-known writer, she finds herself inducted into a community of women artists—what we might imagine as the Victorian version of the temple caryatids, made flesh. But this community is formed not through shared artistic goals, but through the predatory collection practices of the aristocratic connoisseur Lord Eglinton, who identifies women artists—including Aurora—as potential mistresses based on their public success as performers. In Book V, Aurora refuses to read a letter from Eglinton because

it is stereotyped;
The same he wrote to, - anybody's name,
Anne Blythe the actress, when she died so true
A duchess fainted in a private box;

Pauline the dancer, after the great *pas*
 In which her little feet winked overhead
 Like other fire-flies, and amazed the pit:
 Or Baldinacci, when her F in alt
 Had touched the silver tops of heaven itself
 With such a pungent spirit-dart, the Queen
 Laid softly, each to each, her white-gloved palms,
 And sighed for joy: or else
 [. . .]
 Aurora Leigh - when some indifferent rhymes,
 Like those the boy sang round the holy ox
 On Memphis-highway, chance perhaps to set
 Our Apis-public lowing. Oh, he wants,
 Instead of any worthy wife at home,
 A star upon the stage of Eglinton? (V.897 – 915)

In acknowledging her kinship to the actress and the dancer, Aurora acknowledges the degree to which Poetess is always actress. Aurora is linked to these performing women because they are all objectified by Eglinton, of course—because they or their work appears in public, he perceives them as receptive to his advances. But Aurora also seems to recognize at least some level of kinship with these other women performers. In “d[ying] so true,” Anne Blythe plays the ultimate Poetess role, performing an artful Sapphic fall that nonetheless reads as perfect sincerity, a “being” and “doing” that, as Prins has shown in *Victorian Sappho*, is no less poignant for having been repeated night after night. Aurora describes her own writing in terms of public vocal performance—albeit, once again, the performance of ancient religious ritual rather than the debased popular spectacle of modern theater. Aurora imagines herself as an ancient Egyptian boy singing to the ox, an avatar of the god Apis; if instead her verses “chance” to please the cow-like public worshiped by modern artists, Aurora implies, that’s not her fault.

Whatever their intentions, however, Aurora and her fellow performers bear the same relation to the public and to Eglinton: they are “stars” on display, to be applauded

and/or collected. Like the “popular actor[s]” of Barrett Browning’s letter, Anne Blythe, Pauline, Baldinacci, and “Aurora Leigh” are famous as much for their own celebrity as for their art: it’s Anne Blythe who “died so true,” not the character she played, and Eglinton seems to admire Blythe and Baldinacci for the effect they produced at Court rather than on the stage of his own soul. Despite their individual celebrity, and the wide range of arts they practice, these performers are interchangeable to Eglinton, deserving only a “stereotyped” letter and occupying the same space on the “stage” of his ancestral seat. If a performance by a “popular actor” can overshadow the power of a poet’s words, the celebrity Poetess also risks losing her identity when she performs herself.

Further, the example of Eglinton shows that it is not only working-class audiences who can be dangerous. The sprawling, capacious affect of this kind of Poetess performance—Romney’s Poetess who makes “all . . . yours and you”; Horne’s actor whose personality takes over retinues of people and things; and Eglinton’s multiplying, “stereotyped” stars—can be powerful, but it also makes women artists vulnerable to erasure and manipulation, a “doublet of flesh” that can be put on by another artist or taken up by the sexually predatory Eglinton. Whether it’s Aurora’s self-crowning ritual in Book II or the “stereotyped” role of “star” on Eglinton’s stage, public performance emphasizes the Poetess’s status as a “thing” interchangeable with other things. In refusing to perform for Eglinton, Aurora distances herself from collective Poetess performance and cements her allegiance to an ostensibly private and purely textual mode of authorship: sequestered in her garret, Aurora maintains greater control of her writing, producing a printed “book” that circulates through the second half of *Aurora Leigh* as a solid and immutable object that affects her readers but itself remains unchanged.

Aurora's refusal to perform on Eglinton's stage links her to another character who refuses to perform: the working-class seamstress and ambiguously fallen woman, Marian Erle. Figured throughout the text as Aurora's double, a potential alternative narrator for the poem, and one of Aurora's two major rivals for Romney's love, Marian's worshipful devotion to Romney marks her as a more compliant performer than Aurora. But Marian ultimately fails to perform her role in one of the poem's grandest theatrical spectacles: the wedding where the aristocrat Romney plans to marry the working-class Marian in a performance of cross-class harmony before an audience of representatives from both classes—a gesture that never reaches completion because Marian never arrives to perform her assigned role of bride (albeit because, we find out later, she is manipulated by the sinister Lady Waldemar, the other rival for Romney's love).

Characters in *Aurora Leigh* consistently describe Romney's planned wedding in terms of theatrical performance and display. Romney himself initially invokes drama to argue that his marriage, in its unrelenting authenticity, is anything *but* theatrical. Dismissing Aurora's offer to provide a home for Marian until the wedding as the offer of a "mask" to conceal Marian's humble origins, Romney insists that he and Marian are unashamed, and that Marian must be married "directly from the people" in "her gown of serge" (IV.368 – 375). Romney clearly intends his rejection of masks and artificial costume, and his insistence that Marian wear her own clothes, as a pragmatic, anti-literary, antitheatrical gesture. But his obvious pleasure in the symbolism of marrying a "daughter of the people," appropriately costumed in a serge gown, prompts Aurora to remark that "dear Romney, you're the poet" (IV.376). Not only does Romney embrace poetic symbolism over Aurora's more conventional, and no doubt more practical, offer,

but his desire to play the hero and his fascination with spectacle and appropriate costume connect him with the theatrical conventions that both Aurora and Romney distrust, as Aurora privately observes: she hopes that Romney will “beware / Of tragic masks we tie before the glass” (IV.378 – 379).

Later in Book IV, as the crowds wait for Marian to make her entrance for the elaborately stage-managed cross-class “spectacle” of her wedding to Romney (IV.758), Romney’s friend Lord Howe extends the trope of Romney-as-tragedian. A fellow aristocrat who shares many of Romney’s political sympathies, Lord Howe disapproves of the artificiality of Romney’s marriage, arguing that it corrupts love, the “one true thing on earth” (IV.747):

he takes it up, and dresses it,
And acts a play with it, as Hamlet did
To show what cruel uncles we have been. (IV.748 – 750)

Here, as in Book V, the problem with theatricality lies in its dependence upon staging and costuming: the effect of Romney’s socialist theater is heightened by the extravagant distance between the dress of his aristocratic wedding-guests in “cloth of gold” and the appalling degradation of the working-class guests “in frieze” (IV.538 – 539), whose coarse woolen clothing—in the mid-nineteenth century, frieze was associated with impoverished Irish immigrants—will link them visually to the more finely-woven wool “serge” dress that Romney intends Marian to wear. (Marian’s skill as a seamstress and her seemingly natural decency and respectability demands that her dress be a better quality than that of the morally-depraved crowd she is intended to represent—but that the raw materials remain the same.) Romney’s theatricality is the visual, material, spectacular theater that both Horne and Aurora reject, a theater that subordinates

language and literary content to crowd-pleasing spectacles—spectacles that themselves please crowds through the dazzling effects produced by huge numbers of lavishly-costumed bodies.

The spectacle of Romney's wealthy wedding guests in their gorgeous attire links Romney's wedding to spectacular theatrical genres such as pantomime, burlesque, and extravaganza, which often relied upon huge casts, elaborate costuming, and sensational special effects to dazzle audiences. By definition, the extravaganza prioritized visual effects over literary content, but in the 1850s the importance of the extravaganza's author's role had reached a new low: James Robinson Planché, the popular writer of Victorian extravaganzas and one of the only writers to approach the authority of a playwright in a genre usually dominated by "performers and technicians" (*Prefaces* 160) complained that he was "positively painted out" of his own productions due to the excesses of scenery and costuming that became popular for mid-Victorian extravaganzas. Theatrical budgets, Planché complained, were being wasted upon elaborate, show-stopping crowd scenes: one production spent "between £60 and £70 for gold tissue for the dresses of the supernumeraries alone, who were discovered in attitudes in the last scene."¹⁰³ In their "cloth of gold," Romney's aristocratic guests are supernumeraries decorating a scene in which Marian is intended to be the star player—a move that has the aesthetic effect of creating a crowd-pleasing spectacle and the political effect of creating a tension between the hierarchy of the stage picture and the hierarchies of class that Romney seeks to break down. Considering the wedding as an extravaganza that emphasizes costume makes it even clearer that, even if Marian once wore it purely out of necessity, her "serge" wedding dress is a costume intended to visually mark her as a bride

¹⁰³ Quoted in Booth, *Prefaces* 196.

“directly from the people.” In this particular spectacle, Romney is asking Marian both to perform as herself and to subsume her individuality in a performance of her class representativeness—before going on to subsume her identity in marriage. Like the “doublet of flesh,” the serge dress threatens to render Marian simultaneously too visible—a “star” vulnerable to an audience of supernumeraries in frieze or cloth-of-gold—and almost invisible. As a representative of the crowd in frieze, Marian would be another supernumerary—a glorified supernumerary in serge and not frieze, but a supernumerary nonetheless.

In this way, Romney’s efforts to address and represent the “general suffering” ignored by Aurora’s poetics have the unintentional effect of reinforcing the sufferers’ status as supernumerary “nobodies,” erasing their individuality and agency.

As Lord Howe implies, Romney’s theatrical staging and costuming are dangerous because they objectify and manipulate actors and audience. Howe explains that, like Hamlet, who stages a play to “show what cruel uncles we have been,” Romney’s marriage is intended “to instruct us formally / To fill the ditches up twixt class and class / And live together in phalansteries” (IV.752 – 756). For Howe, the church crowded with frieze- or cloth-of-gold-clad bodies becomes equivalent to one of the cooperative households, or phalansteries, that Romney hopes will help to close the social “wound” of Victorian society—both, in Howe’s formulation, highly artificial theatrical spaces that Romney intends to cram with spectators who are also, like Claudius in Hamlet, unwilling performers in a larger social experiment. The fact that phalansteries, or *phalanstères*, were associated with the sexual radicalism of their inventor, the French philosopher

Charles Fourier, makes Howe's depiction of their grotesque enforced intimacy especially unsavory.

Whether they are spectators or performers or both, the crowds filling Romney's theatrical spaces are certainly dangerous—especially the working-class crowds. Both of Romney's attempts to stage his vision of social harmony—the planned wedding and the actual phalanstery that he eventually sets up at Leigh Hall—ultimately fail, and both end in mob violence directed against Romney himself. When Marian fails to appear at the wedding, the working-class guests suspect foul play and attack Romney; the inhabitants of Leigh Hall, like unruly spectators or too-charismatic actors, take control of the production and burn the building to the ground, blinding Romney in the process. Barrett Browning depicts both scenes of violence with irony and contempt: the crowds of working-class people are revealed as brutal, selfish, and hypocritical, and many readers have been troubled by Aurora's seeming insensitivity to the poor and working-class crowds she encounters throughout the poem.

This mob violence seems to vindicate Aurora's contempt for crowds of working-class "nobodies," whether they are in the streets or in the theater; it also seems to support Aurora's resistance to participating in theatrical performance in any way, whether as author ("I will write no plays") or as a "star" on Eglinton's stage. This resistance also appears to extend to Marian, who refuses to perform her bridal role at the wedding, ultimately substituting a written text for her performing body by sending a letter explaining that she cannot marry Romney. Later in the poem, we learn that Marian's absence is the result of the manipulations of the scheming Lady Waldemar, who wants Romney for herself. But in deliberately withholding Marian from Romney's carefully

stage-managed scene, Barrett Browning allows Marian's absence to register as a refusal to perform working-class womanhood for Romney, just as Aurora goes on to refuse the role of "star" for Eglinton—one of many ways in which Marian functions in the text as a double for Aurora. Both Marian and Aurora, then, seem to refuse what Aurora describes as the poet's "twofold life," in which "the artist's part is both to be and do" (V.380, 367).

As Poetess figures who refuse to put their bodies onstage, Aurora and Marian seem to be protecting themselves from the violence of the "five hundred nobodies" who make up a theatrical audience. But the way that violence actually operates in *Aurora Leigh* complicates Aurora's characterization of the "hiss[ing], howl[ing]" public as the guilty party. Keeping offstage does not protect Marian from violence; when she fails to perform as a bride, she is almost immediately kidnapped and raped. Meanwhile, Romney *does* suffer violence at the hands of his audience—but as Lord Howe implies, this violence is mutual and multidirectional, a violence generated as much by the actor-manager's attempt to control the crowd as it is by the mob itself. The danger the theater poses in *Aurora Leigh* is not only to the poet whose vision is compromised by the charismatic actor or the whim of the public; it is also the danger the poet poses to her actors or her audience—the danger of a crowd of real people who themselves have been "stereotyped," reduced to supernumeraries or symbols.

After the failure of the phalanstery Romney sets up at Leigh Hall, Romney himself seems to recognize his reformist efforts as performance and the burning of Leigh Hall by his tenants as theatrical spectacle, implicitly acknowledging that Lord Howe was right that Leigh Hall would become both phalanstery and theater. Of his gradual disillusionment with his reformist projects, Romney tells Aurora that

the curtain dropped,
My part quite ended, all the footlights quenched. (VIII.464 – 467)

Further, Romney recognizes his own theatricality as inseparable from coercion and violence. Rebelling at last against his stage management, the residents of Romney's phalanstery take control of the production, just like too-charismatic actors or unruly spectators, and burn Leigh Hall in a highly theatrical spectacle that renders Romney himself an admiring audience member before it ultimately causes his blindness:

The flames all through the casements pushing forth
Like red-hot devils crinkled into snakes,
All signifying, - 'Look you, Romney Leigh,
'We save the people from your saving, here,
Yet so as by fire! We make a pretty show
Besides, - and that's the best you've ever done.'
- To see this, almost moved myself to clap! (VIII.976 – 983)

With its spectacular special effects—the transformative “red-hot devils” that “crinkled into snakes” are reminiscent of the pyrotechnic displays that nineteenth-century technological innovations made possible on the Victorian stage—this passage is a fitting grand finale for Romney's tragic political theater.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, we might read Romney's bitter account of his role as author, actor, stage manager, and spectator of this gloriously horrible scene as *Aurora Leigh's* final condemnation of theatrical performance and spectatorship. As we may have suspected all along, the “pretty show” is bad for actors, audience, and poet alike: it is produced by actors rebelling against the author's tyranny; it obliterates the author's work; it injures its spectators even as it compels them to applaud; and it destroys the theater in which it is set. As an art form that requires bodies—choruses

¹⁰⁴ Victorian melodrama frequently depicted spectacular, realistically burning buildings with the use of increasingly sophisticated lighting effects (moving from burning pans of “red fire” early in the nineteenth century to manipulating limelight at midcentury) along with braziers of smoking and burning lycopodium powder (Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre* 64).

of performers, crowds of spectators—to crowd together in close proximity, the theater encourages artistic tyranny, objectification of women, and mob violence. Romney's subsequent blinding might seem to be the ultimate indictment of his desire to create spectacle, and the definitive darkening of the theater in *Aurora Leigh*.

Yet although Romney curses himself for his own theatricality, *Aurora Leigh*'s insistently dialectical structure complicates readers' ability to agree with any character's interpretation of events—and the unfolding of the last books of *Aurora Leigh* suggests that Romney's theatrical days are not over. In his despair, Romney imagines the burning of Leigh Hall as his grand finale, but the final act of *Aurora Leigh*, his joyful reunion with Aurora, is yet to come. Like Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, whose blinding and maiming Barrett Browning borrowed for her account of Romney's fate in *Aurora Leigh*, Romney has to be weakened and made vulnerable before he and Aurora can be together; Barrett Browning famously explained in an 1856 letter to Anna Jameson that “it was necessary . . . to the bringing-out of my thought, that Romney should be mulcted in his natural sight.”¹⁰⁵ Humbled by the failure of his social theory as well as by his physical disability—and, as many critics have pointed out, feminized by the “mulct[ing]” of his “natural” masculine strength—Romney is finally able to recognize the error of his earlier disagreements with Aurora, who in turn is able to imagine a synthesis of both their ideas improved and strengthened by religious faith.

Romney's recognition of the artificiality and theatricality of his utopian community is part of this process; perhaps surprisingly, however, he does not reject the language of theatricality as he humbles himself before Aurora, but embraces it further. After an absurd series of misunderstandings in which reconciliation between Romney and

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Reynolds, “Critical Introduction” 340.

Aurora begins to seem impossible, Romney declares his love for Aurora in a long speech that he frames as both a spontaneous, involuntary outpouring of feeling and a highly stylized performance:

The most utter wretch
Will choose his postures when he comes to die,
However in the presence of a queen;
And you'll forgive me some unseemly spasms
Which meant no more than dying. (IX.471 – 475)

Here, the distinction between artifice and true feeling, masked actor and earnest lover break down. Even in the “unseemly” and seemingly involuntary death “spasms” produced by his “utter wretch[edness],” Romney recognizes that he has the ability to “choose” which “postures” those spasms take: his deliberate gestures resemble melodramatic “attitudes.” Feminized by his injury, performing a death that he characterizes as both artful and utterly, involuntarily, degradingly authentic, he comes to resemble the actress Anne Blythe, “who died so true.” In performing his own misery through a series of chosen “postures” and “unseemly spasms,” Romney fuses his own language of theatricality with the larger poetics of doubleness that Aurora has been developing throughout the poem, particularly with her theory of the “twofold life” of poets:

the artist's part is both to be and do
[. . .]
turning outward, with a sudden wrench,
Half agony, half ecstasy, the thing
He feels the inmost, - never felt the less
Because he sings it.” (V.367-374)

The theatrical “postures” and “unseemly spasms” of Romney performing Romney, then, are also Romney “turning outward, with a sudden wrench” to perform as a poet—or

perhaps as Poetess. Romney's "postures" and "spasms" recall not only Blythe, but Tyndale's 1531 description of the Maid of Kent, a "goodly poetess" whose body is "tormented" and "disfigured" by a Pythian possession that, in Tyndale's account, is simultaneously compulsive and contrived (Tyndale 92). In this moment, *Aurora Leigh* suggests most strongly that the "doublet" of Poetess performance is not exclusive to women writers, but can be inhabited by actors of any gender—and that if such embodied performances are dangerous, they can also foster generative connections between performer and audience. Romney's confession, after all, ends his misunderstanding with Aurora and allows them to admit their mutual love. Like Anne Blythe's, Romney's artificial death produces truth.

This theatrical confession—and the subsequent union of Poetess figures Romney and Aurora—is only possible after Marian, now a saintly unwed mother dedicated entirely to her child, releases Romney from their engagement, in a passage that further complicates our ability to read *Aurora Leigh* as an antitheatrical text. Marian's presence reminds us that for characters such as Marian, the antitheatrical narrative mode of *Aurora Leigh* can be as oppressive as Romney's style of actor-management. Despite the similarities Preston notes between *Aurora Leigh* and dramatic monologue, the poem's retrospective narrative mode is in many ways formally anti-dramatic. Unlike a play, in which each character speaks her own lines and no narrative voice is in evidence, or a dramatic monologue, in which only one character speaks, sometimes pausing for the interruptions of the implied auditor, *Aurora Leigh* proceeds like a first-person novel, in which all action and dialogue is reported by—and subject to the bias or faulty memory of—a single narrator.

In this sense, the verse novel is the perfect form for a poet who fears the loss of authorial control required by theatrical performance—and Marian bears the heaviest weight of Aurora’s overdetermined narrative control. All the dialogue in *Aurora Leigh* is reported by Aurora, the governing first-person narrator, and therefore theoretically subject to Aurora’s bias or faulty memory. But Marian is the only character whose speech Aurora admits to deliberately rewriting. Introducing the first of several narratives by Marian that appear within *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora explains that “she told me all her story out, / Which I’ll re-tell with fuller utterance” (III.827 – 828). Although Aurora presents this retelling as an effort to smooth out or supplement Marian’s uneducated speech, we can read it as an effort to exert control over a character who often threatens to become *Aurora Leigh*’s alternative narrator. Several books of *Aurora Leigh* begin or end in the middle of a long paraphrase of Marian’s narration of her experiences, as if Marian’s story itself resists Aurora’s careful structuring of her own poem and spills over the boundaries of each section.

At crucial junctures in the poem, Marian appears to resist this authorial control from within Aurora’s own narrative. When Aurora accuses Marian of “steal[ing]” her own illegitimate child—of conceiving him through sexual “license,” not within “God’s own barrier-hedges of true love” and marriage (VI.633 – 635)—Marian takes up Aurora’s metaphor and confidently, authoritatively corrects it: “I did not filch, - I found the child” (VI.670). Marian refuses any responsibility for the violent crime during which her son was conceived or for the compensating love and pleasure the child has brought to her; refusing Aurora’s euphemism of “seducer” for “rapist,” Marian asserts that “I was not ever, as you say, seduced, / But simply, murdered” (VI.769 – 770).

In Marian's final appearance in the poem she stages a performance for Aurora and Romney that allows them to confess their mutual love—more than making up for her failure to perform on her own wedding day. She appears on cue, as soon as Romney mentions her name—"I'm married. Is not Marian Erle my wife?" (VI.179)—and holds both their attention with her "thrilling, solemn, proud, pathetic voice" (VI.196) and Aurora's attention with her dramatic figure, illuminated and floating spectrally as if aided by some cutting-edge theatrical trick:

She stood there, still and pallid as a saint,
Dilated, like a saint in ecstasy,
As if the floating moonshine interposed
Betwixt her foot and the earth, and raised her up
To float upon it. (IX.187-191)

Marian's "pallid," "dilated," "ecstastic" body— a body that through its undeniable fecundity has already challenged Aurora's authority over Marian's text—seems to give her authority to override Aurora's narration and speak in her own voice. That authority is enhanced by the fact that she is playing a role: she speaks, Aurora notes, "as one who had authority to speak, / And not as Marian" (IX.250 – 251). Aurora's description of Marian here resembles contemporary descriptions of popular Victorian actors; in Michael Booth's introduction to an anthology of early Victorian drama, he cautions readers not to forget "the skill of the great actors in transforming what today seem pages of lifeless and unreadable text into *tours de force* which electrified audiences and stirred memories years after the event" (*Prefaces* 18). Booth cites John Coleman's description of a performance by the actress Charlotte Cushman in Edinburgh in 1847, which focused entirely on the magnetism of Cushman's body in her portrayal of a "poor demented creature whose face was transformed into the mask of Medusa, and whose eyes . . . glittered with infernal

fire.”¹⁰⁶ Like Marian’s, Cushman’s performance transforms her into an otherworldly creature, one who is “demented” rather than ecstatic and whose body “glitter[s] with infernal fire” instead of floating in moonlight, but whose physicality alone conveys an extreme psychological state and whose body is transformed as if illuminated by the vivid, supernatural effects made possible by the recent technological innovation of electric lighting.

Unlike Cushman’s, Marian’s ecstatic body and her thrilling voice may not be feigned, but she mobilizes them as part of a performance intended to elicit a particular response from Aurora and Romney while concealing her true feelings from them. First, she seems to demand that Romney acknowledge his commitment to marry her: “Confirm me now,” she says to Romney in a “thrilling,” hypnotic voice that draws Romney toward her with his arms outstretched, “You take this Marian, such as wicked men / Have made her, for your honourable wife?” (IX.193 – 195). Romney promises to marry her and claim her child as his own; Marian then “turn[s] toward [Aurora], very slow and cold” (IX.218) and demands that Aurora relinquish the narrative of Marian as a fallen woman who stole her own child. In her enthusiasm, Aurora promises to use her own high class status and reputation as a “woman of repute” to rehabilitate Marian socially: in “clasp[ing]” Marian’s hand with her own “pure” hand, Aurora will demonstrate Marian’s purity, and “as I’m a woman and a Leigh” will

witness to the world
That Romney Leigh is honoured in his choice
Who chooses Marian for his honoured wife. (IX.269 – 273)

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Booth, *Prefaces* 19.

Having established her control of the narrative, Marian changes her affect completely, transforming from a “pallid . . . saint in ecstasy” to an affectionate, emotional “spaniel” or “fawn” and correcting the narrative yet again: rejecting the class-based authority and conventional morality with which Aurora hopes to rehabilitate her, Marian invokes instead the value of “a human soul,” interchangeable with any other, whether “poor or rich, / Despised or honoured” (IX.328 – 329)—implying that one effect of the interchangeability and objectification of Poetess theatricality might be democratic equality. As for the marriage, Marian Erle is dead to everyone except her child, and she will never marry Romney. She ends her monologue by strongly insinuating that Romney and Aurora should marry instead, then vanishes, leaving the lovers alone together. Like Romney’s, Marian’s final performance calls attention to the disconnect between *being* and *doing*. Even though Marian never lies to Romney and Aurora, she uses a calculated series of gestures and speeches—implying that she might want to marry Romney in order to elicit his renewed commitment to their engagement, then relieving him of that obligation so that he is free to marry Aurora—to manipulate them into understanding the truth. Through the benign deceit of her performance, Marian is able to make Romney and Aurora see her as she really is—and each other as well.

Through Marian’s resistance to Aurora’s narratives, Barrett Browning acknowledges that the safety a non-performable text brings to the author comes at a cost: it may protect the poet from the demands of actors and audience, but the unreliability of Aurora as a narrator—revealed by her evident intolerance toward working-class crowds and her rewriting of Marian’s language and motives—makes it impossible for her to fully represent the world or to do justice to the other people in her story. Despite *Aurora*

Leigh's antitheatrical stance, the final performances of Romney and Marian register the value of theatricality as a form that can represent the crowds that monodrama or monologue can't account for. And in so insistently and affectingly performing their own suffering, Romney and Marian also invoke the figure of the sentimental Poetess, cementing the Poetess's status in *Aurora Leigh* as a theatrical figure. In performances that foreground the complex relationship between (spoken) language, visual gesture, and bodily feeling, Romney and Marian invoke a literary and performance history in which the performing Poetess might have been understood not as a solitary artist writing in a garret, but as one of a chorus of interchangeable supernumeraries. For Barrett Browning to assign these characteristics to Romney, a male character who critiques Poetess sentimentality, and to Marian, a figure whose seemingly spontaneous, "natural" gifts make her in many ways clearly legible as a Poetess figure, suggests a continuing ambivalence about concealing or revealing the history of the performing Poetess. Romney and Marian's performances invoke, provoke, and give voice to the crowds of "supernumeraries" and "nobodies" that the narrative voice of *Aurora Leigh* tends to suppress.

In the end, *Aurora Leigh* seems to find a compromise between the private, disembodied poetics of the "stage of the soul" and the public, claustrophobic chaos of the real-life Victorian theater with its supernumeraries draped in gold cloth, its retinues of uphosterers, and its "five hundred nobodies." The poem settles on the intimate duality of marriage, the actor/manager and dramatist each performing for an audience of one. The marriage Aurora and Romney ultimately achieve is emphatically not a conventional one in which the wife's identity is subsumed into the husband's in keeping with the legal

precedent of *couverture*; still less is it the nightmare of passive, public display that Aurora imagined in Book II, in which the actor-manager husband might instrumentalize, disassemble, and distribute his wife's body for the public good. Having lost the power granted by his male gaze and his inherited wealth, Romney is able to enter instead into a companionate marriage between equals—or perhaps a marriage in which the bride has the upper hand. Insofar as this feminist version of marriage depends upon the preservation of Aurora's individuality from the "five hundred nobodies" into whose service Romney may have wanted to press her, it also depends upon the elimination of the expansive, collective possibilities suggested by the poem's crowds of multiplying figures. As a corrective to Romney and Marian's disastrously public, theatrical wedding, Romney and Aurora's marriage pushes the crowds of supernumeraries and the audience of "nobodies" offstage. At the end of the poem, the lovers are relieved of at least some of their responsibility toward Romney's suffering crowds by the vague *deus ex machina* of religious faith. Recognizing the futility of their earlier debate in the context of the overwhelming power of God's love, Aurora muses that "if He cannot work by us, / He will work over us" (VIII.574 – 575), and Romney agrees that his own systemic interventions are unnecessary in a world where "HE shall make all new," including "new churches, new oeconomies, new laws, [and] new societies" (IX.947 – 949). Now that God has taken responsibility for Romney's crowds and ushered them offstage, Romney and Aurora turn their eyes—one pair sighted, the other pair blind—toward the intensely visual spectacle of a real sunrise, but focus much more strongly on a vision that takes place on the stage of the soul and that relies on textual, rather than visual or performative,

reference. Responding to “the thought of perfect noon” which “his soul saw” even if his eyes don’t see the actual sun, Romney

turned instinctively, where, faint and far,
 Along the tingling desert of the sky . . .
 Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass
 The first foundations of that new, near Day . . .
 [he] fed his blind, majestic eyes
 Upon the thought of perfect noon: and when
 I saw his soul saw, - “Jasper first,” I said,
 “And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;
 The rest in order, - last, an amethyst.” (IX.951-964)

By the end of the poem, Romney and Aurora are alone, encountering a vision that neither of them can physically see. The “jasper” hue visible in the sky is rapidly replaced by a vision of the New Jerusalem composed entirely of language: a Biblical text, read out loud by Aurora, with no visual referent in the sky before them. If Aurora’s final speech is a performance, it is disembodied and anti-spectacular—or rather a spectacle that is effected through language, on the private “stage” of Aurora and Romney’s “soul[s].” But in the wings, represented by Marian’s body, hybridized with the body of her baby; Lady Waldemar’s dangerously seductive body; the unruly crowds; the other doubles and objects and clothing that litter the poem—wait the bodies and characters and set pieces of the performing Poetesses they leave behind.

Chapter Four

“We Should Be *That Iago*”: Augusta Webster’s Lyric “We”

Augusta Webster called her 1870 collection of dramatic poems *Portraits*, but according to a review in the *Nonconformist*, the title is misleading. The poems, the reviewer explains, “are not portraits, but dramatic sketches,” since Webster’s “faculty of sympathy” prevents her from achieving the exacting objectivity required by “true portraiture” (416). Specifically, the reviewer claims that Webster’s “dramatic imagination” overwhelms her “critical faculty” in the poem “A Castaway.” The poem, a first-person account of the life of Eulalie, a contemporary high-class courtesan, is plausible as “the kind of pleading a pure sister might offer on behalf of a fallen sister” but implausible as a monologue spoken by an actual prostitute. Referring to Eulalie’s introspective account of her past, including a failed attempt to start a new life at a Magdalene refuge for fallen women, the reviewer reasons that “[t]he woman who had resolution enough to subject herself to so keen a torture as all this remembrance and self-judgment involve, would have been able to break away from her entanglements, and could have borne the discipline of ‘the Refuge’” (417).

Despite the reviewer’s distinction between the poems’ “dramatic” qualities and the pictorial or “critical” qualities implied by the collection’s title, this chapter proposes that for Webster, the “dramatic” and the pictorial share important characteristics. Primary among these is the ability to organize figures in space, rather than over time, and therefore to model and facilitate collective experience—a function that Webster extends to poetry in general. Characterizing poetry as a spatial form—and suggesting, in the essay “Poets and Personal Pronouns” from her 1879 collection *A Housewife’s Opinions*, that

poets use the pronoun “we” instead of “I”—Webster describes her work in terms that invoke the collective, theatrical assemblages produced by Hemans, Landon, and (more ambivalently) Barrett Browning. Through such assemblages, Webster replaces the “I” associated with both dramatic and lyric verse—the “personal pronoun” that poets “have to use” (“Poets” 155)—with what I identify as the “lyric we.”¹⁰⁷ Webster thus reframes poetry as a collaborative endeavor.

Further, Webster rejects the narrative, sequential logic that underlies the objections the *Nonconformist* reviewer makes about the plausibility of “A Castaway”—revealing that if, as the reviewer complains, Webster is not sufficiently “critical” of her poem’s speaker, she is highly critical of the larger social narratives that have shaped the reviewer’s understanding of that speaker.¹⁰⁸ In speculating about what the Castaway would have been able to do if she had possessed a particular moral quality, the *Nonconformist* reviewer invokes contemporary Victorian debates about fallen women, moral responsibility, and social reform. More specifically, in phrasing that speculation as a counterfactual statement—*if* a fallen woman had the resolution to produce such a self-searching text, she *would have been* able to bear the Refuge—the reviewer makes use of a moral logic that Webster’s poem actively works to question, criticize, and re-form. I call this logic, which focuses on the choices and contingencies that irrevocably shape the course of an individual life, “counterfactual thinking.” In her poems and essays, Webster

¹⁰⁷ My use of the term “lyric” here indicates a literary history in which “stasis” has come to be understood as a “lyric” quality—rather than a claim about lyric as a transhistorical genre. Any recent discussions of “stasis” as a feature of lyric are indebted to Sharon Cameron’s *Lyric Time*; in Webster studies, Emily Harrington has recently written of Webster’s manipulation of lyric stasis as a generic fantasy in “Appraise Love and Divide.” For a longer discussion of lyric as a genre, see note 124 below.

¹⁰⁸ See Glennis Byron’s work on dramatic monologues by Victorian women, in which she argues that, while critics such as Dorothy Mermin have interpreted women poets’ “sympathy” for their speakers as a lack of irony (“The Damsel” 76), such readings ignore the fact that the “target” of many women poets’ irony is in fact “the systems that produce the speakers” (“Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue” 87).

proposes an alternative use for the counterfactual statement, using it to model a reader's radical sympathy for and identification with a literary character and producing a temporary, synchronic union of poet, reader, and character—a "lyric 'we'"—through a process that I call "counterfactual sympathy."

This chapter traces the development of Webster's poetics of the lyric "we"—from *Portraits*, in which Webster experimented with the use of "we" as an alternative to the "I" most often associated with both lyric and dramatic poetry, through *A Housewife's Opinions*, in which she codified these ideas into an extensive social and poetic theory grounded in counterfactual sympathy and the values of simultaneity and mutual accommodation—in order to demonstrate that, for Webster, the writing and reading of poetry is a collective, collaborative act that models the creation of communities and can lead to social reform. Webster's emphasis on the stasis and "simultaneity" of poetry—as opposed to the branching narrative options offered by conventional counterfactual thinking—figures the poem as a three-dimensional space that can accommodate multiple actors, readers, and writers. The simultaneous, collaborative, theatrical space of the poem becomes a model for social life, while the figure of the "housewife" that Webster constructs in her essay collection can be read as a Poetess figure whose performances in the surprisingly public, expansive domestic spaces of late-Victorian London make visible both the middle-class conservatism and the potential for radicalism within the history of Poetess theatricality.

I begin by considering the counterfactual statements in "A Castaway" and "Poets and Personal Pronouns" to show how Webster's dramatic poems served as a testing ground for the theories of reform and social thought that she went on to develop in her

essays. Eulalie in “A Castaway,” attempting to imagine an alternative reality in which she might not have “fallen” or been “cast away,” tests multiple solutions to the problem of prostitution by incorporating them into a series of counterfactual statements and questions. Ultimately she rejects counterfactual thinking as unproductive, as do the speakers in many of the other poems in *Portraits*. Webster presents a more optimistic version of the counterfactual, however, in “Poets and Personal Pronouns,” using the “if . . . then” structure of the counterfactual statement to describe the process by which reading poetry can transform poets, speakers, and readers into imaginative communities. Critical attention to the essay has focused primarily on Webster’s trenchant assertion that “as a rule, I does not mean I” and her repudiation of Victorian autobiographical reading practices.¹⁰⁹ Equally important, however, are two aspects of the essay that until now have remained underexplored: Webster’s recommendation that poets use the pronoun “we”—specifically the “editorial We”—in place of “I” (155) and the essay’s strange vision of readerly sympathy.¹¹⁰ Assigning the collective pronoun “we” not only to the poet but to the community of the poem’s readers, Webster uses a series of counterfactual statements to describe a reading practice by which we the readers fuse into one of the most unsympathetic and apparently unmotivated characters in literature: Shakespeare’s Iago. In her insistence on the “we” and on poetry’s power to transform the collective imagination of its readership, Webster advocates for a poetics of counterfactual sympathy that aims to replace the conventional counterfactual thinking that the speakers in “A Castaway” and the other poems in *Portraits* so vehemently reject.

¹⁰⁹ “Poets” 154. The phrase, in fact, became the title of Kate Flint’s essay on women poets and the dramatic monologue, “. . . As a Rule, I Does Not Mean I”: Personal Identity and the Victorian Woman Poet.”

¹¹⁰ Exceptions include Flint, “As a Rule”; and Harrington, “Appraise Love and Divide.”

In the second part of this chapter, I show how Webster continues to develop her poetics of counterfactual sympathy throughout the rest of the essays in *A Housewife's Opinions*. Webster demonstrates that counterfactual sympathy, in broadening readers' social imaginations and emphasizing an inclusive, collective "we" rather than an individual "I," facilitates harmonious social relationships and makes large-scale social reform possible. Further, counterfactual sympathy's impact as a force for social and political reform is inextricable from its role in facilitating aesthetic appreciation.

Finally, I turn to the generic implications of Webster's lyric "we" and the figure of the "housewife," showing that Webster's understanding of the "we" as primarily *lyric* helps us understand the relationship between the dramatic poems for which she is best known and the more obviously lyric forms to which she turned at the end of her career. Reading Webster's "dramatic" and "lyric" poems alike as expansive, accommodating "households" demonstrates their shared commitment to collectivity and what we might call "lyric stasis," and suggests the social potential inherent in the Poetess tableaux imagined by Hemans and Landon, a potential anticipated but dismissed by *Aurora Leigh* in its treatment of the (appalling) public intimacy of Romney's phalansteries. Understanding the lyric collectivity of Webster's most famous dramatic poems reveals the continuing influence of Poetess theatricality during the second half of the nineteenth century, and suggests the ways in which poets made use of theatrical form for explicitly social and political ends.

The Counterfactual Castaway

While critics have usefully pointed out the ways in which "A Castaway" addresses contemporary Victorian debates about prostitution, women's work and

education, and the Woman Question in general, I argue that Webster engages with these discourses not only thematically but on the level of the sentence. Examining Webster's own use of the counterfactual statement in *Portraits* and in the essays that she collected in 1879 under the title *A Housewife's Opinions* reveals her own preference for a specifically poetic version of counterfactual thinking, a mode I refer to as "counterfactual sympathy." In this mode, readers' identification with and radical sympathy for a poetic speaker produce expanded imaginative communities in which the individual "I" is replaced by a collective "we" through the reading of poetry.

Syntactically, a counterfactual statement is a particular kind of conditional sentence, an *if/then* statement that, as the editors of the arts magazine *Triple Canopy* explain in a recent issue on literary counterfactuals, has the "the unusual effect of causing past-tense forms to read in a capacious—even paradisiacal—present tense; such a conditional is defined by the fact that a speaker presupposes the proposition given in the *if* clause to be false."¹¹¹ Among the many counterfactual statements Eulalie makes in "A Castaway," a particularly concrete and poignant example arises when she imagines the possibility of redemption through female solidarity:

I think indeed
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)

If some kind hand had appeared, *then* Eulalie would have had a chance to move forward along the "firm ground" of redemption. Since there was no hand, the counterfactual sentence implies, there was no help, and Eulalie is not standing on firm ground: the

¹¹¹ Frank et al. "A Note on Counterfactuals."

sentence tantalizingly summons up hand, help, and firm ground only to relegate them to the land of missed opportunities.

The counterfactual encourages us to contemplate what might have been or what almost happened. It invokes the optative mode—in the words of Andrew H. Miller, a retrospective “mode of self-understanding” in which we are aware of the ways in which our lives could have been different (774). As Miller points out, even as the optative focuses on the course an individual life has taken, it also mediates between the self and the social whole, encouraging us to think about the choices, accidents, and contingencies that differentiate an individual person from countless other people with whom he or she has something in common, any one of whom, had things been different, he or she might have become instead. Because the optative negotiates in this way between the particularity of individual characters and the generality of literary “types” and because it is an especially important motivation in three areas of middle-class modern life that are central to Victorian novels—the “choice of career within an exchange economy promising social mobility; marriage; and the loss of a child” (788)—Miller argues that the optative has a “privileged relation to realistic fiction” (781).

Webster’s essay “Poets and Personal Pronouns,” in contrast, associates counterfactual statements with dramatic poetry; in the counterfactual’s invocation of alternative realities, it allows Webster to describe the imaginative leap that, she claims, is required of poets and their readers. In the essay, Webster decries the tendency of “the general public” to read poetry autobiographically. The root of this misconception lies in the “personal pronoun” that poets “have to use”; despite the fact that literary tradition demands that poets use the pronoun “I,” Webster argues that poets, unlike novelists,

almost never make use of themselves or other real-life people as models for their work (155). While Webster discourages the use of such models, or “lay-figures,” in fiction as well as in poetry, she recognizes that the novelist must rely heavily on observations of particular real-life people, since readers expect a “minute definiteness” from the characters in a novel. Readers of poetry, on the other hand, demand a “full conception of character” that, even in poems about historical or contemporary figures, transcends the particularity of time and space (150).

Webster is not arguing that the figures in poems are timeless or universal in their appeal; her model is stranger and more complicated. She explains the poet’s function using a dazzling series of increasingly implausible counterfactual statements: “We look to the poet,” she explains, “for feelings, thoughts, actions if need be, represented in a way which shall affect us as the manifest expression of what our very selves must have felt and thought and done if we had been those he puts before us and in their cases.” The poet “must make us feel . . . what no circumstances could possibly call out in us. . . . [H]e 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.” And finally, “Not many have it in us to be Iagos,” but when we read *Othello*, “we feel sure that, if we were to be an Iago, we should be *that* Iago” (151 – 152). Webster emphasizes the way in which reading poetry can close the sometimes alienating distance between character and reader, choosing as her example Shakespeare’s least redeemable villain, one whose motivations are notoriously opaque.

The counterfactual often belongs to the realm of the speculative, the unproven, the paradisiacal, the utopian, but Webster’s counterfactuals in this essay are especially

outrageous. *If* we had been a character in a poem, we would have felt and thought and done the things this character feels and does. *If* we had been capable of thinking about committing murder, we would have felt these sensations. *If* we were to be *an* Iago, we should be *that* Iago. With this last claim, Webster is asking readers of poetry to take a tremendous leap and poets to make that leap possible: if I am myself and not Iago, how could I know *which* Iago I would be if I were to suddenly stop being myself? In Webster's account of the relationship between the reader and Iago, she associates both poetry and the counterfactual with an utterly transformative form of sympathy that the "minute definiteness" of the novel does not make possible.

The pronouns Webster uses in this passage demonstrate that, for her, this transformation is a collective one. It is no coincidence that Webster ends this particular essay, in which she has imagined multiple readers becoming "*that* Iago," by recommending that poets use "we" instead of "I." Critics interested in the tension between the "mask" of dramatic monologue and the concealed self of the poet have tended to focus on another of Webster's tongue-in-cheek solutions to the problem of autobiographical reading: that poets should use a "big I" when writing *in propria persona* and a "little i" to indicate "a modest disclaimer of the writer's personality in the matter." But—despite her concern that readers might confuse the "editorial We" for the "particular *she* and *I*" of conventional love lyric—the "editorial pronoun, the 'We' and the 'Our' and the 'Us,'" is the term Webster ultimately "recommend[s]" for the "future protection" of poets (p. 156).

Taken together, this "editorial We" and the "we" who "should be *that* Iago" imply that, for Webster, neither poet nor reader is a solitary "I." In claiming that "not many

have it in us to be Iagos,” Webster invokes the wide audience of readers who will almost inevitably feel alienated from Iago’s actions. Further, she summons up a universe of counterfactual “Iagos,” only to transform Iago into a “type” (*an Iago*) and then into an individual (“*that Iago*”). But “*that Iago*,” for all his particularity, contains multitudes. The “we” who could never be multiple separate Iagos unite in “*that Iago*,” forming many potential communities: the reader and Iago, the reader and Shakespeare, all the readers who have ever been united by their identification with Iago. I call this collective, transformative sympathy, which Webster never explicitly names, “counterfactual sympathy,” distinguishing it from the conventional counterfactual thinking that Webster associates with realist fiction and Victorian discourses of social reform.

The *Nonconformist* reviewer’s counterfactual-conditional statement, then, is the logical opposite of the one Webster would use in “Poets and Personal Pronouns.” Instead of “If we had had it in us to be an Iago, we should be *that Iago*,” the reviewer claims that “If the Castaway had been *this* Castaway, *this* Castaway wouldn’t exist”: either she would have “borne the discipline of the Refuge” and been reformed, eliminating the occasion for the poem, or she would have been able to bear *neither* the discipline of the Refuge *nor* the sustained self-examination that constitutes the poem’s form. In claiming that Webster ignores the putatively observable reality that vicious living degrades the capacity for moral thought, the reviewer is holding Webster to standards of verisimilitude that, for Webster, belong only to the novelist. At the same time, the reviewer seems incapable of—or merely uninterested in—the complex moral imagination that Webster demands of her reader. For Webster to bring too much of herself, “a pure sister,” into her depiction of Eulalie, “a fallen sister,” is not a failure of the “critical faculty” but a leap

into radical counterfactual sympathy. To read “A Castaway” correctly is to see what counterfactual sympathy—the sense that “we should be *that* Iago”—looks like in practice. Because of Webster’s counterfactual sympathy, we would be “*that* Eulalie.”

That Eulalie is busy imagining a world where, as a result of institutional changes or personal choices, she might have been a different Eulalie. She searches her past systematically, looking for turning points at which the “good girl” of the childhood diary she peruses at the beginning of the poem could have avoided becoming “me / Who am . . . me” (ll. 7, 25 – 26). In doing so, she invokes a number of overlapping contemporary Victorian discourses that intersected at the figure of the “fallen woman.”¹¹² As we know, questions about the contingencies leading to the “Great Social Evil” of prostitution preoccupied Victorian lawmakers, social thinkers, activists, novelists, and poets, particularly in the years following the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864: did prostitution present women with an appealing, seemingly luxurious alternative to hard but honest labor, or was it the only livelihood available to a certain category of “redundant” woman? Could prostitution be eradicated if women had access to better education or spiritual training, or was it an inevitable practice that could be regulated but never eliminated?¹¹³ Such questions, like the *Nonconformist* reviewer’s inquiry about whether Eulalie could have plausibly “borne the discipline of ‘the Refuge,’” are a form of counterfactual thinking. Eulalie herself points this out, characterizing Victorian debates about prostitution as the speculation of “wise ones” who debate over “cause” and “cure,” locating “blame” in “society . . . or law, / The Church, the men, the women, too few

¹¹² In 1870, the term “fallen woman” referred to any woman engaged in illicit sexual activity, whether or not she exchanged sex for money. On the figure of the fallen woman, see Elizabeth Helsinger et al., *The Woman Question*.

¹¹³ For a full discussion of these debates, see Judith Walkowitz’s *Prostitution and Victorian Society*.

schools, / Too many schools, too much, too little taught” (ll. 289–293). Through the figure of a castaway, in other words, Webster evokes an optative understanding of social problems through which different social arrangements, with fewer social evils, might be glimpsed.

Most of the poem’s counterfactual statements engage with a specifically personal, literary discourse of the fallen woman. In beginning the poem with the question of how the “good girl” of the diary became the unnamable, perhaps unspeakable, “me” of the present moment, Webster invokes familiar Victorian narratives in which good girls with middle-class values fall or are ruined, narratives whose poignancy comes from the fantasy that, through some choice of her own or some timely intervention on the part of another person, the fallen woman could have been saved. In telling the story of a fallen woman, then, each counterfactual is almost literally paradisiacal: if this moment had been different, this particular woman would not have fallen. In presenting Eulalie’s story as shaped by a succession of crucial “forks in the road,” Webster positions Eulalie as the protagonist of such a narrative, a Pip or a Tess who is defined by the different lives she did not lead but could have led. Indeed, the experiences Eulalie imagines as potential turning points in her life often correspond to the three areas Miller attributes to the novelistic optative: capitalist markets and career choice; marriage; and the lost child.¹¹⁴ In a series of counterfactual musings, Eulalie hypothesizes that if one or another thing had happened, she “might have struggled back”: if she had invested her earnings in the stock market; if she had pursued an alternative career doing needlework; if she had been married; if the child she bore had lived and given her the sanctified status of mother.

¹¹⁴ For more on the novelistic counterfactual and the “fork in the road,” see Miller, “Case of Metaphysics” 779.

The poem, however, resists the counterfactual logic underlying such familiar Victorian narratives. Having opened up the possibility of these counterfactual lives, lives in which she remains unfallen or has been reformed and redeemed, Eulalie immediately rejects each one as practically or morally impossible. She is not a good enough seamstress to compete in a market glutted with female laborers, and even if she did find some other work—“[w]ith the marts for decent women overfull, / If I could elbow in and snatch a chance”—she would by necessity “oust some good girl . . . who then perforce / Must come and snatch her chance among our crowd” (275 – 278). As for her fantasy of “some kind hand, a woman’s,” Eulalie dismisses it as flatly impossible: “But let her be all brave, all charitable / How could she do it?” (262 – 263).

In rejecting the possibility of forks in the road, Eulalie halts the narrative energy they might have brought to her story. Rather than tracing a fallen-woman plot from innocence to corruption, the poem rests in a state of lyric stasis, focused not on the lives Eulalie could have lived but on the present-tense reality of “me / Who am . . . me.” “A Castaway” is dramatic insofar as it ends with a dramatic encounter with a visitor and narrative insofar as it includes the details of Eulalie’s life story, but it is lyric insofar as it emphasizes the tautology of the “personal pronoun” that, according to Webster, poets “have to use.”¹¹⁵ In invoking a “me” who exists simply by virtue of being a “me,” the poem refuses to provide a referent for that personal pronoun outside the text itself. The “me / Who am . . . me” is emphatically *not* one of the alternative selves proposed by the poem’s many counterfactuals; nor is it the “minute[ly] definite” protagonist of a novel,

¹¹⁵ As recent criticism has shown, of course, poetry is rarely (if ever) “purely” lyric, dramatic, or narrative. See, for example, Herbert F. Tucker’s “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric” and Patricia Rigg’s “Augusta Webster: The Social Politics of Monodrama.”

defined in opposition to the many lives she could have lived. Nor—to return to Webster’s argument against autobiographical reading practices—is this “me” Webster herself or a real-life sex worker Webster met. Instead, this is a “me” whose identity other than “me” may be unspeakable not only because of Eulalie’s reluctance to utter the word “whore” but because of its total lyric abstraction, its status as a pronoun with no referent outside the poem. After all, a “me / Who am [only] me” is not so different from the “I” that “does not mean I” of “Poets and Personal Pronouns.”

Yet Eulalie is not quite the lyric figure of the Poetess, as described by Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson: “not a speaker, not an ‘I,’ not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self” (“Lyrical Studies” 523). To the contrary, Eulalie’s “me / Who am . . . me” can be read as an almost aggressive celebration of self, of the woman who does exist. It registers the intense pleasure of *being* a self in the present moment—a pleasure that may be shared by the reader, both in the aesthetic pleasure that the poem provides and the reader’s own possible counterfactual transformation into *this* “me / Who am . . . me.” After all, in Webster’s account of counterfactual sympathy in “Poets and Personal Pronouns,” even as readers move *outside* themselves, they are paradoxically returned to themselves. In becoming “*that* Iago,” readers enter a radically counterfactual world in which sympathy with the other ultimately becomes sympathy with oneself. The “we” collapses back into an “I,” a single self, an Iago or a Castaway.

Still, the “we,” even collapsed, is always present. These indefinite articles—*an* Iago, *a* Castaway—make it impossible to forget that the single self is part of a larger whole. Like a character in a novel or a dramatic monologue, Eulalie has a proper name to differentiate her from a social background made up of other people of the same class or

type. But her name is mentioned only once in the poem, while the poem's title designates her as a type—a Castaway.¹¹⁶ Eulalie's fate is tied to the "we" as much as to the "I"; her identity as a type itself shuts down the possibilities for individual prevention or redemption that her counterfactual statements open up. As Eulalie herself points out, if this particular woman had not fallen, some other "good girl"—some new castaway—would have; meanwhile, throughout the poem, Eulalie frequently refers to herself and other sex workers as "we," invoking cross-class solidarity with "any drab / Who sells herself as I"; "Our traffic's one" (68 – 69, 76). In this way, the extent to which counterfactual sympathy is always collective becomes clear: unlike a character in a novel, Webster's individual "me / Who am . . . me" does not define itself *against* the social whole. The lyric stasis of Webster's poetry focuses our attention on the individual who exists now—the deictic "me / Who am . . . me" or "*that* Iago"—as opposed to the counterfactual figures who *could* or *should* have existed; but at the same time, it refuses to allow "*that* Iago" or "*that* Eulalie" to detach from the "we" who share that lyric stasis. "We" are never separate from "*that* Iago"—and vice versa.

Webster's refusal to fully detach Eulalie as *a* Castaway from the broad community of castaways exposes the limits of fallen women literature and of the "cause" and "cure" of public policy—both counterfactual discourses that emphasize individual moral agency in an economy that can support only so many "pure sister[s]."¹¹⁷ Even if, as Eulalie bitterly admits, any individual woman is responsible for what she does with her

¹¹⁶ Further, as Natalie Houston has shown, the literary history of the name "Eulalie"—as a doomed performing Poetess figure in Landon's 1829 poem "A History of the Lyre" and a "fair and gentle" bride in Poe's 1845 "Eulalie"—associates the name itself with the abstract feminine types of nineteenth-century lyric ("Order and Interpretation").

¹¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of the relationship between economic and moral discourses in "A Castaway," see Susan Brown's "Economical Representations" and E. Warwick Slinn's chapter on Webster in *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique* (158–184).

life, some women will always be required to fall: the world “somehow needs to its worst use / So many lives of women,” so it “buys us of ourselves” (566 – 568). In “A Castaway,” rather than the occasion for relief or regret about lives that an individual subject could have lived, or even a mediator between that subject and the social whole from which she is drawn, the counterfactual is an index of the fantastic impossibility of being such a subject, particularly for women. In Webster’s poem, there is literally nothing an individual Eulalie can do to alter the fate of a generic Castaway. In pointing our focus beyond the individual woman, Webster reminds us to consider the large-scale economic and social realities that throw “pure” women into penury or that make a “fallen sister” an outcast—and to consider, too, the logic of “redundancy” that suggests that the fates of individual women are always interchangeable.

The poem ends with a turn toward another “we”—one formed through intimate social relationships, in this case through a local community of women friends. Having dismissed every possible counterfactual life, Eulalie settles down to the life she has; the poem ends with her greeting a female visitor as a welcome distraction from her solitary thoughts. While this everyday, social “we” is not identical to the lyric “we” produced by counterfactual sympathy, nor to the wider communities of fallen women, working women, and marginalized women whom Eulalie invokes throughout the poem, the poem’s final turn toward community suggests that Webster understood the “we” as a direct alternative to conventional counterfactual thinking.

Eulalie’s systematic assessment of the counterfactual thinking underlying Victorian discourses of reform and her defiant rhetorical solidarity with other sex workers make “A Castaway” a particularly striking test case for Webster’s experiments with the

counterfactual and the lyric “we.” Reading the other poems in *Portraits* with these ideas in mind, however, reveals that Eulalie’s counterfactual thinking develops according to a pattern that nearly all the poems in *Portraits* follow, suggesting that the counterfactual and the lyric “we” were important concerns for Webster as she worked on the collection as a whole. For first-person dramatic poems, Webster’s *Portraits* use “I” sparingly: Webster often foregrounds the instability of the “I” by delaying its appearance in the poem, submerging her speakers’ identities in the first few lines as they announce their presence through their relationships with objects, scenery, or other people—as when Medea in “Medea in Athens” initially presents herself and her husband as a united front in their response to the news of Jason’s death, beginning the poem with the line “Dead, is he? Our stranger guest said dead.” In this way, Webster deemphasizes her speakers’ individuality and emphasizes their identifications, commitments, and histories as part of a variety of communities. Like Eulalie, the speakers in “Medea in Athens,” “A Painter,” “An Inventor,” “A Preacher,” and “In an Almshouse” meditate on the possibility of having lived other lives, having been different selves. Such speculation frequently appears in the form of counterfactual statements, such as the wistful sentence that begins “A Preacher”: “if someone now / Would take that text and preach to us that preach,— / Someone who could forget his truths were old,” “yes, such a one perchance / . . . might waken me as I / Have wakened others” (13–5, 17–19). Even when Webster’s speakers do not formulate their ideas as counterfactual statements, they often invoke the optative mode as they struggle to explain how they became the people they are today: the philosopher “In an Almshouse,” contemplating his refusal to take a stable position as a clergyman, wonders, “why was I too weak for such a life[?]” (106). Patricia Rigg has

noted that such questioning is characteristic of monodrama, a genre that, Rigg argues, more accurately describes the solitary performances of Webster's speakers than the term "dramatic monologue" does (*Julia Augusta Webster* 77). As in "A Castaway," Webster seems to use this generic feature of the monodrama in each portrait in the collection as a way of putting pressure on the counterfactual statement: ultimately, all the speakers reject the possibility that any of the alternative paths they imagine were ever truly available to them—often turning, like Eulalie, toward intimate social engagement, letting go of their imaginary counterfactual lives and recommencing the social, active lives that are available to them now.

Far from reading the poems' indictment of "cause" and "cure" as pessimism or the turn to imaginative or real-life communities as mere distraction, I argue that Webster deliberately reveals the limits of conventional counterfactual thinking in *Portraits* in order to gesture toward a more effective strategy for large-scale reform: counterfactual sympathy. Emphasizing the importance of collective experience, Webster anticipates the poetics of counterfactual sympathy that she develops throughout *A Housewife's Opinions*, a poetics grounded in the "we" of poetic readership, mutual tolerance, and most importantly, the smaller, more intimate, but surprisingly varied households, families, and other social communities that constitute the domain of the "housewife."

**A Housewife's Poetics: Counterfactual Sympathy
and the Creative Imagination in *A Housewife's Opinions***

Few critics have given prolonged attention to Webster's essays.¹¹⁸ Her 1879 collection *A Housewife's Opinions*, which includes "Poets and Personal Pronouns," consists of several miscellaneous pieces, originally published anonymously in the *Examiner*, on topics as varied as household management, poetics, children's education, women's suffrage, and translation. It is most often cited as evidence of Webster's particular political and poetic engagements; critics have also remarked on the deliberate irony of the collection's title, noting that the varied political and aesthetic opinions that the essays put forth are difficult to reconcile with our image of the typical Victorian housewife.¹¹⁹ To date, however, no one has discussed the larger system of ethics and aesthetics that Webster develops throughout *A Housewife's Opinions*, or the role that Webster depicts her politically engaged, decidedly middle-class "housewife" figure as playing in that system. Reading the collection as a whole makes it increasingly clear that, for Webster, the collaborative model of counterfactual sympathy that she describes in "Poets and Personal Pronouns" constitutes a more effective approach to social reform than does the conventional counterfactual thinking that fails to help the speakers in *Portraits*. Throughout the collection, counterfactual sympathy emerges as a comprehensive model for the imagination's role in social reform and community formation.

Like *Portraits*, *A Housewife's Opinions* registers skepticism about the "cause and cure" of conventional counterfactual thinking—the tendency in Victorian reform and

¹¹⁸ Exceptions include Marysa Demoor's account of Webster's essays and political pamphlets, "Power in Petticoats" and Rigg's 2004 study of Webster's *Athenaeum* reviews ("Augusta Webster and the Lyric Muse"). Robert P. Fletcher has written about two rarely read essays in *A Housewife's Opinions*, discussing "St. Opportune" in "Convent Thoughts" and "Lay Figures" in "The Perverse Secrets of Masculinity in Augusta Webster's Dramatic Poetry."

¹¹⁹ See Flint, "As a Rule" (164); and Sutphin's "Introduction" (26), among others.

literary discourse to focus on choices or contingencies that might have changed the course of an individual life. Certainly, in her interventions in contemporary debates over women's suffrage and education, Webster often writes in the speculative mood common to persuasive political writing, projecting her reader forward and backward in time with counterfactual-conditional statements that imagine the causes of the problems she discusses or the effects the cures she proposes might have. In "Protection for the Working Woman," for example, Webster's narrator imagines what effect overprotective restrictions on women's labor might have had on the heroine of the fairy tale "The Wild Swans": if she "had been protected, if the police had intervened" as she labored to weave her magical, curse-breaking shirts, "she would not have been able to throw the garments at the nick of time over the eleven swans, thereby restoring them to human shape as her brothers and having herself accepted as the princess she was born" (p. 175). As this example suggests, the Webster of *A Housewife's Opinions*—like the Webster who wrote "A Castaway"—is keenly aware that the counterfactual statement is always as much a fantasy as enchanted swan princes or curse-breaking shirts are.¹²⁰ That fantasy is an appealing and persuasive one: the counterfactual statement connects the *if* clause to the *then* clause with matter-of-fact simplicity. When Eulalie imagines "some kind hand, a woman's," in "A Castaway," for example, the counterfactual summons up both the helping hand and the "struggling back" to respectability that it might make possible. This directness might tempt the eager reformer to misread the counterfactual as *always*

¹²⁰ It's important to note that the "I" in *A Housewife's Opinions* does not necessarily indicate Webster—as she reminds us, "as a rule, I does not mean I." For a number of reasons—not least of which is the fact that Webster wrote the essays in *A Housewife's Opinions* for her *Examiner* column, where they were published anonymously—we should assume that the "opinions" expressed in Webster's essays are those of the "housewife," not necessarily Webster's "own." At the same time, the social and aesthetic models described in the essays were (presumably) designed by Webster; for this reason, in many places in this chapter I use "Webster" to designate the narrator in Webster's essays, making sure to note instances where the distance between Webster and her narrator might affect readers' understanding of her work.

possible or at least as having been possible—an alternative that was available, at least at one time, and therefore an alternative that might become available again. Logically, however, the syntax of a counterfactual statement reveals nothing about the plausibility or possibility of the *if* clause—only that it did not happen. Webster, in the essay “Cooperative Housekeeping,” warns her readers against the appeal of “the irresistible If”: the temptation to dwell on the idea that “*If* it were possible it could be done,” rather than to deal directly with those things that *are* possible and *can* be done (p. 9). In this way, counterfactual statements in Webster’s essays often simultaneously register a yearning for rapid social change and an acknowledgment of the limitations of most strategies for bringing such change about.

Echoing the Castaway’s rejection of personal and legislative “cause” and “cure,” Webster refers again and again in *A Housewife’s Opinions* to problems which *cannot* be solved by individual will or determination, and which may be equally resistant to legislative fixes. In evaluating and rejecting these potential solutions, she continually turns to inexorable economic circumstances that can only be altered by broad social—not necessarily legislative—change. As Webster’s narrator’s resistance to labor protections for working women suggests, this resistance to counterfactual thinking sometimes produces apparently conservative political viewpoints that might surprise readers of “A Castaway.”¹²¹

This pattern begins with the first essay in the collection, “The Cost of a Leg of Mutton”—a title whose stolid practicality nicely establishes Webster’s “housewife” persona. In the essay, Webster’s narrator dismisses the idea that the “almost hostile”

¹²¹ Given Eulalie’s own middle-class background and the poem’s concerns about the specific problems facing unmarried, “redundant” middle-class women, however, Webster’s focus on middle-class women may not be so surprising after all.

relations that have developed between middle-class employers and their domestic servants might “be removed by any amount of consideration and indulgence or any effort of organising and disciplining ability” on the part of the employer (2). In other words, this particular social problem cannot be solved by the moral exertions of individual British housewives to make themselves kinder or more disciplined. The problem, Webster implies, lies in the relation of servants to their work, a relation that perhaps might be changed by individual moral improvements in individual servants, but which the narrator presents as a socio-economic reality: “The conditions and duties of household service are not to the mind of household servants of the present day, and cannot be made so without some such complete change in our domestic and social institutions and customs as is not possible in one generation, and, above all, not possible in this generation of household servants” (2). In order to reduce the financial and emotional “cost” incurred by middle-class families who have to employ expensive and unhappy servants to cook their legs of mutton, Webster suggests the elimination of personal domestic servants altogether. As an alternative, she proposes cooperative housing: apartment buildings with shared kitchens, cooks, and domestic staff that would more efficiently and cost-effectively provide families with their legs-of-mutton without interfering with the family’s comfort and privacy.

Consistent with the essay collection’s focus upon middle-class households, this solution seems to be based in an exasperation with the difficulty of finding good domestic help. As this example suggests, the potential radicalism of “A Castaway”’s resistance to counterfactual thinking is tempered here by an often painful class bias and a tendency toward conservatism—a conservatism that is in keeping with Webster’s narrator’s

identity as a middle-class “housewife” figure. Yet this class bias coexists with a practical accommodation of things as they are that pervades *A Housewife’s Opinions*. While the solution Webster offers focuses on improving the comfort of the family rather than the working conditions of the servants, she frames the change in relations between servants and employers as a socio-economic shift, not a moral failing in either “housewife” or servant. The prestige of domestic labor, the narrator argues, has changed; the implication, at least, is that changing the scale of that domestic labor might prove more satisfying to independent-minded working-class women.¹²²

Webster’s solution to the tyranny of the leg of mutton involves an acknowledgement of the competing interests of different members of the household; a re-imagining of household arrangements to accommodate those competing interests (at least in theory); at the same time, a decided bias in those arrangements toward the interests of the middle-class family; and a widening of the scope of the concepts of the household and housekeeping, moving from the confines of an individual, freestanding house to a community containing multiple families. Further, collectivist—even socialist—solutions such as cooperative housing coexist with mainstream Victorian domestic ideals.

The social change Webster believes is possible, then, depends on the collective, accommodating qualities of the counterfactual imagination. As we have seen, the essay “Poets and Personal Pronouns” proposes an alternative use for the counterfactual: the model I call counterfactual sympathy, which facilitates the formation of a communal experience and identity in the moment of reading. Throughout the other essays in *A Housewife’s Opinions*, Webster demonstrates that counterfactual sympathy has a social

¹²² The status of domestic and service-industry labor in our own period suggests that changing the scale of labor may not have done much to raise the prestige of this work, or to better the working conditions of its practitioners.

as well as a poetic function. The same imaginative processes that make counterfactual sympathy necessary for the appreciation of poetry also underlie the strategies Webster endorses for social and political reform, especially reform that will improve the lives of middle-class women.

Webster explains the imaginative processes involved in counterfactual sympathy in her essay “Imagination,” which makes explicit values that are implicit in “A Castaway” and “Poets and Personal Pronouns”: the primacy of simultaneity over sequence, space over time, lyric over narrative, the “we” over the “I.” Webster distinguishes between two types of imagination: the “unpoetical” imagination, which conceives of experience as events “received successively—as existing in time”—and the “creative” imagination, which experiences the world in terms of objects “received simultaneously—or as existing in space.” Webster claims that people with simultaneous, object-based creative imaginations “will possess greater love of beauty and greater enthusiasm” and are “able to enter fully into the spirit of poetic imagery” (p. 215). Within this values system, it becomes clear that the conventional counterfactual thinking that Webster critiques in “A Castaway,” with its focus on the unfolding of events in an individual life over time, is part of the event-based “unpoetical” imagination, while the simultaneous, collective, transformative qualities of counterfactual sympathy are a function of the creative imagination.

While Webster seems to want to avoid privileging one type of imagination over the other, she continually positions the unpoetical imagination and the counterfactual thinking it produces in terms of lack—not only as lacking aesthetic appreciation but as lacking the ability to go beyond the limits of the self. Because people with unpoetical

imaginations can only understand ideas as connected through time, Webster argues, they “overlook the subtler relations of analogy” present in “metaphorical” poetry. Unable to grasp “the hidden resemblances of dissimilar things,” these readers value only literature that reminds them of “sentiments they have experienced” in the past or “instructive” literature that can teach them how they might behave in the future (215–216). Like the “wise ones” whom Eulalie critiques in “A Castaway,” the unpoetical imagination is concerned with the “cause[s]” and “cure[s]” that have shaped or might shape an individual life. But the “unpoetical” imagination can never persuade readers that they “would be *that* Iago” or *that* Castaway; this limited vision, Webster goes on to suggest in other essays, also prevents “unpoetical” people from truly sympathizing with real people in their own lives.

Counterfactual sympathy and the creative imagination, on the other hand, can create connections between people as well as foster aesthetic appreciation. The reading of poetry, Webster claims in “Imagination,” is always a collaborative act. While only writers with true poetic genius can fully “seize . . . the hidden resemblances of dissimilar things” and achieve “that power of vision which shows to the poet link upon link joining earth to heaven, high meanings to humble things,” it is the reader’s responsibility to fill in the gaps between the poet’s metaphorical leaps: “We must be able to perceive the [poet’s] analogies when hinted to us, and to contemplate for ourselves the unelaborated idea, for the poet cannot check his own ascent to point us out every link of the chain. He will carry us on after him if our eyes can trace out for ourselves the rainbow track he indicates, but otherwise his description will seem nothing but vanity, a saying ‘Look!’ when there is nothing” (215). This model of poetic reading, in which the poet and the reader both

actively participate in the creation of the poem as a three-dimensional object in space, illustrates Webster's claim that the creative imagination, which perceives objects "simultaneously—or as existing in space," is the only form of imagination that can take the reader outside the self. If we as readers can follow the poet along his "rainbow track," the poet—like the impossible, counterfactual "kind hand" that the castaway Eulalie imagines might "help [her] to firm ground"—will "carry us on after him" (215). This phrase—"carry us on after him"—invokes the etymology of the word "metaphor" itself, which literally means "to transfer" or to "carry over or across." In calling attention to the spatial imagery in which poetic language is rooted, Webster frames poetry as an interpersonal collaboration that takes place in space, not over time, and emphasizes the importance of what I have called "lyric stasis" in forging imaginary communities. The simultaneity or stasis of poetry allows for the copresence of multiple figures in the same space, and poetic language generates a rich proliferation of connections between and among these figures. In an "unpoetical" narrative, Webster implies, the subject moves determinedly through time, comparing previous experiences with present experiences and making predictions and resolutions about the future; in poetry, the subject expands, becomes entangled with other subjects, extends its tendrils toward the reader. It is only the "lyric" space of the poem, and not the forward-moving narrative of the novel, that allows readers to recognize and understand another person, to follow the deictic gesture of the poet's "Look!" and to take the dizzying leap into counterfactual sympathy that allows us to say "we should be *that* Iago."

Elsewhere in *A Housewife's Opinions*, Webster argues that such counterfactual leaps, and the reading of poetry that makes them possible, have a direct impact on real-

life social relationships, as well as clear implications for social reform. In “Children’s Literature,” for example, she proposes a program of early childhood reading experiences that might lay the groundwork for counterfactual sympathy, implying that one strategy for social reform might lie in developing the literary—and therefore the social—imagination of future citizens. Opposing the tendency in contemporary children’s literature to reflect children’s own experiences, Webster argues that children’s reading about people *like* themselves encourages their imaginative development to stagnate at the level of narcissism. Instead, children should be encouraged to read about people *unlike* themselves, “to find that amusement in books which will expand [a child’s] imagination and its sympathies and widen its mental range” (118). For a child, imagining herself as Julius Caesar or a knight-errant is the “earliest stage of development” of “the all-important power, imagination—. . . that ability to conceive and appreciate other circumstances and other needs than those of our own actual experience” (117).

Here, Webster establishes that the “all-important power” of the imagination and the ability to sympathize with other people develop from the same source and in the same way, and she suggests that the imaginative leap beyond “our own experience” made possible by counterfactual sympathy has an important practical function in social life. Trained by childhood reading to “conceive and appreciate other circumstances and other needs than those of our own actual experience” and accustomed to follow the poet along the “rainbow track” of metaphor, the adult reader can also bring counterfactual sympathy to bear beyond literature, into the social world.

As Webster’s theories about childhood education suggest, the principles of counterfactual sympathy are crucial to Webster’s more “housewifely” arguments about

domestic harmony. Perhaps the most telling link between the language of Webster's poetics and her language of domestic economy comes in the essay "The Vice of Talking Shop." In this essay, the spatial metaphor Webster uses to describe the relationship between the poet and the reader—"he will carry us on after him"—reappears in a slightly altered form as a prescription for social harmony between family members, neighbors, and acquaintances. "Talking shop," or discussing one's professional interests in mixed company, is a problem only because most people lack the "sympathetic perception which is the reality of good manners. They do not put themselves in the position of the outsider and remember to . . . 'take him along with them'" (p. 182). Both the social act of "taking the other along" and the poetic act of "carry[ing readers] on after" the poet are accomplished through counterfactual sympathy.

Figured as a spatial, collaborative phenomenon, one that permits movement inside, outside, across, and along any number of perspectives or selves, counterfactual sympathy provides Webster with a model for sharing both imaginative and domestic spaces. In keeping with her investments in domestic management, social relationships, and poetry—as well as with the dry wit and appreciation for absurdity that characterize many of the essays in *A Housewife's Opinions*—Webster selects the nursery-rhyme couple Jack Spratt and his wife as exemplary of the domestic benefits of going beyond "our own experience." Rather than allowing their different dietary preferences—Jack Spratt could eat no fat, and his wife could eat no lean—to cause marital discord, Webster explains, each spouse accommodated the other's preferences, "and . . . the happy result was that between them both they licked the platter clean, and so enjoyed at once the blessings of domestic affection and domestic economy" because "they could sympathize with tastes

they did not share.” The Spratts’ form of sympathy, Webster argues, in its ability to “take us outside ourselves,” can create a “tie of kinship with all our kind” (“Infallibility” 138). The understanding produced by counterfactual sympathy, then, also fosters mutual tolerance; in accommodating each other’s immutable, nonnegotiable tastes, the Spratts embody another, lighthearted form of the Castaway’s satisfaction with “me / Who am . . . me.” In Webster’s essays, accommodating the selves who exist in the present, rather than dwelling on the “irresistible *if*” of a counterfactual past or conditional future, produces surprising opportunities for solidarity, partnership, and even new economies that might, at least on a local level, provide shelter from the brutal market forces that dominate “A Castaway.”

This pragmatic accommodation of reality is also reflected in the diversity of the households over which the collection’s implied “housewife” appears to reside: the essays represent a wide range of communities, from married couples to coworkers to the inhabitants of a cooperative housing project to common but technically unorthodox domestic partnerships such as the “spinster sisters” Webster describes in her essay “Yoke-Fellows.” Webster explains that such nonmarital partnerships are “unions [that are] practically quite as indissoluble as the bond between man and wife” (202). She concedes that unions like these are rarely chosen by their participants, but as she points out in the same essay, marriage partners rarely choose each other based on their long-term capacity to keep house together; in marriage as in other partnerships, sympathy between different partners must be cultivated.

The scope of *A Housewife’s Opinions*, of course, implies that a housewife’s domain includes national politics—and Webster offers counterfactual sympathy as a

model for the management of the national “household” as well. While the narrator of *A Housewife’s Opinions*, like Eulalie in “A Castaway,” rejects many legislative or moral “cures” that rely on the irresistible *if* or that seek to change individual moral behavior, she is optimistic about solutions that might encourage the expansion of a community’s collective social imagination. When the University of London began granting degrees to women students, Webster argued that the greatest social benefit of this decision would not be the fact that some women would now have M.A. degrees but that “with the possibility of their being M.A.s like their brothers,” there might

creep in a feeling that their faculties, like those of their brothers, need to be trained and ought to be trained. . . . That large class of parents who might at present be disinclined to listen to arguments in favour of a more real education for their girls, because they see that their girls can be just as successful in society without it, will by-and-by unconsciously accept the stronger argument of example, and come, as though they had never felt otherwise, to feel it their natural duty to give daughters, as well as sons, a solid preparation for the work of life. But this change will bring another, even greater: a girl’s time will be considered to have some value. (“University Examinations for Women” 95–96)

The advantage to women here is the gradual but inevitable expansion of their own and their parents’ imaginations, catalyzed by a change that, according to Webster, will have very little direct impact on most women’s lives. Relatively speaking, not many women will get M.A. degrees; Webster believes that most women will continue to choose marriage and motherhood as their primary vocation. But if this change in institutional policy is able to expand parents’ and daughters’ imaginations to accommodate the possibility that a girl’s time has “some value,” those parents and daughters might, like the reader of poetry, follow the “hints” traced out by the policy and complete it with their own imaginations, blazing new and unexpected rainbow tracks in women’s careers, education, family life, and social and economic possibilities.

If the fusion of the “pure sister” with the “fallen sister” in “A Castaway” is, as the *Nonconformist* reviewer implies, a failure of novelistic observation, it is a successful act of poetic imagination. *A Housewife’s Opinions* corroborates that argument. Taken together, Webster’s essays provide a theory that supports the workings of counterfactual sympathy in *Portraits*, showing that it is not merely a temporary escape from the oppressive determinism of the market. Instead, in emphasizing the power of counterfactual sympathy to broaden and shape a community’s imagination, Webster suggests that the reading of poetry itself makes social reform possible.

The 1860s and 1870s, when Webster was writing *Portraits* and *A Housewife’s Opinions*, were crucial years in her career as a poet and as an activist: she was writing her most critically and financially successful poems, actively campaigning for women’s suffrage, and, by 1879, on the verge of running for a seat on the London School Board.¹²³ During this period, her experiments with the speculative form of the counterfactual statement allowed her to explore and evaluate strategies for both social reform and the creation of poetic communities. In privileging what I am calling counterfactual sympathy—the transformative, collaborative model of counterfactual thinking made possible by the reading of poetry—over the “unpoetical” model of counterfactual thinking common to Victorian reformist discourse and the realist novel, Webster demonstrates that her investments in poetics and politics are inextricably connected. For Webster, poetic language creates a relatively static imaginative space in which collaborative relationships proliferate; a lyric “we” is produced when poets, readers, and figures within the poem “take [each other] along” beyond the limits of the self. Despite

¹²³ For detailed accounts of Webster’s political activities, publication history, correspondence, and other important contexts for her life and work, see Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster*.

this breathtaking imaginative power, Webster's model of counterfactual sympathy is also surprisingly pragmatic in its approach to social and political problems, lending itself to solutions that encourage imaginative change while accepting people as they "really" are. In arresting the poem's movement through time and temporarily closing off past and future "forks in the road," Webster's model of counterfactual sympathy allows speaker and reader to dwell with satisfaction on the self as it is now—the "me / Who am . . . me." This practical accommodation of multiple perspectives within a larger social community points us back to the title of Webster's essay collection, reminding us that for Webster the thinking necessary for social change and for appreciating poetry are equally the domain of the "housewife."

"The Particular She and I": Homosocial Housekeeping,

The Lyric "We" and the Theatrical Poetess

In addition to illuminating the relationship between poetry and reform in Webster's work, the lyric "we" produced by counterfactual sympathy provides useful insight into Webster's poetics as they developed through the 1870s and beyond—particularly into her theories about genre. In defining all poetry, including dramatic poetry, by its simultaneity and its ability to facilitate collective experience, Webster emphasizes qualities that came to define "lyric" as a poetic genre.¹²⁴ The possibility that

¹²⁴ The terms in which Webster describes the creative imagination—synchronic and not diachronic, object oriented and not event oriented, impersonal and not of the self—are crucial terms for subsequent theorists' definitions of "lyric." Even if Webster herself was not directly thinking of these qualities as "lyric," she was writing at a moment in history when the concepts of "lyric" and "poetry" were beginning to fuse; for an overview of this process, see Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson's anthology *The Lyric Theory Reader*. For Webster, the primacy of the novel as a nineteenth-century genre may have also put pressure on her definition of poetry as antinovelistic and nonnarrative—pushing it toward the stasis and abstraction of *the lyric* as an abstract genre. In this way, although critics disagree on whether Webster wrote as a "Poetess," Webster's work may also contribute to our understanding of the Poetess poetics described by Prins, Jackson, Eliza Richards, and Tricia Lootens, among others.

Webster herself considered even her early dramatic poems as *already* primarily lyric may help critics better understand Webster's apparently puzzling abandonment of dramatic poetry for the shorter lyric modes she favored later in her career. Further, although Webster is not always considered a Poetess performer, her poetics of the lyric "we" makes visible the important role that Poetess performance plays in her work, as well as the potential for social and political reform inherent in the collectivity of Poetess theatricality.

My discussion of *A Housewife's Opinions* has shown that the resistance to conventional counterfactual thinking Webster registers in "A Castaway" is representative of larger theories that she continued to develop throughout her career about the collective, "simultaneous" qualities of the "creative imagination." Returning to *Portraits* with these larger concerns in mind reveals that Webster figures these poems as three-dimensional collective spaces, spaces that recall the tableaux and assemblages associated with Poetess theatricality. As I have already discussed, the "we" Webster extols in "Poets and Personal Pronouns" is a powerful presence in *Portraits*: through her preference for "types" rather than named characters and her frequent use of the pronoun itself, Webster foregrounds the ways in which her speakers belong to a "we" and deemphasizes any speaker's individual identity as an "I." In the context of Webster's claims about the creative imagination, the connection between the "we" of *Portraits* and that of *A Housewife's Opinions* grows even clearer: not only is the "we" important in *Portraits*, but it is important precisely because it creates, within and among Webster's dramatic poems, the static, intimate "households" that Webster imagines throughout *A Housewife's Opinions*.

Before turning to Webster's lyric households, I will examine the poetics and politics of the "housewife" figure that Webster creates in *A Housewife's Opinions*. As this chapter has already established, Webster's "housewife" is a polymath, with opinions on economics, poetics, professional etiquette, and children's education; she is also an advocate for social reform, especially reform that benefits middle-class women. Is she, additionally, a Poetess figure? And if the "households" she imagines are potentially theatrical spaces, or the sites of theatrical assemblages or tableaux, is *A Housewife's Opinions* a theatrical text? Other writing by Webster might certainly be considered more theatrical than either *A Housewife's Opinions* or *Portraits*: Webster's three plays, for instance, including one—*In a Day*—that was produced in 1890 as a one-time matinee at Ellen Terry's West End theater, to neither critical nor financial success.¹²⁵ In the context of the Poetess theatricality invoked by the crowds of objects and performers in the work of Hemans, Landon, and Barrett Browning, however, Webster's "housewife" is undeniably linked to many aspects of Poetess theatricality. She embodies the tensions between the Poetess's genteel feminine authority and her reformist, potentially liberatory energy, and simultaneously makes those tensions visible and available for critique.

Like Poetess figures before her, Webster's Housewife performs a conventionally feminine role—yet her performance of that role complicates the received Victorian doctrine of "separate spheres." The interpenetration of public and private life is immediately visible in the essay collection's table of contents; the fact that the book contains essays on poetics, women's suffrage, and classical translation has led many

¹²⁵ See T.D. Olverston's "The Limits of Liberty" for a reading of *In A Day*, Webster's only play to be produced onstage; Olverston suggests that the play failed because "it had never been a drama designed to compete with the spectacular toga-clad pageants of Henry Irving, Beerbohm-Tree, and Wilson Barrett" (34–35).

readers to interpret the title as ironic. The inclusion of topics usually associated with the “masculine” or “public” sphere, however, does not make *A Housewife’s Opinions* a subversive text: in fact, many of the texts we might think of as the foundational texts of “separate spheres” ideology rely on interpenetrating models of public and private, masculine and feminine realms to make their arguments about the importance of the domestic sphere.¹²⁶ Victorian conduct manuals and domestic texts assigned domestic women immense power in transmitting and maintaining Britain’s status as a colonial power, while on another level, they emphasized women’s role in local economies. Part of the cultural work performed by these texts is, to borrow Tricia Lootens’s term, the “suspension” of spheres: the delicate balancing act that permits the illusion that the apolitical, feminine domestic sphere is indeed “separate” from the public, masculine sphere of the State, when in fact the domestic sphere is only uneasily “suspended” within—and authorized by—the public sphere (13 – 14).

The originality of *A Housewife’s Opinions* lies, in part, in Webster’s willingness—if not quite her ability—to end the suspense. Taken together, Webster’s essays make explicit the implications that were already coded into the concept of “separate spheres”: that the domestic realm both mirrors and participates in larger

¹²⁶ In *Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (1861), for example, recipes and advice about matronly duties such as managing servants or making social calls are interspersed with relevant quotations from poets and trivia about the history of the “kitchens of the Middle Ages,” the history and morphology of the almond tree, and notes on the “natural history of fishes.” The implication is that the “feminine sphere” is in fact as broad and encompassing as the masculine, requiring grounding in a liberal-arts education including history, literature, science, and economics. Even Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *Wives of England* (1843), with its strong emphasis on the difference between the sexes, argues that women must be “economists” before marriage and demonstrates the housewife’s influence on the larger economy, especially in its emphasis on economic justice. As these texts imply, true separation of the spheres was materially and economically impossible: because professional life entered the home through commercial and professional work spaces attached to or inside the home (studies, doctor’s offices, photography studios); through social events that have an effect on the larger life of the community; through the visits of salesmen, workmen, the presence of apprentices and servants; and because “domestic” concerns spread to the larger community, and had an economic or moral effect on local, national, and global levels.

professional, economic, and imperial concerns. Further, Webster insists that both men and women cross and recross the boundaries between these separate, or uneasily suspended, spheres. To return to “The Cost of a Leg of Mutton,” for example: despite its housewifely title, the essay is not explicitly directed at housewives, as a similar chapter in *Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management* or any number of nineteenth-century “housewife” manuals might have been. Although it addresses the problems that middle-class housekeeping poses for married women, the essay’s point of view hews more closely to that of male householders who may have chafed at the costs required to maintain an ordinary middle-class English standard of living. Webster begins the essay by wondering about the hidden costs of the leg of mutton “as it appears on the table of the gentleman of limited income”: although it is the “most thrifty of plain joints,” each leg of mutton served at home costs this gentleman three guineas a year, since it requires him to maintain a kitchen staff for cooking the mutton, as well as to pay rent on kitchens for cooking the mutton and bedrooms for housing the staff (1). As the essay goes on, the narration of this gentleman’s growing dismay at the financial and emotional cost of the leg of mutton approaches free indirect discourse: “But Paterfamilias begins to reflect that he does not get anything like a return for his expenditure on his housekeeping,” Webster’s narrator reports. “It is time for him to do something; but what?” (3). It’s possible to read this narrator as a Paterfamilias himself—and throughout the essays, the narrator’s irreverent, witty, urbane voice seems calculated to appeal to an audience of well-read, cosmopolitan middle-class Londoners regardless of gender. As some critics have noted, the gender readers assigned to Webster’s persona in these essays may have shifted from the time of their original, anonymous publication in the *Examiner* to their

appearance in a book by Augusta Webster with the title *A Housewife's Opinions*. The book's publication history, then, transforms a Paterfamilias into a Housewife—and the fact that this transformation is accomplished simply through a change in the title is symptomatic of Webster's larger project of revealing the unity of separate spheres—and of valuing the importance of the domestic sphere as a model for every area of life.

In its expansion of the feminine sphere to encompass the masculine, along with the reference to marriage invoked by the term “housewife,” *A Housewife's Opinions* might seem to have more in common with Barrett Browning's serene vision of heterosexual compromise at the end of *Aurora Leigh* than with the violent theatrics of *Aurora Leigh's* working-class crowds or the bleeding, weeping, gorgeously ornate assemblages in Hemans's *Records of Woman*. Indeed, as I show in my first chapter, for some critics Webster herself has come to represent the “woman poet” untainted by “Poetess” theatricality, particularly in the cheerfully authoritative, seemingly un-gendered tone of her anonymous *Examiner* essays.¹²⁷ In her championing of a universal, “editorial” voice for the poet, a figure she describes using the pronoun “he”; in her practical championing of the rights of women without any appeals to womanly virtue or any mention of the Poetess; in the placid anonymity of her journalism and the lack of a portrait in the frontispiece of her books, Webster seems to embody the anti-Poetess that Aurora tries to imagine in *Aurora Leigh*, as well as the virtue of letting, to quote Landon's “Preface,” the poems “speak for themselves” (103).

While these are certainly characteristics of *A Housewife's Opinions* and its narrator, I argue that even as the “housewife” figure's moderate, middle-class values link her to Aurora and Romney's privatized vision of authorship as heterosexual marriage, her

¹²⁷ See, for example, Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry* 373.

insistence on the possibilities of counterfactual sympathy and the lyric “we” depends upon the extravagant collective performances of the theatrical Poetess—performances that coexist with, but constantly threaten to exceed, the middle-class values Webster’s narrator claims as her own. In her vision of “cooperative housing,” for example, Webster is careful to explain that the collective arrangements she describes are no threat to the insularity of the British family home, to the domestic sphere itself:

to give up home would be too great a sacrifice . . . if by home is meant room and privacy for family intercourse and the intimate sympathies of close relationships, for independence of the outside world and the power of being alone, for the indulgence of individual tastes and the enjoyment of pursuits in common . . . But why . . . must Home be a separate compartment of a street? Why may Home not be horizontal as well as vertical? (4 – 5)

Webster takes pains to demonstrate that the co-operative housing arrangements she describes have little in common with the unruly, overcrowded, theatrical phalansteries so theatrically and didactically stage-managed by Romney Leigh; in their focus on the “privacy” of “family intercourse,” these middle-class Victorian apartments are carefully insulated from the phalanstery’s associations with violence or unorthodox sexuality. Yet to discuss “co-operative housing” in England in the nineteenth century is to invoke its more radical practitioners; for many readers, the phrase “co-operative” housekeeping would indeed have summoned the scandalous threat of midcentury experiments in collective living. For other English readers, “co-operative housekeeping” may have invoked not the social and sexual radicalism of the French philosopher Fourier and his *phalanstères*, but simply the promiscuous urban living arrangements of ordinary, contemporary French families, crowded together in the grand apartment houses that characterized Parisian urban planning in the nineteenth century. Webster’s guarantees of

privacy echo the arguments of architect William H. White, who in 1878 urged British architects to construct Parisian-style apartment houses: as Sharon Marcus shows, White's reassurances that such apartments would not encourage "intimacy between neighbors" responded to a widely-held belief among architects, builders, and the public, that Parisian-style apartment houses were un-British and possibly immoral (*Apartment Stories* 84). Thus, even as Webster assures her readers of the inviolable privacy of British domestic life, the possibilities of widening up the domestic sphere, of a private life that is also undeniably public, enter *A Housewife's Opinions*.

Just as Webster's insistence on the privacy of cooperative housekeeping conceals her awareness of its potentially dangerous collectivity, her confident adoption of masculine or gender-neutral perspectives in both her poems and her essays coexists with a tendency in both *Portraits* and *A Housewife's Opinions* to imagine the lyric "we" in exclusively feminine terms—suggesting the influence that the collectivity and femininity of Poetess theatricality exerts in her work. In "Poets and Personal Pronouns," Webster emphasizes the distance between the impersonal, gender-neutral "editorial We" she proposes poets use, on the one hand, and on the other the "we" as it is conventionally used in poetry, to indicate "the particular *she* and I" of heterosexual love lyric. Yet so many of Webster's poems and essays describe pairs and groups of women that it's also possible to read Webster's "we" in precisely those terms. Webster's "we" might indicate as a "particular *she* and I" where the gender of the "I" is also feminine; a "we" composed of many different individual women; or even as an assemblage of women and feminized objects similar to those in Hemans's and Landon's poems. Thus the lyric "we" of *A Housewife's Opinions* and *Portraits* not only draws on the *choral* nature of Poetess

theatricality, but evokes the homosocial nature of Poetess tableaux as imagined by Hemans, Landon, and Barrett Browning—tableaux in which the logic of “redundant women” that dooms Eulalie to her fate as a “Castaway” is literalized through the representation of endlessly proliferating, endlessly interchangeable women.

To consider Webster’s lyric “we” as composed of a “particular *she* and I” is to imagine the households of *A Housewife’s Opinions* as vast, cooperative, public architectural assemblages populated as frequently by “spinster sisters” as by heterosexual married couples and their children. It is also to understand the connections between the many “we”s in Webster’s poems as formally equivalent. The *we* that indicates Eulalie’s solidarity with other sex workers is one of these: a “we” that encompasses relatively wealthy courtesans such as Eulalie herself as well as “any drab / Who sells herself as I . . . Our traffic’s one” (68–69, 76) and that eventually extends to include *all* women:

But I say all the fault’s with God himself
Who puts too many women in the world.
We ought to die off reasonably. (295 – 297)

Indeed, Eulalie’s scornful “I hate men” (258) in “A Castaway” connects the feminine homosocial communities in Webster’s work with the potential feminist separatism that Lootens associates with the figure of the Poetess.¹²⁸ Webster’s poems also include the “particular *she* and I” of the more intimate, women-only households and friendships depicted at the end of poems such as “A Castaway”—“Oh, is it you? / Most welcome, dear; one gets so moped alone” (629 – 630)—and “Faded,” a poem Webster added to the

¹²⁸ As Lootens explains, the figure of the Poetess in her guise as “Sappho-Corinne can hardly escape the Isle of Lesbos’s association with eroticized (and interrupted, mournful) fantasies of separatist female creative community. The (unstable) Second Wave feminist dreams of a ‘Lesbian Nation’ begin here” (*Political Poetess* 9).

second edition of *Portraits*, which ends with the speaker returning to the drawing room to listen to “my young sisters’ music” (169).

The homosocial intimacy of such relationships poses an even more explicit challenge to the “particular *she* and I” of heterosexual love lyric when read in the context of Webster’s posthumously published sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*. In these poems, as Marianne Van Remoortel has shown, Webster reimagines the desiring male poet and female beloved of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence as a mother and daughter. In some sonnets, this replacement of the heterosexual lovers with the mother/daughter dyad has the effect, as Remoortel argues, of “hermetically seal[ing] the mother/daughter bond from male intrusion” and “turn[ing] their relationship into a completely self-sufficient union” (482). In Sonnet XXVI, for example, the mother and daughter are fused into a passionate (and intensively private) “we”: “We, darling, paired alone?/ Thou hast all thy mother; thou art all my own” (ll. 10-11).

Seemingly even more private than this exclusive mother/daughter love is the autoerotic communion that takes place in many of Webster’s poems between women and their own reflections, portraits, and images. While in *Mother and Daughter* the “particular *she* and I” of Petrarchan poet and beloved is transformed to the “*she* and I” of mother and child, in Webster’s poem “Circe” the “particular *she* and I” becomes the speaker and her reflection in a pool:

Oh, lips that tempt
My very self to kisses—oh, round cheeks
Tenderly radiant with the even flush
Of pale smoothed coral—perfect lovely face
Answering my gaze from out this fleckless pool--
Wonder of glossy shoulders, chiseled limbs--
Should I be so your lover as I am,
Drinking an exquisite joy to watch you thus

In all a hundred changes through the day,
 But that I love you for him till he comes,
 But that my beauty means his loving it? (120-30)

Circe's blazon, itemizing the beautiful parts of her own body, allows her to imagine herself as the desired beloved of lyric tradition—she implies that her own “love” for herself is a placeholder until a worthy male lover appears. While she is waiting, however, she must at least temporarily become the desiring lover of herself. For Cornelia D. J. Pearsall, Circe's transformation into a “we” is evidence that her “intense experience of satisfaction” has led, “paradoxically” to “self-division”—a characteristic Pearsall also assigns to Eulalie in “A Castaway” (81). I suggest that this intense satisfaction may indicate, instead, the pleasures of proliferation—the satisfaction of a Poetess figure who, in regarding her own beauty, recognizes not only narcissistic pleasure or the anticipation of being desired by someone else, but a connection with Poetess performances before and after, imagined in space rather than over time—a version of the Poetess's repeating Sapphic fall that is more performance of pleasure than of mourning.¹²⁹ Whether or not Circe experiences this moment as expansion or division of the self is irrelevant—Circe does not experience either, because she does not exist. But to read Circe in this scene as multiplied and not divided is to understand the ways in which “Circe” contributes to Webster's model of a lyric “we” consisting of a “particular *she* and I,” and the importance that this model places upon the representation of identity and relationships in terms of static, visual, spatial arrangements: the “simultaneity” of the “creative imagination.”

¹²⁹ See Prins, *Victorian Sappho* 195.

In *Portraits*, the simultaneous, object-oriented model of Webster's "creative imagination" is most evident in poems where Webster portrays her speakers' retrospection as a spatial, not a temporal phenomenon. In resisting conventional counterfactual thinking, Webster's speakers frame their past and present identities as multiple objects in space rather than as a single individual developing over time: as a companionable "we" rather than a forward-moving "I." In their emphasis on the self or selves who exist now to the exclusion of the selves who might have existed, the speakers in *Portraits* emphasize the *object* perceived by the creative imagination instead of the "successive," event-based narrative available to the unpoetical imagination. Further, these speakers make even their past selves into objects for poetic contemplation. As in Hemans's *Records of Woman*, human beings and the objects that surround them become difficult to distinguish; the objects take on human identity; the women contemplate themselves as objects.

In beginning "A Castaway," for example, with Eulalie's contemplation of a "poor little diary (1)—so that the first pronoun the reader encounters is not "I," but "it"—Webster allows Eulalie to invest the diary with agency: here is an object that has "its" own "simple thoughts" and "good resolves" (1-2). The speaker soon reveals that she herself wrote the diary when she was a girl; the incredulity she expresses—"And did *I* write it? Was I this good girl?" (6)—highlights the distance between the "I" and "this good girl" from the past whom the "I" no longer recognizes. The "it" in "did *I* write it" is obviously the diary, but since the "simple thoughts" and "good resolves" of the speaker are ascribed to the diary, it's quite possible to read the "it" as a pronoun for "this good girl," suggesting that the past self is not only represented by but identical to, written as,

the diary itself. Even as the past self is imagined as an “it,” a speaker’s detachment from that “it” can produce a new “we”: the speaker and another self, alone in a room together, sometimes in conversation. It’s possible to read Eulalie’s relationship to this diary—as well as to her reflection, which, like Circe, she contemplates with pleasure, exulting “let me feed upon my beauty thus” (34)—as self-division. At the same time, “Poets and Personal Pronouns” might encourage us to interpret Eulalie’s communion with her diary and her reflection an act of counterfactual sympathy with the self. In depicting Eulalie’s self-contemplation, Webster depicts a female homosocial intimacy not unlike the friendship Eulalie shares with her visitor, as a way of making visible the real and imagined communities that construct women’s experiences and identity.

Another past self, still a representation but this time an actual *portrait*, provides the occasion and audience for “Faded,” the poem that immediately follows “A Castaway” in the second edition of *Portraits* (“Faded” was written in 1870, just after the publication of the first edition.) As in “A Castaway,” the past self in “Faded”—a portrait of the aging speaker in her youth—provokes both regret and recognition of distance: “Ah face, young face, sweet with unpassionate joy,” the speaker begins the poem, finally identifying her addressee as “face who wast myself” (7) who teaches her

my lesson what I was; which (ah, poor heart!)
Means trulier my lesson, bitter to learn
Of what I cease to be. (21 – 23)

This time the conversation between selves is explicit: the speaker addresses the portrait as “you” and, toward the end of the poem, refers to the two of them as a “we.” The conversation between past and present self is not one-sided: the face in the portrait has “the girl’s questioning smile / Expectant of an answer from the days” (5 – 6), and the

speaker asks her to “talk with me, with this later drearier self” (8). The speaker, whose beauty has faded, envies the beautiful young self, but she also treasures their time alone together, using language that invokes both Eulalie’s longing in “A Castaway” for female fellowship as the more erotically charged feelings that might accompany a forbidden tryst: the speaker declares that “oftenest I dare not see thee,” but seems to enjoy the time when “alone / Thou and I in the quiet . . . there’s none at hand to note” (10-13). Like Eulalie’s diary, the portrait is transformed from a turning point in a personal history to a material object in a landscape or tableau. Assembled in space, not time, these material selves necessarily constitute a “we” within the world of the poem—a “we” that links the repeating, “stereotyped” permutations of the figure of the Poetess, the political abjection of the “redundant” woman, the possibilities for collective political engagement suggested by Webster’s counterfactual sympathy, and the more intimate, companionable households that appear in Webster’s poems and essays.

As “Poets and Personal Pronouns” makes clear, the “we” in any poem also includes the reader. The turn to the social that the speaker so often makes at the end of the poem is a turn toward a sister, a student, a visiting woman friend, but also toward the reader: “Oh, is it you? Most welcome, dear; one gets so moped alone.” At the end of “Faded,” the speaker abandons her meditation on the portrait of her own youthful face to rejoin a group of real women: her own family of “spinster sisters.” Roused by the sound of “my young sisters’ music” in the drawing room, the speaker is moved to join them: “Maudie’s clear voice sends me my favourite song, / Filling my stillness here. She sings it well” (169-71). While we could imagine the “young sisters” as a threat to the speaker in the same way that the portrait might cause her pain, she is genuinely pleased by their

music and happy to take her place among them, possibly as a mentor, possibly as an audience member who appreciates not only their physical beauty but their artistry. The move from the speaker's contemplation of a portrait, which seems permanent but will decay over time, to song, which in 1870 remained an ephemeral, un-preservable art form that served the important social function of bringing family and friends together, gestures toward the emphasis that *A Housewife's Opinions* places on the practical good we can do for others. These gestures demonstrate that the seeming solitude of both the poem itself and the act of reading poetry is in fact populated by multiple voices and multiple auditors, including the present reader. In Webster's counterfactual sympathy, the act of reading ultimately trains both reader and speaker to return to the intimate "households" over which they might preside in the expansive persona of Webster's "housewife." The households to which each speaker returns—whether it's "Faded"'s speaker to her spinster sisters, the Castaway to her friends, Medea to her new husband, the Painter to his wife, even the Inventor to his machine—are imperfect yoke-fellows, but for Webster their efforts to entertain, accommodate, and imagine each other is the theater in which true social reform might begin.

Webster's poetic theory, then, connects concepts that have been important, but often implicit, in the theatrical Poetess performances this dissertation has considered so far. In linking the collectivity of the lyric "we" specifically to simultaneity and three-dimensional space, Webster demonstrates that figuring the poem itself as a theatrical space might make the collectivity of Poetess theatricality possible, and shows how the theatrical, spectacular, but *static* form of the tableau has been useful to poets in theorizing poetry as collective experience. In addition, Webster's emphasis on the relationship

between poetry and reform reveals the political potential of the static, simultaneous, collective form of the tableau to represent and perform inclusion and exclusion—a potential that may have facilitated Hemans’s overdetermined efforts to represent and record the excesses of “Woman” and Barrett Browning’s struggle to accommodate *Aurora Leigh*’s working-class crowds. Just as the melodramatic tableau was an opportunity for Victorian audiences to concentrate their attention and analysis on the relationships created between the figures onstage, the tableaux imagined by Webster’s poems and essays allow audiences to contemplate the social relationships represented therein—and possibly to imagine and enact different relationships. Thus the lyric “we” in *A Housewife’s Opinions and Portraits* not only draws on the *choral* nature of Poetess performance, but also—even in pointedly private, intimate scenes that do not evoke the publicity of Poetess theatricality—invokes the static, spatial nature of Poetess tableaux as imagined by Hemans, Landon, and Barrett Browning—as well as the homosocial communities of apparently “redundant” women that those tableaux so often create.

The lyric “we” points us, too, toward a better understanding of poetry’s choral, collaborative function, one whose “stasis” makes space for the imagination and proliferation of multiple relationships. To Herbert F. Tucker’s claim that “choral dissolution” is encoded in lyric voice (55), Webster might imagine her own “lyric” spaces as participating in choral *construction*, expanding and elaborating upon the “I” until it is a “we.” In this way, the moments of self-absorption in Webster’s monodramas, including the many moments in which her female speakers gaze at their image in a mirror or a portrait, take on a new meaning. If the Castaway’s contemplation of the “me / Who am . . . me” represents not *only* the narcissistic but alienated gaze of the fragmented

female subject, nor only a baffled effort to make sense of a narrative in which the “pure sister” has become the “fallen,” but a meditation on lyric stasis—the contemplation of a self that contains the speaker and the reader and simultaneously maintains the “full conception of character” demanded by poetry—the questions of “big I” and “little i,” of the identification of poet and speaker, become less relevant. Instead, the focus shifts from questions of voice, performance, and impersonation—questions we traditionally associate with dramatic poetry—to the stasis and solitude that nineteenth-century theorists were already beginning to associate with the lyric, a stasis and solitude that allows the reader to contemplate a *me* who is not quite *me*, and then turn, as Eulalie does, to the forward-moving, narratable social world with a renewed sense of possibility.

Chapter Five

“Not a Natural *Cri de Coeur*”:

Charlotte Mew’s Quotable, Extractable Poetics

First, a brief history of a telling phrase that has frequently been misread. In July of 1918, Sydney Carlyle Cockerell, the director of Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam Museum, suggested to the poet Charlotte Mew that the last lines of her poem “The Farmer’s Bride” seemed out of character for the speaker, a homespun farmer tortured by unreciprocated desire for his young wife. The passionate lyricism of the farmer’s exclamation—“the soft brown down of her, the brown, / The brown of her - her eyes, her hair, her hair!”—was not, Cockerell wrote in an unpublished letter, “a natural *cri de coeur*.”

Despite the fact that Mew politely declined to follow Cockerell’s advice, his assessment of Mew’s writing has significantly shaped the popular and critical reception of her work, and its influence continues to the present moment. In her influential 1984 biography of Mew, Penelope Fitzgerald quotes Cockerell’s letter and Mew’s reply to support her claim that the *cri de coeur*, which Fitzgerald characterizes as an almost involuntary expression of barely-concealed emotion, was central to Mew’s poetics. Fitzgerald’s model of the *cri de coeur*, itself based on a misreading of Mew’s letter, anticipates an ongoing critical tendency to read Mew’s work in terms of a pathological division between poet and speaker, depth and surface, authentic feeling and artificial performance—divisions that, I argue, have their origins in nineteenth-century reading practices and that have shaped twentieth-century (mis)readings of both Victorian and more recent women poets. Elements from Mew’s personal history, including her reputation as a closeted lesbian, her family history of mental illness, and her suicide in

1928 at the age of fifty-eight, make it easy to pathologize her writing in this way: Laura Severin's claim that Mew's "lesbian passion can only be revealed obliquely through dramatic monologue, which painfully hides an authorial presence that both fears exposure and longs to be released" is typical of this strain of Mew criticism (25).

In addition, Mew's liminal position in literary history—not quite Victorian, not fully modernist—makes reading her work in terms of a divided self especially tempting. Specific formal features of Mew's poetry, including its irregular prosodic effects, the presence of images of concealment and revelation, and the sudden, passionate exclamations that Cockerell described as *cris de coeur*, are often read as symptomatic of the poet's own internal struggle between Victorian propriety and modernist license, between the poet's passionate lesbian desire and the formal constraints with which she tries (and fails) to repress or disguise that desire.

That the phrase *cri de coeur*—which literally means "cry from the heart"—has appealed so strongly to Mew's critics speaks to a persistent tendency to read women poets in terms of their emotions, and more specifically to the ways in which critics have consistently read Mew as a Victorian "Poetess." Indeed, we can trace this fascination with the poet's "heart," as well as the critical impulse to read the form and content of Mew's poems in the context of her mental illness, to Victorian "cultures of the heart" that, as Kirstie Blair has shown, conflated medical and literary discourses and linked the strong emotions felt by poets—especially women poets—to heart disease and mental illness. Meanwhile, the implication that Mew's poems express her concealed feelings is rooted in a critical tradition that (mis)reads women's poetry in terms of what Isobel Armstrong has labeled "the gush of the feminine." Critics of Poetess writing continue to

demonstrate that reading practices such as these obscure the aesthetic and political work done by many women poets. Armstrong has demonstrated that, even in the most seemingly expressive nineteenth-century poems by women, “the gush of the feminine is a fallacy” (“Gush” 32) while Angela Leighton and Tricia Lootens, among others, have called into question the Victorian discourses of the “heart” that continue to shape Poetess reception. As early as 1992, Leighton argued that many women poets, including Mew, wrote not “from” but “against the heart,” often deliberately choosing the “heartlessness” of aesthetic “play” over the sincerity expected of the woman poet (7). More recently, Lootens has shown that the concerns at the “heart” of the most seemingly personal, sentimental Poetess writing are actually the public, political histories of empire (2). If the (seemingly) Victorian practice of reading poems as effusions from the poet’s heart does not, as these critics have shown, accurately represent the work even of Victorian poets, we might wonder precisely whose “heart” we expect Mew’s poems to reveal.

In their efforts to reveal Mew’s “heart,” meanwhile, such reading practices obscure the theatricality of her work: its deliberate artifice; its modeling of and commentary upon the difficulties of collective participation in a community; and the ways in which it invites performance and quotation. Mew may not be a Poetess by virtue of her half-concealed, confessing “heart”; but this chapter suggests that critical focus on Mew’s heart ignores her work’s affinity with the collective, citational performances that characterize Poetess theatricality. Mew’s response to Cockerell’s letter implies that, for her, the *cri de coeur* was not an expression of deep feeling but a quotable, extractable catchphrase or tag that might circulate independently from its source text in quite

different literary and cultural contexts.¹³⁰ In correcting previous misreadings of the *cri de coeur* and its importance to Mew's work, I seek to reorient discussions of Mew's poetics around her own use of the term. Reading Mew's poems "The Farmer's Bride" and "The Fête," as well as her unpublished short story "Thic Theer Kayser," with Mew's own definition of the *cri de coeur* in mind, I argue that, far from representing involuntary confession or registering painful divisions within the poet's identity, the exclamations that critics have described as *cris de coeur* were part of a deliberate strategy through which Mew developed a playful, citational poetics rooted in the lively print and performance cultures of her own lifetime. Ultimately, I argue, Mew's use of the *cri de coeur* privileges the forms of knowledge and identity represented and often embodied by the popular print and performance cultures that shaped Poetess theatricality in the nineteenth century: deliberately artificial, flexible, portable, and entertaining, capable of moving between communities of performers, readers, and listeners.

Further, in locating the origin and the very modernity of Mew's formal strategies in these nineteenth-century literary and cultural practices, I call into question the relevance of debates about division in Mew's writing, whether the division is imagined in psychological or historical terms. Expanding upon Carrie Preston's observation that twentieth-century women poets like Mew and H.D. were interested in nineteenth-century forms such as the dramatic monologue "not as a Victorian throwback, but as a formal challenge" (117), I show that Mew's engagement with nineteenth-century forms suggests a generative continuity between nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture, as well as between popular forms and "high" literature," that criticism has often missed

¹³⁰ See Meredith McGill's "Common Places" on the dislocating effect of extraction and its implications for our own historicizing practices.

because of gendered preconceptions about figures such as Mew and their role in literary history. Mew's poetic practice draws upon and resembles nineteenth-century print and performance genres, such as melodrama, recitation, the daily newspaper, the scrapbook, and the book of extracts, that invited quotation, extraction, and collage—genres that were often interlinked and mutually informing.¹³¹ Focusing on the *cri de coeur* as a portable, extractable phrase, rather than as proof of depth or integrity of character, reveals not only the connections between Mew's poems and other literary and cultural texts, but some of the complex networks of affiliations between nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary cultures. In particular, Mew's definition and deployment of the *cri de coeur* reveals one way in which the formal strategies and generic affiliations that shaped Poetess theatricality continued to inform twentieth-century poetics. At the same time, the history of critical misreadings of the *cri de coeur* provides valuable insight into a longer history of gendered misreading, a history in which reading practices long associated with the Victorian Poetess have caused both critics and readers to interpret the work of women poets—including the work of Poetess performers—as the product of broken “hearts” painfully divided by psychology, ideology, and literary history.

¹³¹ Sharon Marcus demonstrates the interplay between theatrical performance and the theatrical scrapbooks that fans collected and filled with print ephemera related to the theater, explaining that “theatrical scrapbooks complicate our understanding of what counted as performance, because they suggest that theatregoers treated representations of performances as extensions of theatrical experience” (“The Theatrical Scrapbook” 284). More broadly—as McGill’s “Common Places” makes clear—extraction, quotation, and collage were common practices among both readers and publishers throughout nineteenth-century Britain and the United States. Early in the century, a renewal of interest in the early modern practice of keeping commonplace books led to an explosion in the popularity of manuscript miscellanies and scrapbooks, in which families pasted “drawings and watercolours, cuttings from newspapers, epitaphs collected in churchyards, and occasional prose” (St Clair 224); publishers soon responded to and stoked the demand for ready-made manuscript albums, as well as print miscellanies, anthologies, and gift books that formally resembled the manuscript albums. As Claire Pettit notes, “[t]he traffic between the manuscript and the print albums was always two-way”: print publications were made to resemble home-made albums, while “many individual album-compilers cut poems out of the print scrapbooks and pasted them into their own collections,” a process that “straddled the personal and the mass-circulated” and took place on the border between reading and authoring” (32-33).

Gesture and Accent: The Portable, Theatrical *Cri de Coeur*

An extended consideration of Mew's own use of the term *cri de coeur* is necessary for two reasons. The misreading of Mew's correspondence that has resulted in misconceptions about Mew's view of her own poetics for the last three decades must be corrected. More importantly, however, Mew's own discussion of the *cri de coeur* highlights the significant influence that popular print and performance cultures exerted on her poetics in general, and suggests a productive model for understanding her speakers' seemingly implausible shifts of language and behavior. Thus, an understanding of her use of the *cri de coeur* can suggest a new and better way to read Mew's writing—as well as another model with which to understand Poetess theatricality.

When Cockerell described the final outburst in “The Farmer's Bride” as a *cri de coeur*, he may have been invoking a *fin-de-siècle* cosmopolitanism that would have been familiar to Mew, a fellow Francophile who, like Cockerell, came of age in the 1890s. The earliest entry for “cri de coeur” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is dated 1897, and although the *OED* defines the phrase as “a passionate appeal” or “complaint,” its use throughout the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth seems as often as not to have been tinged with urbane irony.¹³²

If Cockerell's use of *cri de coeur* was somewhat playful, however, the term is in many ways an accurate description of the anguished language of “The Farmer's Bride.” In the poem, the Farmer, whom Mew describes as a “rough country man,” narrates his violent efforts to overcome, and finally his despair as he begins to come to terms with, his young wife's apparently unnatural resistance to consummating the sexual and social aspects of their marriage. The lines that Cockerell dismissed as “not a natural *cri de*

¹³² “cri de cœur, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Web. 1 June 2015.

coeur” for the Farmer are the last three, in which the Farmer, thinking about his wife sleeping alone in the attic above him with “just a stair / Betwixt us,” cries out

Oh! my God! the down
The soft brown down of her, the brown,
The brown of her - her eyes, her hair, her hair! (45 – 47)

Cockerell’s objection seems to lie in the disparity between the farmer’s colloquial, uneducated language at the beginning of the poem—“when us was wed”; “she runned away”—and the desperate, rhythmic passion of the last lines. Cockerell may have also shared the objections of his friend Wilfrid Blunt, who felt that for a woman poet to write in the voice of a man “takes away something of her poems’ full sincerity,”¹³³ or those of the *Nation*’s poetry critic Henry Nevinson, who found the Farmer “much too sympathetic. A man can hardly imagine why the most sensitive of women should run out into the night to avoid him” (442). The implication in all three objections, of course, is that the Farmer is implausible as a character because his speech and actions do not consistently conform to the expectations a reader might have—based on the author’s name or the farmer’s dialect—about the speaker’s class location and gender. Instead, at the end of the poem the Farmer’s hesitant language and forbearance with the passive Bride marks him as feminine and middle-class—less like a well-drawn rustic character and more, as Fitzgerald would go on to imply, like Mew herself. Mew responded to Cockerell that it was impossible for her to change the lines:

I could only change my farmer by making him someone else - as, so far as I had the use of words, they did express my idea of a rough country-man seeing and saying things differently from the more sophisticated townsman - at once more clearly & more confusedly. I am afraid, too, that the point you touch on is more than merely technical - as it seems to me that in the ‘cri de coeur’ (I use your phrase) one either has or has not the person & if the author is not right here he is wrong past mending . . .

¹³³ Quoted in Mew’s “Letter,” July 20, 1918.

But as well as for your interesting criticism I have to thank you for turning my thinking towards the test in literature of this ‘*cri de coeur*.’ In Marguerite Gautier’s “*Je veux vivre*” and Sarah Gamp’s “Drink fair, Betsy, wot’ever you do!” one has not only the cry but the gesture and the *accent*—. And so one goes on - calling up the witnesses to the ‘real thing’ and finds oneself in delightful company.¹³⁴

From this letter, in which Mew responds to—and rejects—a specific suggestion from Cockerell, Fitzgerald isolates the phrase *cri de coeur* as an important element in Mew’s own poetics, one that functions as proof of a dramatic speaker’s authenticity, “the test of truth.” Further, Fitzgerald, following the implications of the objections made by Cockerell and his friends, strongly suggests that this extorted cry expresses Mew’s own truth, disguised as her speaker’s, since Mew’s dramatic monologues are themselves almost involuntary “impersonation[s]”:

To Charlotte Mew impersonation was necessary, rather than helpful. “The quality of emotion,” she thought, was “the first requirement of poetry . . . for good work one must accept the discipline that can be got, while the emotion is given to one.” And what she needed to give a voice to, as she also explained, was the *cri de coeur* . . . (104)

Fitzgerald’s discussion of the *cri de coeur* is misleading for several reasons. First, she implies that the *cri de coeur* and “the quality of emotion” belong to a single statement that Mew made about her own poetics—perhaps one that addresses the necessity of “impersonation.” In fact, as Fitzgerald’s footnotes reveal, Mew’s comments about “the quality of emotion” come from a letter written to a different correspondent, a year and a half before she wrote the letter to Cockerell. Fitzgerald also implies that *cri de coeur* was an important technical term for Mew, one she developed herself, while Mew’s letter to Cockerell makes it very clear that *cri de coeur* is *his* phrase, not hers: “(I use your phrase.)” Finally, Fitzgerald ends her discussion with a misreading of Mew’s observation

¹³⁴ “Letter to Sidney Carlyle Cockerell,” 10 July 1918. Mew’s letter is also reprinted in Cockerell’s *Friends of a Lifetime*, 316–317.

that “so one goes on - calling up witnesses to the real thing.” Fitzgerald interprets this to mean that “A cry has to be extorted, that is its test of truth”—implying that the *cri de coeur* in Mew’s work is an involuntary flood of emotion, one that gushes from the heart of the poem’s speaker as well as from Mew’s own heart. But in Mew’s letter to Cockerell, she makes it clear that what she finds useful about Cockerell’s phrase is not the value of the *cri de coeur* as a test of raw emotional authenticity, as Fitzgerald’s misreading suggests, but its function as the distillation of an immediately recognizable character, complete with “the gesture and the *accent*.” The theatricality of both gesture and accent certainly associates them with strong emotion—but with the *performance* of strong emotion, not necessarily its expression. For Mew, “calling up witnesses to the ‘real thing’” refers to what she herself is doing in her letter to Cockerell: thinking of additional examples of effective *cris de coeur* in literature, and enjoying the “delightful company” of the characters associated with—and in fact defined by—such gesture[s] and “*accent*[s].” The “real thing” is, perhaps paradoxically, not sincerely felt emotion but Mew’s professional admiration for “real,” as in powerfully well-crafted, art(ifice).

Several critics, accepting Fitzgerald’s misreading of Mew’s letter, have also adopted Fitzgerald’s implication that the *cri de coeur* was one of Mew’s “aesthetic touchstones” (Colecott 166), and many critics who do not borrow the term itself follow Fitzgerald in the condescending assumption that Mew’s monologues express her own helpless cry of pain or passion, only partially masked by the *personae* of her poems.¹³⁵ Such biographical reading practices, of course, are perennially applied to women poets; critics’ tendency to read Mew in this way is consistent with a tendency to read her work,

¹³⁵ Examples include Severin (see below) and Rice, who claims that “like Emily Brontë, to disguise her own self, Mew often spoke through a masculine voice” (55) and compares Mew to “her farmer, caught forever on the stair below the beloved’s room” (60).

if not to label her, as a nineteenth-century Poetess—despite the fact that as early as 1879, Augusta Webster had dismissed such reading practices with her reminder that, when it comes to poets, “As a rule, I does not mean I” (“Poets” 154). Beginning with Fitzgerald’s biography, which presents Mew as a Jekyll-and-Hyde figure composed of the decorous “Miss Lotti” and the more daring and passionate “Charlotte,” critics have seen Mew as tortured by so many conflicting identities and allegiances that her division appears to be overdetermined. Mew is divided between devotion to her family and a desire for artistic freedom, between painful shyness and overwhelming hilarity, and, most famously, between a ladylike prudishness and a passionate lesbian desire, a division which manifests itself in both her life and her writing as a tension between silence and speech, concealment and revelation.¹³⁶ For these critics, the best emblem for Mew’s poetics is the “red dead thing”—the buried heart or aborted fetus—in her poem “Saturday Market”:

What were you showing in Saturday Market
That set it grinning from end to end
Girls and gaffers and boys of twenty - ?
Cover it close with your shawl, my friend. (13 – 16)

To read Mew’s work as her own involuntary *cri de coeur* is to read it as a bloody heart whose cry—or bloody stain—reveals itself despite her efforts to conceal or mask it. As Severin argues, “the desire for women briefly flickers” in the farmer’s final *cri de coeur*, when the speaker is no longer plausible as a “rough country-man” but is visible instead as “a woman poet impersonating a man” (27). Read in these terms, “The Farmer’s Bride” expresses not only the *cri de coeur* of a baffled, uneducated farmer, but of a woman poet whose frustrated desire for women’s bodies can’t be directly articulated, but must slip out

¹³⁶ See Fitzgerald, especially on the division between “Charlotte” and “Miss Lotti,” (50, 91 – 92); Laura Severin on Mew’s “longing for self-unification” (27); Tim Kendall on how “readers alike have the opportunity to “see” (or fail to see) the otherwise withheld secrets of Mew’s personae” (645).

through the voice of a male speaker, inexpertly disguised by an unevenly-applied country dialect. Whereas early in the poem, the writer's and the reader's sympathies lie with the silent bride, Severin follows Fitzgerald's implication that our sudden surge of sympathy for the farmer in the last stanza is in fact sympathy for Mew's barely-disguised voice as it breaks, almost unintentionally, into the poem.

Mew's desiring body, divided between passion and convention, is further understood by many critics to have produced a body of work divided by the conventional periods of literary history. As Joseph Bristow has explained, Mew is "hard to place, both culturally and historically," because her literary career can be easily divided into two distinct periods, one in the 1890s and one in the 1910s (225). Because of this, most critics choose a side, making a case for classifying Mew's work as either "Victorian" or "modernist." Victorianists have made much of the fact that Mew's first published work, a short story called "Passed," appeared in 1894 in the second issue of the self-consciously scandalous fin-de-siècle journal *The Yellow Book*, alongside illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley and texts by Henry James and Max Beerbohm; much has also been made of the fact that, after Oscar Wilde's arrest and conviction in 1895, Mew apparently cut all ties with *The Yellow Book*, presumably wanting to distance herself from the scandal associated with literary decadence as a movement.¹³⁷ Two decades later, in 1916, Mew published *The Farmer's Bride*, the collection of poems upon which her literary reputation would rest; the book was reviewed by the modernist poet H.D. in Ezra Pound's journal *The Egoist*, and scholars have argued that Mew's work influenced T.S. Eliot's.¹³⁸ In arguing for the inclusion of Mew's work in the canon of a particular literary period—

¹³⁷ See Fitzgerald 70 and Severin 23.

¹³⁸ Among the first to make this claim was John Newton, in his 1997 article "Charlotte Mew's Place in the Future of English Poetry"; see also Rice 46.

Victorian or modernist—critics nearly always acknowledge that her work lies at the furthest possible limit of either; Mew becomes a defining boundary, an Ultima Thule of periodization, the last gasp of Victorianism or the first tentative murmur of modernism. For Angela Leighton, Mew is “one of the last Victorians,” a child of the late nineteenth century whose imagery and subject matter owe more to the lyrics of Christina Rossetti and Emily Brontë than to the twentieth-century milieu in which she wrote her most famous poems. According to other critics, Mew has been miscategorized as a Victorian “poetess” not because she writes on Victorian themes, but because of what Nelljean Rice describes as her “conservative, even genteel poetics,” which have distracted critical attention from the radicalism of her depictions of lesbian desire; for Rice, Celeste M Schenk, and others, Mew is “one of the founders of a female modernism” (Rice x).

Some critics, however, most notably Bristow, Kate Flint, and Carrie Preston, have resisted the temptation to choose a side in these debates over periodization. Flint and Preston demonstrate that Mew’s short stories and dramatic monologues respectively owe much of their power to the modernity of nineteenth-century social life and poetic form.¹³⁹ Bristow argues that Mew’s writing is “hard to place” in literary history precisely because her work formally and structurally enacts temporal displacement; in this way, Bristow suggests, Mew’s work not only frustrates critics’ efforts to assign it to a particular literary period, but calls into question the value of periodization itself (257). Yet even Bristow’s powerful critique of the critical desire to “fix [Mew] in time,” as well as of the desire to

¹³⁹ Although Flint identifies Mew’s *Yellow Book* short story, “Passed,” as an “experimental” and “proto-modernist piece,” she makes it clear that this experimentalism is a direct product of the *fin-de-siècle* urban landscape: Mew’s story marks “a convergence of contemporary social topoi,” not a violent break with late-nineteenth-century culture or a nostalgic yearning for a high Victorian childhood (703). For Preston, Mew’s adoption of the nineteenth-century form of the dramatic monologue demonstrates its continuing relevance for twentieth-century poets, including modernist icons such as Eliot, Pound, and H.D.

solve the mystery of her literary, historical, and sexual allegiances, dissects Mew's work in order to identify and label its "Victorian" and "modern" components. According to Bristow, while Mew displays a protomodernist tendency to "diminish . . . the authority" of the poem's speaker, her verse "nonetheless clings to the vestiges of rhythm and rhyme" bequeathed by those same Victorians.¹⁴⁰ The image of a woman poet "cling[ing]" to the "vestiges" of an obsolete Victorian tradition is familiar from modernist narratives of the Victorian era, such as Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" decorously "taking tea with friends" in what Ben Glaser has identified as a vestigial form of iambic pentameter.¹⁴¹ In other words, although Bristow resists the biographical speculation that dominates so much writing about Mew, nevertheless in associating Mew's varied formal choices with Victorian poetry, and her fragmentation of the speaking subject with modernism, his analysis bears a structural resemblance to accounts of Mew as divided between an artificial and old-fashioned propriety—what Rice calls "genteel poetics"—and a seemingly modern "radical sexual politics" that expresses Mew's authentic lesbian identity (Rice 14).

As I have shown, Fitzgerald's focus on the *cri de coeur* as a central motif in Mew's poetry is based at least in part on a misreading of Mew's letter; subsequent critics' reading of Mew's work as ruptured by involuntary or barely-concealed bursts of the

¹⁴⁰ Bristow 271. One problem with this account, of course, is that it places unrhymed free verse as a modernist telos, which is accurate only in the narrowest accounts of the history of English prosody. As recent studies in historical prosody have shown, "rhythm" and "rhyme" were by no means stable categories in the Victorian period. Debates about the relationship between meter and conversational speech proliferated throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth; Mew's own experiments with mixed meter and irregular rhyme schemes have plenty of nineteenth-century antecedents as well as twentieth-century descendents. See Meredith Martin's *The Rise and Fall of Meter* and Yopie Prins's "Victorian Meters," among others.

¹⁴¹ In a talk entitled "The Gender of Modern Meter" at Rutgers in the spring of 2014, Glaser discussed Pound's and Eliot's association of traditional forms with figures of women as part of their critique of 1890s aesthetics. See also Suzanne Clark and Gail McDonald on Pound and Eliot's antifeminine aesthetics.

poet's own passion becomes less convincing when we attend to Mew's own use of the phrase. Further, some of Mew's most obviously "modern" poetic choices—the apparent "fragmentation" of her speakers, for example—invoke nineteenth-century forms and genres in a way that complicates debates about Mew's position in literary history. Her emphasis on the role of "gesture" and "accent" in "A Farmer's Bride" recalls the stylized theatrical conventions of nineteenth-century performance genres such as melodrama; it also reminds us of the significance that spoken, embodied performance played in the history and reception of her writing, as well as in the literary communities to which she belonged. It is important to remember that Mew began her career as a poet by reading her poems out loud at literary salons hosted by Catherine Dawson Scott ("Mrs Sappho"). Later on, Alida Klemantaski (later Monro) performed Mew's poems at London's Poetry Bookshop, where Klemantaski and the Bookshop's founder, Harold Monro, would eventually publish *The Farmer's Bride*; Monro himself considered the performance of poetry to be an important aspect of literary culture, treating the text of a poem as merely a "printed score" for live performance (Fitzgerald 145).

Mew's emphasis on "gesture" and "accent" adopts the same performance metaphor, associating the *cri de coeur* with stylized theatrical conventions that can be learned and practiced, a far cry from the uncontrollable outburst that Mew's *cri* is often understood to be. In Victorian melodrama, standardized speech and gestures were two of the conventions that allowed audiences to immediately recognize familiar melodramatic types. Melodrama, too, provides a precedent for the inconsistencies in the farmer's diction, as he moves from homespun regionalisms to grammatically correct but passionate lyricism. According to Carolyn Williams,

in relation to the heroine's purity of speech, the hero is sometimes a mixed figure, as in nautical melodramas such as *Black Ey'd Susan*, where he usually speaks in a dense metaphorical jargon, showing that he is fully inhabited by his role as servant of the state, but under the stress and pressure of strong emotion, his speech will become a heightened form of manly eloquence, sometimes even rising into blank verse. (203)

Mew's attention to gesture and theatricality also suggests the nineteenth-century theories of Francois Delsarte, who, following traditional melodramatic performance conventions, developed a system of "attitudes" for exercise and performance in which "each gesture or pose corresponded to a separate meaning" (Preston 60), and whose ideas influenced early twentieth-century "cultures of recitation," including the Poetry Bookshop (10).

Not only does Mew foreground the artificiality of the *cri de coeur* by describing it in terms of the conventional gestures of the Victorian theater, she also associates the *cri de coeur* with two figures familiar from the nineteenth-century stage: Marguerite Gautier and Sarah Gamp. Although they are not quite as conventional as melodramatic types, both Gautier and Gamp were made famous through nineteenth-century theatrical performance and circulated readily within and across print and performance texts and genres as instantly-recognizable cultural icons rather than plausible three-dimensional characters. In this way, figures such as Gautier and Gamp, immensely popular characters whose cultural presence exceeds the boundaries of the novels in which they first appeared, resemble the figure of the Poetess: a figure who facilitates textual and affective circulation across national and generic boundaries. Like Poetess performers, Gautier and Gamp gesture and emote not to reveal the contents of their "hearts," but rather as

“empty” vehicles for feeling and, in these cases, the portable, extractable, memorable phrases that Mew describes as *cris de coeur*.¹⁴²

In her discussion of the power of the *cris de coeur* of Gautier and Gamp, Mew both enacts and calls attention to the modes of circulation that characterize Poetess writing by emphasizing the ways in which memorable catch phrases or “tags” circulate among and between texts, performances, and audiences. Sarah Gamp, an alcoholic nurse who plays a minor, comic role in Dickens’s 1843 – 44 novel *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*, was immensely popular among Victorian audiences—perhaps even more successful in performance than on the page. Gamp was a major character in unauthorized theatrical adaptations of *Martin Chuzzlewit* that toured England throughout the nineteenth century, while Dickens himself capitalized on the character’s popularity outside of the novel by giving frequent public readings of “Mrs Gamp,” a manuscript in which he condensed, edited, and added to the sections of the novel having to do with Mrs Gamp (Adams 67). An independent “sketch” Dickens had drafted, in which Mrs Gamp describes, in her distinctive style, a real-life benefit performance Dickens organized in 1847 for Leigh Hunt, was rediscovered and privately printed in New York in 1899—demonstrating the ease with which Dickens was able to detach Gamp entirely from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and suggesting that at the turn of the twentieth century there was a resurgence of interest, on both sides of the Atlantic, in Gamp as a stand-alone

¹⁴² For a fuller discussion of Poetess circulation, see Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson, “Lyrical Studies,” in which Prins and Jackson argue that the Poetess “circulates from the late eighteenth century onward as an increasingly empty figure, not a lyric subject to be reclaimed as an identity but a medium for cultural exchange” (523). See also Prins’s entry on the “Poetess” in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*, in which Prins emphasizes the Poetess’s “broad international circulation” (1051) as well as her role “as a detachable figure that exceeded the work of any actual woman poet” and a “repeatable trope” that might be taken up by anyone (1052); and McGill’s introduction to *The Traffic in Poems*, which suggests that attending to the Poetess’s transatlantic circulation might “make it possible to track the shifting currents of cultural exchange” (4).

character.¹⁴³ Indeed, anthologies such as *The Humour and Pathos of Charles Dickens* (1884) and *The Comedy of Charles Dickens* (1906), collections of extracts that could be read aloud or performed in the family parlor, dedicated substantial sections to passages in the voice of Sarah Gamp. Readers were so taken with the character and with her ubiquitous umbrella that *gamp* remained a slang term both for an underqualified nurse and for an umbrella well into the twentieth century.¹⁴⁴

While Mrs Gamp circulated beyond *Martin Chuzzlewit* in a multitude of authorized and unauthorized texts and performances, as well as in casual spoken language, Marguerite Gautier, the consumptive courtesan heroine of Dumas *fils*'s 1848 novel *La Dame aux Camélias*, circulated (and continues to circulate) primarily in the gorgeously costumed, gracefully gesturing form of nineteenth- and twentieth-century actresses—embodied onstage, flickering onscreen, flattened into photographs and playbills and pasted into theatrical scrapbooks. Gautier never utters the phrase “*Je veux vivre*” in the novel itself; Dumas added it for the 1852 stage version. The play was hugely popular and was revived multiple times throughout the nineteenth century in Paris, London, and New York, with some of the most prominent actresses of the 1890s playing the leading role, including Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt; Bernhardt also starred in a 1911 film version, years before Greta Garbo's iconic performance as Gautier in the 1936 film *Camille*. In the theater, cry, gesture, and accent became much more important than they are in Dumas's epistolary novel; but in the theater these factors also vary widely based on the choices of the actress who plays the role. Mew herself, as she notes

¹⁴³ Dickens, “Mrs Gamp With the Strolling Players: An Unfinished Sketch.”

¹⁴⁴ “Gamp, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2017. Web. 17 June 2015. One of the references for “gamp” in the *OED* is from a novel published in 1918, the year of Mew's letter to Cockerell: “‘What weather!’ muttered Miss Hand. . . . ‘With my usual luck, came without a gamp this morning,’ grumbled Miss Turner” (G. M. Baillie Reynolds, *Lonely Stronghold* I.9).

in a different letter to Cockerell, saw both Duse and “Sara” in the role and remarked upon the differences between their performances: “it was like light & darkness though both were great.”¹⁴⁵

It’s possible that Mew saw both performances in the summer of 1895, when Duse and Bernhardt appeared in London in competing productions of *La Dame aux Camélias*, in repertory with *Heimat*, a play by the German playwright Hermann Sudermann. Mew’s use of the phrase “light & darkness” not only evokes the famous rivalry between the the naturalistic Duse and the more “theatrical” Bernhardt,¹⁴⁶ but echoes the language George Bernard Shaw used in a review he published that year comparing their performance styles: the two celebrity actresses, Shaw writes, are “as different . . . as light from darkness” (139). Shaw’s discussion of Duse and Bernhardt evokes questions of sincerity, artifice, and intentionality that were important in discourse surrounding the nineteenth-century Poetess as well as the actress—a connection that Jonas Barish makes explicit in his account of contemporary critical responses to the two actresses, which he frames in terms of John Stuart Mill’s famous “distinction between poetry and eloquence.” Citing Arthur Symons’s writing about Duse, Barish writes that “[j]ust as the lyric poet eschews eloquence and allows us to ‘overhear’ his reveries, Duse shuns all ‘conscious rhetoric,’ permitting us simply to ‘overlook’ her” (345). Similarly, Shaw’s review emphasizes the contrast between Bernhardt’s obviously self-conscious, self-aggrandizing performance and the seeming privacy and interiority of Duses’s. Bernhardt, “looking you straight in the face,” woos the audience with her larger-than-life personality and her “splendacious,”

¹⁴⁵ ¹⁴⁵ “Letter to Sidney Carlyle Cockerell,” 24 January 1922.

¹⁴⁶ Arthur Symons said that Duse and Bernhardt helped critics “realise the difference between what is dramatic and what is merely theatrical” (quoted in Barish 346). Barish cites critical praise for Duse’s naturalistic style in his discussion of late-nineteenth-century antitheatricity.

“inhuman” beauty, enhanced by “a layer of peach-bloom from the chemist’s.” Despite her heavy makeup, Shaw describes Bernhardt as always emphatically, even distractingly herself: “[s]he does not enter into the leading character; she substitutes herself for it” (135 - 136). Duse’s refusal to “paint an inch thick,” on the other hand, allows her to transform her body into her character’s through feeling; her skin is a transparent instrument that reveals interior emotion through physiological effects. Shaw recounts with awe a scene in which Duse, in character as Magda in *Heimat*, appears to blush “spontaneously”: “I could not detect a trick in it: it seemed to me a perfectly genuine effect of the dramatic imagination.” When Bernhardt performs the same scene, meanwhile, the painted “peach-bloom never altered by a shade” (141).

Based on Fitzgerald’s interpretation of Mew’s *cri de coeur*, we might expect Mew to prefer Duse, whose performance—however technically perfect and intentional we know it to be—seems to embody the idea that emotion should be, or should at least *appear* to be, “extorted.” Duse’s blush is a literal, corporeal manifestation of her own *coeur*: the blood that rushes to her face is evidence of her own beating heart and powerful emotion. The effect, as Shaw notes, appears to be both “spontaneous” and almost involuntary: he recounts how Duse, in character as Magda, tried to ignore the heat and color spreading across her face and then finally “gave up and hid the blush in her hands” (141). Yet Mew admires both performances: the larger-than-life, even “inhuman” personality of Bernhardt as well as Duse’s subtle, naturalistic expression of her character’s psychology and physicality; the artifice of painting one’s face to become more oneself and the technique—no less artificial despite its apparent naturalness—of transforming one’s body through deeply-felt emotion to become more like someone else.

In citing two performances of Gautier's "Je veux vivre!" that were so famously different in "gesture" and "accent" as well as in costume and makeup, Mew makes it clear that one of the pleasures of the *cri de coeur* is its theatrical versatility, its ability to transform entirely from darkness to light, from naturally blushing flesh to chemist's peach-bloom, as it moves from one performer to another.

In this way both Gautier and Gamp are remarkable as characters for their portability: the ease with which they can detach from their original literary context and attach to different bodies and voices (Duse and Bernhardt, light and darkness) and even objects (umbrellas). Mew's choice of these portable figures, with their memorable dialects (French, cockney), suggests that she understands the *cri de coeur* to be a kind of catchphrase or "tag" that might circulate and take on new meanings in multiple contexts.

"That Tag of the Old Greek Philosopher":

Circulating Language in "Thic Theer Kayser"

Further evidence for the importance of the circulating "tag" in Mew's work may be found in her unpublished short story "Thic Theer Kayser," which reposes among Mew's papers in the British Library. A darkly comic portrait of a small town on the Cornish coast at the outbreak of the First World War, written sometime after war was declared in 1914, "Thic Theer Kayser" was for many years unavailable to scholars.¹⁴⁷ It

¹⁴⁷ As an undated, unpublished typescript salvaged from Alida Monro's private files, "Thic Theer Kayser" might serve as an emblem for Mew's periodization problem. The story could have been written any time between the formal declaration of war in August 1914 and Mew's death in 1928; depending on the date of composition, we might understand the story's author as writing in the final glow of antebellum Victorian optimism or in the throes of postwar modernist disillusionment. In cataloguing the foibles of her volunteer patrolmen on the Cornish coast, does Mew unintentionally foreshadow the horrors of the First World War, or is she writing the story as a deliberate commentary on those horrors? The answers to these questions matter; they are also likely to be impossible to retrieve from the materials currently available to scholars. Yet "Thic Theer Kayser" itself suggests that the question of Mew's own loyalties to the past or the future is irrelevant. The themes and language of "Thic Theer Kayser" are consistent with Mew's interests as a writer throughout her lifetime, further troubling the narrative in which Mew experienced a traumatic rupture from

is not included in Mew's *Collected Prose*; its only appearance in Mew criticism is in Mary Davidow's 1959 dissertation on Mew, in which Davidow reports that Alida Monro had the manuscript of "a humorous war story in the Cornish dialect" (166). The story's use of humor makes it almost unique among Mew's writing—only one other piece, Mew's short story "A Fatal Fidelity," seems to have relied as heavily on comic effect.¹⁴⁸ In the absence of the anguished characters featured in Mew's more well-known writing, this story, in conjunction with Mew's letters to Cockerell, gives us a fuller context in which to understand her theories about the value of the *cri de coeur* and the "tag." Reinserting "Thic Theer Kayser" into Mew's canon allows us to see that the interest Mew displayed in the extractable, portable humor of Gamp's *cri de coeur*, as well as in the popular print genres in which such quotable *cris* might circulate, influenced Mew's own writing.

"Thic Theer Kayser" is indeed a "war story," but a war story about the home front. Throughout the story, the title phrase "thic theer kayser" circulates among the inhabitants of the fictional town of Weston immediately before and after the declaration of the First World War, as they prepare to defend their coastline from Kaiser Wilhelm and speculate about how the war will affect their local community. While, as this repeated phrase suggests, Weston first appears to be a community united by a common dialect, local customs, and local knowledge, Mew's repetition of the phrase "thic theer kayser" and other shared language reveals a community engaged in active debate about the sources

fiction writing after the *Yellow Book* folded in 1894: whether written in 1914 or 1927, the story contributes to existing evidence that Mew continued to write thoughtful, complex fiction throughout the early decades of the twentieth century.

¹⁴⁸ In an introduction to "A Fatal Fidelity," which was published after Mew's death in 1928, Alida Monro wrote, "The author's temperament was keyed very low and the agreeable, wry irony of 'A Fatal Fidelity' exhibits about as sanguine a view of life, as near comedy as is to be found anywhere in her writing" (Monro, "Typescript.")

and ethical application of community knowledge, as well as where the authority over such knowledge might lie. The questions of cultural authority that underlie Mew's and Cockerell's correspondence about the *cri de coeur*—should Mew's farmer conform to standards set by erudite male readers with academic bona fides, or to the standards Mew seems to have gleaned from wide, if disorganized and promiscuous reading and playgoing?—emerge in “Thic Theer Kayser” as questions with significant ethical, as well as aesthetic, consequences.

The story begins with a long monologue delivered at a local pub by Bill Gush, a veteran of the Naval Reserve who is now “only eight years too old for the call”:

“The village do seem to be all stirred up about it” said Bill Gush, smoking and spitting from the bench at the ‘Fountain Head’, “but it wad’n no surprise to me. I knawed from the first what thic theer Kayser was about, so soon as I were out to they manoeuvres. I cu’d hev told ‘em, though I baint no Admiral in a blue padded coat walkin’ deck and lookin’ trustful to the stars when all the mischief was said and done wi’.” (1:1)

At the end of his monologue, Gush recounts a conversation he had with the Coast Guard; the narrative moves from Bill at the Fountain Head to the coast guard at his look-out post, where he is being “fetched home by his wife and the last twins in the perambulator” (1:2), and continues on through many of Weston’s residents and places, following an associative, almost cinematic logic that anticipates Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*. The story “cuts” abruptly from a scene in which Mrs Parry is gossiping about how angry Constable Butler is with young patrolman Ridge Abbot to a scene in which Constable Butler tells the same story himself; from a scene in which the wealthy, genteel Miss Emily is speculating about the vicar’s views on the war to a scene in which the Vicar finally, and surprisingly, reveals his own (terrifying, apocalyptic) view of the war.

One function of this narrative technique is to construct a map of a community's consciousness. Everyone in the town knows everyone else; everyone knows—and is telling—the same story. And, in contrast with the standard English used by the narrator, the characters in Part I of the story are united by their common dialect: unlike the Farmer's rather generic "rough" speech in "The Farmer's Bride," the distinctly Cornish dialect of the residents of Weston marks them as belonging to an identifiable region of England—although the name of their specific town, with its Hardyan etymology, is fictional. This continuity of both consciousness and voice is reinforced by the recurrence of tags or refrains, including the phrase "armed praper dangerous" and the eponymous "thic theer kayser."

Within the continuity of this community voice, "Thic Theer Kayser" stages debates over authority, knowledge, and belonging. Beginning with Bill Gush's opening claim that he is better equipped to assess what "thic theer Kayser was about" than an "Admiral in a blue padded coat . . . lookin' trustful to the stars," the residents of Weston continually prioritize local, community wisdom over state, religious, and even natural systems of authority ("the stars"). Bill is vague about the source of his special insight into the Kaiser's motives; his invocation of his twenty years in the Naval Reserve, combined with his association with the local watering-hole the Fountain Head, imply that a semi-professional engagement in warfare, one that does not override his identity as a Weston townsman, is a source of his special insight into the Kaiser's motives. Gush's semi-professionalism—his amateur status—allows him to remain entirely in and of Weston, a human embodiment of the Fountain Head pub, a thoroughly local—and gushing—font of knowledge himself.

Having established, in Gush's opening monologue, the value of a Westoner's informally acquired local knowledge in opposition to knowledge acquired through official education or authority, Mew's story goes on to test these systems of knowledge against one another, unfolding as a series of debates between Weston residents over the definitions and limits of Gush's local form of knowledge. The wartime preparations provoked by the looming, if unseen, presence of "thic theer kayser" involve the literal policing of community boundaries: as the townspeople debate over the strategies that volunteer patrols should use for excluding or eliminating the Kaiser's soldiers and spies, implicit judgments about who does and does not belong in, or to, Weston are laid bare for debate and critique. Mr Dowell believes that a volunteer patrol is unnecessary, since the community already employs a constable to police its borders: "if these heer barbarious fee-ends bewalkin' cliffs, 'tis for Mr Boyd wi' his spy-glass and target to shoot 'em at sight or what's he theer for?" (1:5). His wife disagrees—not with Mr Dowell's assessment of Boyd's ability to distinguish enemy combatants ("barbarious fee-ends") from Westoners, but with the assumption that barbarious fee-ends deserve to die:

Mr Boyd should call 'em up and talk plain and kind to 'em, before he thinks of acting so" said Mrs Dowell, stoutly - "I got two lads of my own in the North Sea, and none but the Almighty knows what lads be up to - all world over. Fee-ends or no, every one of they theer Germans do be some poor woman's son. (1:5)

Mrs Dowell advocates for a deeper knowledge of the outsiders, based in clear and sympathetic communication ("talk[ing] plain and kind") rather than the immediate identification of their outsider status; in echoing the story's oft-repeated title, she transforms the townspeople's indignant resentment of the temerity of a faraway head of state ("thic theer kayser") to a plea for empathy for the subjects of that state ("they theer

Germans”). Mrs Dowell is still operating according to Gush’s Fountain Head values—rejecting state authority in favor of personal or communal experience—but the community she privileges is the feminine, cross-cultural community of sentimental motherhood rather than the closed community of Weston, whose members, united by shared language and landscape, are immediately recognizable to one another.

Meanwhile, once the volunteer patrol is established, another mother, Mrs Parry, boasts of her son Art’s expertise as a Westoner and of his willingness to shoot strangers on sight. Initiating another catchphrase that will come to circulate in the story, Mrs Parry mother boasts that when her son, “armed praper dangerous,” noticed “two black figures up on Bovey Cliff,” Art bravely approached and readied himself to shoot: “if he hadn’t known the walk of ’em for Mabel Otton and young Searle, sweet-heartin’, [he] wu’d hev put a charge into m’em, he says, clean off” (MS 1:6). Perfectly willing to shoot first and ask questions later when it comes to the unfamiliar (and racialized) “black figures,” Parry possesses a deep and powerful understanding of his neighbors, on both a physical and emotional level. Even in silhouette, he can recognize Westoners “sweet-heartin’” and identify the specific couple by their distinctive walk.

At the end of the story, Mew’s omniscient narrator moves to a genteel drawing room where standard English is spoken instead of dialect, and the circulating phrases become literary quotations. The hypocritical Vicar of Weston preaches the importance of “self-control” during wartime, even though he himself believes the Apocalypse has come: “What is that tag of the old Greek philosopher -? ‘Valour consists in the power of self-possession’ - Nothing more true!” (2:5). The Vicar’s authority is challenged, however, by “Miss Sladen (B.A.), the governess,” who ventures that she “thought the correct reading

was self-recovery! And she believed it was Emerson. No, she was sure. Yes, she remembered now, she had seen the quotation in yesterday's 'Daily Mirror.' Emerson" (2:5).

Miss Sladen is correct; the quotation is Emerson's. In correcting the Vicar's quotation, Miss Sladen challenges his intellectual authority with her own distinctly less prestigious, more feminine education. Since Oxford did not grant degrees to women students until 1920, and Cambridge not until 1948, Miss Sladen's B.A. could not have come from the university at which the Vicar presumably received the classical education he invokes in quoting "the tag of the old Greek philosopher," as well as the spiritual and cultural authority he wields over the parish.¹⁴⁹ In keeping with the less authoritative source of her own education, she bases her claim not on a classical text, or even on Emerson's original essay, but from a "quotation in yesterday's 'Daily Mirror.'" The *Daily Mirror's* ephemerality is significant: in Mew's manuscript, she inserted the modifier "daily" in pencil after the story had already been typed, implying that as she revised, she had decided the "daily" quality of the newspaper was important to emphasize (2:5). As a daily paper that packaged literary culture in bite-sized, easily digestible extracts and "quotations" alongside advertisements for "Paisley's Flour," depilatories, and children's medicine—as well as up-to-the-minute war coverage—the *Daily Mirror* exemplifies the casual, disposable reading material popular with middle-class women readers.¹⁵⁰ Further, Miss Sladen's Emerson quotation invokes a rich print culture and

¹⁴⁹ Miss Sladen could, however, have been a "Steamboat Lady" who studied and took examinations at an Oxbridge women's college and subsequently received a degree from Trinity College in Dublin between the years of 1904 and 1907. See "A Timeline of the History of Women in Trinity," Trinity College website. Web. 19 July 2017.

¹⁵⁰ The Emerson quotation Miss Sladen cites did in fact appear on page 5 of the September 5, 1914 edition of *The Daily Mirror*, under the heading "A Thought for Today" and alongside a poem on "courage" taken

readership that developed in the nineteenth century and that depended heavily upon the use of quotations and extracts—including magazines and newspapers that published sentimental poems and sensational stories; printed scrapbooks and albums; manuscript albums and commonplace books; and anthologies such as *The Humour and Pathos of Charles Dickens*. According to Meredith McGill, the practice of detaching text from its original context creates a dislocating, dehistoricizing effect that emphasizes historical disjunction and distance over continuity (“Common Places” 358). Yet in its disruptions of received literary histories, such a practice can also identify historical continuities that scholars tend to overlook. As McGill says of Emerson’s own commonplace books, the extract reveals the contemporary relevance of historical texts (366); further, it is literal, material evidence of the text’s persistence in contemporary culture. For Emerson to reappear in *The Daily Mirror*, then—as well as in “Thic Theer Kayser”—is a sign not only of the continued relevance of nineteenth-century texts into the twentieth century (indeed, of the way in which some aspects of nineteenth-century literature were becoming, in the twentieth century, canonized *like* classical texts), but also of the continued influence in the twentieth century of practices that, although they predate the nineteenth century, profoundly shaped nineteenth-century print culture in both England and the United States.¹⁵¹

“Thic Theer Kayser” ends with more repeated “tags,” this time produced by the Vicar’s repeated claims about his determination not to share his apocalyptic pessimism about the War with the residents of Weston: “I shan’t breathe a word to it to the Parish”

from the play *Love and a Bottle* by George Farquhar; a column on gardening; and a number of letters and editorials about the war.

¹⁵¹ These practices worked differently over the course of the nineteenth century in Britain and the United States, however, in part because of differences in copyright laws. See McGill’s *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, as well as *The Traffic in Poems*.

and “I wouldn’t depress them for the world!” (2.6). Like Bill Gush, who “knawed from the first what thic theer Kayser was about,” the Vicar claims to have understood the implications of the Kaiser’s actions “from the outset.” Mew altered the Vicar’s speech in her original typescript, changing “my view is” to “my view is, and was,” in order to emphasize the fact that the Vicar is claiming a stable, unchanging authority, a belief that he has not adjusted in response to new developments in the war.

In ending her story with a speech that undermines the Vicar’s claims to rationality even as it gestures toward the unspeakable trauma of modern, global warfare, Mew refuses to resolve the story’s epistemological debates. The story exposes the absurdity and, in some cases, the violence underlying each form of knowledge that it depicts: the Vicar’s genteel pessimism, Bill Gush’s public-house posturing, the Parrys’ exclusionary violence. Nor do the forms of knowledge associated with women escape critique. The juxtaposition of Mrs Dowell’s tender-hearted concern for mothers’ sons across the globe with Mrs Parry’s bloody-minded maternal pride hints at the complex relationship between sentimental Poetess ideologies and the spread of imperial violence. And the narrator’s wry emphasis on Miss Sladen’s “B.A.”—with the implication that Miss Sladen is constantly reminding others of her credentials—invites us to smirk at Miss Sladen’s self-importance as well as at her reliance upon quotations from the middlebrow *Daily Mirror* and lack of deep reading of more prestigious texts. Of all the qualities Mew gently satirizes in “Thic Theer Kayser,” however, the story is most critical of unchanging certainty that cannot accommodate new information or respond to critique—a dangerous drawback of having an undivided, unchanging self. Mew associates this problematic certainty with the Vicar, whose unchanging views are authorized by the state-sponsored

institutions he represents; but she demonstrates how such certainty can come as easily from an Oxbridge education, an Admiral's padded coat, total immersion in a community, or even an individual person's innermost conviction. The local knowledge possessed by the anti-professional Bill Gush and the bloodthirsty Parrys, for example, is valuable in that it provides an alternative to official knowledge and brings Weston together as a community, but—as Mew also demonstrates in her depiction of the community-authorized violence in “A Farmer's Bride”—it is dangerous in its exclusivity and inflexibility, in Weston's willingness to shoot outsiders on sight. Mew's story is interested in the evolving argument, the dynamism of the community that is formed and taken apart again through debate and discussion, through shifting alliances, through uncertainties.

In this context, then, Miss Sladen comes closest to representing the story's epistemological standpoint. The structure of her response to the Vicar, which moves from “she thought” to “she believed” to “yes, she was sure” to “she remembered now” is, on one level, a gendered, passive-aggressive strategy that might allow a subordinate to disagree with an authority figure. Yet Miss Sladen's highly-gendered progression from thought to belief to certainty, and her citation of evidence to support her claim, is at the same time a model of an actively thinking, considering mind. In privileging Miss Sladen's mass-produced newspaper excerpt over the Latin “tag,” and the flexibility of “self-recovery” over “self-possession,” Mew's story privileges the real-time, daily construction and re-construction of the self in response to new ideas and new audiences over the inflexibility of Weston's residents and the Vicar's reliance on the (imaginary) textual integrity of an unchanging classical canon.

When we read Mew's poems in the context of the adaptable print and performance cultures associated with Miss Sladen, Mrs Gamp, and Marguerite Gautier, the *cri de coeur* marks the poems' speakers not as three-dimensional human beings overwhelmed by a secret passion, but rather as adaptable dramatic figures, available to be "impersonated" or interpreted by any number of actors, excerpted and quoted out of context, or even altered according to the shifting needs of the text itself. While Mew's assertion that "one either has or has not the person" implies a belief in the totality or integrity of the farmer as a complete character, the examples of Gamp, Gautier, and Miss Sladen's Emerson suggest that perhaps Mew's speakers become a complete "person" not through the authority of verisimilitude, but rather through their very textuality—through Mew's "use of words" (as she put it to Cockerell) to create a written score that might be complete on the page, but that might also flexibly accommodate other figures within and outside of the text; that might be extracted as "tags" and combined with other texts; or that might be further supplemented by "the gesture and the accent" of the performing body.

The Artifice of Passion in "The Farmer's Bride" and "The Fête"

Two of Mew's poems, "The Farmer's Bride" and "The Fête," particularly illustrate her investments in the nineteenth-century print and performance cultures she associates with the catchphrase or "tag." Early audiences for both poems believed that they required the supplement of the voice and gestures of a reader or performer.¹⁵² The novelist May Sinclair, a friend of Mew's, lamented that "The Fête" would not be enjoyed by a wide audience, since it "absolutely needed [Mew's] voice, her face, her intonation

¹⁵² Diana Collecott claims that for women writers in the first decades of the twentieth century "reading aloud to an audience was as significant as appearing in print" (166).

and vehemence, to make it carry,”¹⁵³ while Mew herself wrote to Cockerell, referring to Klemantaski’s performances of her poems, that

I think Miss Klemantaski’s reading of some of them must be largely responsible for the appreciation you are good enough to send me, as no doubt you will agree that - like the wind - she has a way of putting/pulling colour into things & among them the little *Farmer’s Bride*. (“Letter,” 10 July 1918)

Mew’s and Sinclair’s comments are an important reminder that the breath that animates Mew’s poetry is not a *cri* from Mew’s *coeur*, or her speakers’—they, of course, are made of language and have no *coeur*—but instead is “colour” that a reader or performer can pull or put into the poem. Even the language of “putting” and “pulling” suggests a certain elasticity that might allow the poem to be repurposed by its reader.

At the same time, these responses make clear that readers of both poems had difficulty fully appreciating Mew’s poems on the page. Both “The Fête” and “The Farmer’s Bride” make use of surprising changes in diction and dialect that challenge readers’ ability to construct a consistent speaker from the poem’s language, a problem that the unifying voice of the performer makes irrelevant. In the readings that follow, I consider how such shifts in diction work on the page, as well as in performance, to dramatize the flexibility and portability of the poems’ language as speech that is available for any number of readers or performers to appropriate, supplement, alter, and transform. Further, I argue, the portability and extractability of the poems’ language, as well as the poems’ performance history as texts shared by small communities of performers and audiences, both model the formation of communities within the poem and invite different performers and audiences to create temporary communities through live performance and quotation. Using shifts in diction and rhyme scheme, Mew brings her speakers into brief

¹⁵³ Quoted in Collecott 167.

proximity with different figures and communities in the poem. Meanwhile, the collage-like form of the poem itself, composed of different extractable sections, suggests that the poem is written to accommodate the performance styles of different readers and audiences. Mew places emphasis upon the often tenuous bonds the poem can create within and across its limits, rather than upon the contents of a speaker's hidden core—or *coeur*. As dramatic monologues, the poems already participate in that genre's historical function of exposing identity as constructed and contingent. While the Browningsque dramatic monologue is known for the tension it creates between individual and community, however, the shifting diction in Mew's poems pushes the reader's focus outward toward the speaker's relationship with the community, or the performer's relationship with the audience, and away from the integrity or interiority of an individual character.¹⁵⁴ In this way, Mew's highly citational poems replicate the insistently collective gestures of Poetess theatricality.¹⁵⁵

In "The Fête," Mew uses shifts in diction and dialect to make visible problems of translation and communication that are active but less apparent in "The Farmer's Bride" and elsewhere in Mew's work. While critics of "A Farmer's Bride" might have doubted that the inconsistency of the Farmer's dialect was deliberate, it is almost impossible to imagine "The Fête"'s polyglossia as unintentional. Mew makes no effort to create a consistent "voice" for her adolescent speaker, a French schoolboy struggling to come to terms with the memory of an erotic encounter he had at a traveling fair. Instead, Mew

¹⁵⁴ See Tucker's claim that the tension between the dramatic monologue's historical context, which "threatens to unravel character by exposing it as merely a tissue of affiliations" and its "lyrical" qualities, which "distemper . . . character and rob . . . it of contour," allow character to "emerge" as the poem "reinstates the checking of such dissolution as the mark of the individual self . . . a distinct 'I,' a name to conjure against" (546).

¹⁵⁵ On the Poetess's ability to create communities, see Eliza Richards's work on the work that "lyric mimicry" does in Poetess performance to "forge . . . social networks and transmit . . . cultural and formal understandings of value within and through time" (25).

marks different aspects of his identity—his Frenchness, his boyishness, his sense of wonder, his loss of innocence—at different moments in the poem through changes in the poem’s diction, even in the language in which the poem is written. The poem veers from French phrases to British schoolboy slang to self-consciously “lyric” speech in standard English, sometimes within a single couplet or line, such as in this description of “the girl who sugared the *gaufres*”: “*Pauvrette* / How thin she was! But she smiled, you bet” (67 – 68).

The apparent justification for these sudden shifts is the conceit that “The Fête,” as the thoughts or speech of a boy in France, was not “originally” composed in English. This conceit allows Mew to approach the problem of the speaker’s diction as a problem of translation. When dealing with a text in another language, is the speaker’s “gesture” and “accent” best captured through the transcription of the literal words he might speak (or write)—as Mew seems to have believed about Marguerite Gautier’s *cri de coeur*, “je veux vivre”? Or is the spirit of the boy’s “gesture” and “accent” best conveyed to an English-speaking audience through the idiom of his closest English analogue, the British schoolboy? Or through the passionate medium of unmarked, “lyric” poetic language? Like a teaching edition of a classical text, in which the text in the original language is printed alongside the translation, “The Fête” invites the reader to keep two or more texts in mind at once in order to synthesize the imaginary text of the speaker’s monologue—except that Mew’s “translations” are mixed in with her “original” text. For this reason, the experience of reading “The Fête” on the page, without the benefit of Mew’s vocal performance (a further translation), can be quite the opposite of the smooth, transparent reading experience we might have reading a loose, idiomatic translation of a French text.

Early in the poem, for example, as part of a complaint about the prefect who is patrolling the dormitory hallways, the speaker refers to himself and his classmates colloquially as “us boys,” then immediately cries out the French tag “*Seigneur mon Dieu!* the *sacré* soul of spies!” (9 – 10). As she does in “The Farmer’s Bride,” Mew uses nonstandard grammar here to indicate a speaker’s allegiance to a particular community: the language that marks the schoolboy as different from the educated English reader is also language that marks him as a distinct “character,” an element that allows for the recognition to which Mew alludes in her letter to Cockerell when she says “one either has or has not the person.” The French tags work in much the same way: a foreign phrase like “*Seigneur mon Dieu!*”, both exotic and immediately recognizable, produces a particular sense of passionate exasperation, a “gesture” and “accent” suited to a Catholic schoolboy in the throes of sexual anguish and guilt—a phrase that might fit both Mew’s and Cockerell’s definitions of a *cri de coeur*. It is noteworthy that the characters Mew cited in her discussion of the *cri de coeur* as examples of “the real thing,” Marguerite Gautier and Sarah Gamp, speak in French and a nonstandard English dialect, respectively. Yet the reader’s ability to “ha[ve] the person” who would say “us boys”—as the reader might feel that she “has” the person who says “je veux vivre!” or “Drink fair, Betsy, wot’ever you do”—is complicated by the fact that the same person says “*Seigneur mon Dieu!*”—and, for that matter, the fact that the same slangy schoolboy often breaks out into passages of haunting lyric description, such as “the sunshine leaves / The portraiture of dreams upon the eyes / Before it dies” (27 – 29).

Still more surprising shifts in diction can be found in the the dizzy, second-person descriptions of “the fête” itself, in which Mew rhymes French and English slang words in

the same couplet—in addition to the “*Pauvrette* / you bet” couplet, the boy describes a carnival game in which

you . . . [h]it, slick, the bull’s eye at the *tir*,
Spin round and round till your head went queer. (63 – 64)

While an English reader with some familiarity with French might find the rhymes to be sonically perfect, readers whose grasp of French pronunciation is much more or much less sophisticated might have to pause in their reading to reconcile the vowel sounds of “*tir*” and “queer”; further, the lack of eye rhyme is conspicuous for any reader. In this way, Mew’s choice of rhyme words foregrounds the artificiality of the text.

The uncertainty this reading experience produces in the reader—the sensation of sometimes being closer to, sometimes being alienated from the boy’s experience—mirrors, on the level of language, the intensity of the poem’s confessions and the profound obscurity of some of its references, in which the boy’s passionate but confused memories of his sexual encounter with a woman appear to fuse with images from the fair or from places he encountered in his childhood:

the starving rain - it was this Thing,
Summer was this, the gold mist in your eyes; -
Oh God! it dies.” (107 – 109)

Such experiences of readerly uncertainty also suggests the difficulty of cross-cultural, even of interpersonal communication: in placing short phrases of French, English slang, and standard English speech alongside one another, rather than constructing a consistent voice that represents the speaker as a whole character, Mew brings the reader into closer proximity to a culture and an individual consciousness that the reader (and Mew herself) can never fully understand. Yet the poem never figures the French and English identities

as a source of conflict for the speaker; “The Fête” is not a poem about a self fragmented by competing allegiances to incompatible cultures. Instead, the changes in dialect operate primarily upon the reader, and the reader’s ability to understand the speaker. The often frustrating impossibility of capturing the speaker’s essence—of “hav[ing] the person”—makes room for artifice and creativity as the poet assembles and reassembles a new person with the help of multiple essences, tropes, types, and phrases, and for the reader to enjoy the pleasure of moving from one linguistic community to the next.

Reading “The Farmer’s Bride” alongside “The Fête” reveals that in both poems, Mew uses shifts in diction and dialect to comment on the pleasures, difficulties, and dangers of participating in a community—therefore addressing many of the same concerns she addresses in “Thic Theer Kayser.” Throughout “The Farmer’s Bride,” the farmer’s diction changes as he positions himself in relation to different social and natural contexts. In changing the farmer’s voice according to his changing allegiances, Mew invokes the melodramatic heroes whose “mixed speech” reflect the competing values of obedience to the state and private domestic virtue, as well as the sudden shifts of emotion characteristic of monodrama—both genres that focus on the presentation of abstract emotions rather than the revelation of character.¹⁵⁶ Considering the Farmer’s shifts in diction in the context of these theatrical genres makes it easier to see the Farmer’s resemblance to the melodramatic or monodramatic “type,” which A. Dwight Culler describes as a “formal thread on which the beads of passion are strung” rather than a divided self (380). The Farmer’s shifts in allegiance are indeed formal and in fact

¹⁵⁶ See Williams 203 for a discussion of “mixed speech.” A. Dwight Culler’s foundational article “Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue” explains that, unlike the dramatic monologue as practiced by Browning, monodrama is concerned not with the “revelation of character” but with “the display of the passions” (370-71). Carrie Preston identifies similar monodramatic shifts in Mew’s poem “Madeleine in Church” (60).

external, often coinciding with his physical proximity to other bodies and objects: the crowd of villagers, a feather, reddening berries, the bride herself. Driven by these proximities and affiliations, rather than by internal conflict, the Farmer becomes a figure not unlike Prins and Jackson's Poetess, a vehicle that carries multiple meanings within the text—and one that, through live performance, can further contain and communicate the “gesture” and “accent” from different performers to a variety of intimate and public audiences.

At the beginning of the poem, recalling a time when he was secure in his identity as a husbandman, and therefore as a husband, the farmer's language is matter-of-fact, his authority as a speaker unquestioned: “Three summers since *I* chose a maid,” he asserts (my italics), dismissing the doubt that she might have been “too young maybe” with the practical point that the business of running a farm “at harvest-time” didn't leave much time to “bide and woo” (1 – 3). When the bride he chose rejects him—“she runned away”—the farmer attaches himself more firmly to the authority of the community, the members of which speak in the same “rough” country dialect that the farmer has used in the poem so far (9). First, the farmer uses “them” as a resource for information about his wife's whereabouts: ““out mong the sheep, her be,’ they said” (10). Then he merges with that “they” to become an inexorable “we,” a hunting party, insistent on restoring the bride to the domestic space where she belongs: “We chased her, flying like a hare . . . We caught her, fetched her home at last / And turned the key upon her, fast” (15, 18-19). Although only one person can feasibly turn a key in a door, the farmer attributes this last act of suppression to the whole community of hunters, perhaps hoping to downplay his

own responsibility for his wife's imprisonment, perhaps longing for the certainty conferred by community authority.

By the third stanza, however, when the bride has been restored to the farm, the farmer's allegiances begin to transform again; his ties to the community as a whole are loosening. He still speaks as an "us," but now the "us" refers to the "men-folk" from whom the bride shrinks, in opposition to "the women" who know more about the bride, even if they're willing to tell on her: "The women say that beasts in stall / Look round like children at her call" (27 – 28). Then, in a burst of agonized loneliness, or perhaps childlike petulance, the farmer bursts out, "*I've* hardly heard her speak at all," breaking his ties to men, women, and patriarchal authority to return to the solitary *I* from the poem's first line (29).

As if this return to the *I* has also transformed the farmer into a Petrarchan lover, at this moment the poem erupts into gorgeous lyric:

Shy as a leveret, swift as he,
Straight and slight as a young larch tree,
Sweet as the first wild violets, she,
To her wild self. But what to me? (30 – 33)

Throughout the poem, the rhyme words in each verse paragraph have been moving closer together and multiplying: rime embrassée becomes couplets, couplets become triplets, so that the repeating sounds in the poem have become more insistent and obsessive. The effect culminates in this stanza, where there is only one rhyme sound, and where each of the first three lines ends with a word referring to the bride, in the terms of the farmer's rapturous blazon: the "he" that refers to the shy, swift leveret that the bride resembles in both her shyness and swiftness, but also perhaps in her unconventional gender

presentation (in her revulsion against her husband's "love," the farmer tells us early in the poem, she "wasn't a woman"); the "young larch tree"; the "she" who is "sweet as the first wild violets." The last line ends with "but what to me?"—another agonized *cri de coeur*, perhaps, lamenting the farmer's exclusion from the bride's autoerotic relationship "to her wild self," but also an open question. One possible answer might lie in the rhyme scheme: in rhyming "me" with words that have only described the bride ("she," "tree," even the "he" of the "leveret"), the farmer equates himself with the bride. This verse paragraph dramatizes a new strategy by which the farmer seeks to reunite with his bride: not through legal or cultural authority, but through sonic and structural mirroring.

By the next stanza, both the farmer and the bride are missing, almost entirely replaced by the lyric description and natural imagery that the farmer's blazon introduced.

In focusing *only* on images—

One leaf in the still air falls slowly down,
A magpie's spotted feathers lie
On the black earth spread white with rime (36 – 38)

—and in all but eliminating the "personality" from his colloquial speech, the farmer approaches the world of the bride still more closely, gesturing toward her silent communion with the natural world rather than deploying its imagery in support of a Petrarchan blazon. Just as Mew's references to Sarah Gamp's and Marguerite Gautier's memorable catchphrases posited the *cri de coeur* as an agent of decontextualization, one that isolates a character or line (such as "je veux vivre!") from the text in which it originally appeared, the *cri de coeur* "but what to me?" seems to have ushered in an extreme decontextualization: in this stanza, the social, literary, and sexual meanings that have accumulated around the poem's images seem to fall away, in favor of an aesthetic

where hierarchies of meaning are flattened out, and where images seem to be arranged only according to a logic of proximity and simultaneity. The falling leaf echoes the shape and the implied gesture of the fallen feathers; the “spotted feathers,” the white rime, and the “black earth” present a series of surfaces that touch one another but remain distinct, suggesting an alternative mode of connection to the violence, ownership, enclosure, and penetration imposed by the legal, agricultural, and literary models of love and marriage that have governed the poem so far. Like the snatches of lyric that, as Herbert Tucker argues, interrupt the historicizing social context of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues, this passage opens up the possibility of release from the exigencies of social life. Or perhaps it suggests the possibility of a different kind of social life, not necessarily Tucker’s “choral dissolution that lurks in lyric voice” (550), but a collage or assemblage arranged, as a reader might arrange a scrapbook or an evening of recitation, by formal and linguistic affiliations—a shared language, a mirrored shape—rather than by legal authority. For the space of these few lines, the poem suggests that, like Webster’s “lyric we,” the shared experience created by Mew’s aesthetics of decontextualization and quotation has the power to unite people in an almost utopian community.

Like the lyric interruptions Tucker cites, this one ends with a return to the social world as we know it—a world that recruits natural imagery to do its work. Ultimately the spell is broken by the “berries” that “redden up to Christmas-time” (39). Even “rough country-men” mark and understand natural time according to human calendars, and Christmas-time is both a time of winter when red berries ripen and a religious holiday beloved of children. The lyric impersonality vanishes from the farmer’s language, the social imperative returns, and with it, another *cri de coeur* in the farmer’s dialect:

What's Christmas-time without there be
Some other in the house than we! (40 – 41)

This “other”—named in the poem only by its absence—is the child whose presence would validate the farmer’s domestic Christmas celebrations. The child’s spectral non-appearance at the end of the stanza, at the moment when the poem’s natural imagery is once again fused to the exigencies of cultural life, reminds the farmer that his celibate marriage, however harmonious it may have seemed with the winter landscape he has been describing, violates both natural and cultural law: the bride, unlike the “redde[n] up” berries, has not ripened into fertility. The family’s failure to produce children is a failure both to fully participate in community celebrations such as Christmas and to fulfill the primary goal of marriage as defined by the church: the getting of children.

With its invocation of the celibate family’s failure to fulfill their social, religious, and possibly even their “natural” responsibilities, the farmer’s penultimate *cri de coeur* puts an end to the farmer’s idyll among the decontextualized, non-reproductive images of the winter landscape and carries him to the last stanza, in which his hope for union with the bride is faltering, and his language focuses on their mutual isolation and on the rawness of the farmer’s desire. The farmer’s forays into community authority, Petrarchan courtship, and impersonal natural description, however, seem to have honed his attention on the bride herself: he is seeing her, or allowing the reader to see her, as a living human body for the first time, after a poem in which she has been livestock, quarry, a muse, and a diffuse natural atmosphere. In this context, the exclamation that Cockerell calls a *cri de coeur*, although it certainly functions as an expression of the farmer’s frustrated sexual desire, may be more interesting to Mew as an index of the power and limits of language

to create community. The farmer and the bride cannot be brought to understand one another throughout the poem—for one thing, the trauma caused by the violence of their initial encounter may be irreparable—but the poem itself might create communities of performers, readers, and listeners, either through live performance or through recognition or quotation of the poem as a familiar text. The farmer’s changing diction, often marked by what Cockerell might call a *cri de coeur* and what we might characterize as a catchphrase or “tag,” functions here to bring various figures into contact throughout the poem—the farmer and the villagers, the farmer and the bride, the farmer and the reader, the reader and the bride—both through the connections the farmer makes with his own dialect, choice of pronouns, and rhyme scheme, and through the medium of the “tags” or *cri de coeur* themselves, as invitations to performance and quotation.

In “The Farmer’s Bride” and “The Fête,” then, Mew’s use of the *cri de coeur* both invites performance and structurally enacts the way in which such “tags” or catchphrases helped to form wider, often unexpected communities of performers, listeners, and readers. Both poems are indexes of the power and limits of language to create community; both are about linguistic pleasure in the movement from one community to the next. As texts for performance they invoke popular theatrical genres, including melodrama and monodrama; cinema adaptation; Dickens’s live readings and the unauthorized stage productions that took liberties with his text; and public poetry performance, private drawing-room recitations, and the semi-public culture of the literary salon. As printed texts Mew’s poems invoke related, similarly contingent and citational genres: the book of extracts; the scrapbook and the commonplace book; the daily newspaper. For Mew, the tag or *cri* is a unit of language and emotion immediately recognizable by the middle-class

woman reader and immediately assimilated, as the title of the *Daily Mirror* suggests, into her daily life. In this way, the *cri de coeur* facilitates the creation of readerly communities, uniting readers in their recognition and enjoyment of a particular character or phrase.

For many critics, Mew's middle-class, Victorian gentility was at odds with her participation in avant-garde modernist culture. Yet as Mew's letters suggest, the nineteenth-century genres Mew invokes in her work were still an active, thriving part of cultural life in the early twentieth century. "Thic Theer Kayser," a First World War story written at perhaps the moment of starkest historical transition between Victorian and modernist literary sensibilities, reminds us that Mew is decidedly a figure of her own time, writing about contemporary events in a contemporary way. Genres, texts, and *people* who had their origins in the nineteenth century continued not only to exist, but to play an active cultural role in the twentieth century: as Miss Sladen's Emerson quotation shows, the language of nineteenth-century America continued to be relevant to the daily round of news and information delivered by the *Daily Mirror*, a publication whose name suggests its function in reflecting quotidian contemporary life. Similarly, the *gamp* circulated in twentieth-century language; Marguerite Gautier appeared on twentieth-century cinema screens; and aging Victorian women such as Bernhardt and Duse—to say nothing of fiftysomething Charlotte Mew herself—were actively creating and consuming culture, publishing books, originating roles, and in Bernhardt's case, acting in the new medium of film. These artists, as Mew insisted to Cockerell, were twentieth-century women, not Victorians who had outlived their usefulness: in her 1922 discussion of Duse, Mew worries that Cockerell will consider Duse to be "too old," but asserts "there's no one like her." Mew's engagement with nineteenth-century print and performance genres suggests

a generative continuity between nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture: the Victorian Poetess, the melodrama, the elegant extract, mixed and broken meters, irregular rhyming, the gestures of Eleonora Duse, and the comic associations of the “gamp” umbrella all circulate in early twentieth-century culture as material from which poetry might be assembled and into which it might be disassembled. Mew’s incorporation of some of these materials into her poetic practice is a creative use of the materials at hand, not necessarily a modernist rejection of ladylike Victorian prudishness and preciousness nor a nostalgic “clinging” to familiar forms.

The fact that Mew has so frequently been read otherwise—that readers and critics from Fitzgerald onward have been surprised that such a prim middle-aged lady could write such passionate poetry—points us again to the forms of prejudice that pervaded modernist depictions of aging, supposedly irrelevant Victorian poetesses. Amused surprise about the passion of an older woman is inextricable from surprise that the “experimental” elements of Mew’s writing could coexist with “Victorian” sensibilities. Attending to Mew as a figure of her own time is crucial not only to our understanding of her work, but also to a better understanding of the messy texture of Poetess theatricality as it was written and read, in relation to literary and non-literary genres, across and alongside the borders of literary periods.

Acknowledgement of Previous Publication

Portions of Chapter Four, ““We Should Be *That* Iago’: Augusta Webster’s Lyric ‘We’” appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of *Victorian Poetry* as ““We Should Be That Iago: Counterfactual Sympathy and the Lyric ‘We’ in Augusta Webster’s *Portraits* and *A Housewife’s Opinions*” (pp. 63 – 83).

Works Cited

- A., "On Miss Landon's Poetry." *Living Poets of England: Specimens of the Living British Poets*, vol. II. Paris, 1827, pp. 496-97. Internet Archive. Web. 3 July 2014.
- "A Familiar Epistle to Mrs. Hemans." *Edinburgh Magazine* 8 (1821), p. 64. Google Books. Web. 12 March 2013.
- Adams, Amanda. *Performing Authorship in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Lecture Tour*. Ashgate, 2014.
- Advertisement for "Medallion Wafers." *Literary Gazette*, January 4, 1823, pp. 11-12. Google Books. Web. 13 July 2013.
- Alvarez, A. "The Poet and the Poetess." *Observer*, 18 December 1960, p. 12.
- "An Humble Invocation to Miss Hannah More." *Gentleman's Magazine* vol. 49, July 1779, p. 367. Google Books. Web. 23 April 2014.
- Arbuthnot, John, John Gay, and Alexander Pope. *Three Hours After Marriage*. In *A Supplementary Volume to the Works of Alexander Pope, Esq.* London: Strahan and Preston, 1807. Google Books. Web. 28 May 2014.
- Armstrong, Isobel. "The Gush of the Feminine." *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, edited by Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley. University Press of New England, 1995, pp. 13-32.
- . *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*. Routledge, 1993.
- . "Misrepresentation: Codes of Affect and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing." *Women's Poetry: Late Romantic to late Victorian, Gender and Genre: 1830 – 1900*, edited by Isobel Armstrong, Palgrave Macmillan, 1999, pp. 3 – 32.
- Badcock, Samuel. "Review of Yearsley, Poems on Several Occasions." *The Monthly Review* volume 73, September 1785, pp. 219, 221. *Spenser and the Tradition: English Poetry 1579 - 1830*. Web. 1 May 2014.
- Ball, William. *The Crowning of the Living British Poetesses*. London, 1827. Google Books. 30 July 2017.
- Barish, Jonas. *Antitheatrical Prejudice*. University of California Press, 1981.

- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*. Edited by Margaret Reynolds, Norton, 1996.
- . *Selected Poems*. Edited by Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor. Broadview, 2009.
- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth and Robert Browning. *The Brownings' Correspondence: An Online Edition*. Web. 10 June 2014.
- Barrow, Barbara. "Gender, Language, and the Politics of Disembodiment in *Aurora Leigh*." *Victorian Poetry*, Autumn 2015, pp. 243-262.
- Barton, Bernard. "To L. E. L. on his or her Poetic Sketches in the Literary Gazette." *The Literary Gazette*, 9 February 1822, p. 89.
- Beeton, Isabella. *The Book of Household Management*. London: 1861. Google Books. Web. 29 October 2016.
- Bennet, Georgiana. *The Poetess, and Other Poems*. London: Longman, Brown and Co., 1844. Internet Archive. Web. 5 May 2014.
- Blain, Virginia. "Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Eliza Mary Hamilton, and the Genealogy of the Victorian Poetess." *Victorian Poetry*, Spring 1995, pp. 31 – 51.
- Blair, Kirstie. *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Booth, Michael R. *Prefaces to English nineteenth-century theatre*. Manchester University Press, 1980.
- . *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910*. Routledge, 1981.
- Boutin, Aimée. "Inventing the 'Poétesse': New Approaches to French Women Romantic Poets." *Romanticism on the Net* vol. 29-30, 2003. Web. 25 July 2017.
- Bridges, Meilee D. "'Thou Thing of Years Departed': (En)gendering Posthumous Sublimity in Felicia Hemans's 'The Image in Lava.'" *Women's Studies* vol. 40, 2011, pp. 429 – 447.
- Bristow, Joseph. "Charlotte Mew's Aftereffects." *Modernism/modernity* vol. 16, no. 2, April 2009, pp. 255-280.
- Brown, Susan. "Determined Heroines: George Eliot, Augusta Webster, and Closet Drama by Victorian Women." *Victorian Poetry* vol. 33, Spring 1995, pp. 89 – 109.

- . "Economical Representations: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Jenny,' Augusta Webster's 'A Castaway,' and the Campaign Against the Contagious Diseases Act." *Victorian Review* vol. 17, 1991, pp. 78 – 95.
- . "The Victorian Poetess." *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, edited by Joseph Bristow, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 180 – 202.
- Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. "Review of *Romance and Reality* by L.E.L." *The New Monthly Magazine* vol. 32, December 1831, pp. 545-51. Google Books. Web.
- Byron, George Gordon. *The Corsair: A Tale. Selected Poems*, edited by Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning, Penguin Books, 1996, pp. 248 – 307.
- Byron, Glennis (See also Stephenson, Glennis.) *Dramatic Monologue*. Routledge, 2003.
- . (as Glennis Stephenson.) *Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L.E.L.* Manchester University Press, 1995.
- . "Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique." *Victorian Women Poets*, edited by Alison Chapman for the English Association. D.S. Brewer, 2003, pp. 79 – 98.
- Campbell, Thomas. *Mrs Siddons*. London: Effingham Wilson, 1834. Google Books. Web. 12 April 2014.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *The French Revolution: A History*, Volume I. London: Chapman and Hall, 1837. Google Books. Web. 12 March 2017.
- . *Sartor Resartus*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Chorley, Henry Fothergill. "English Poetesses." *New Quarterly Review* vol. 5, January 1845, pp. 77 - 104. Google Books. Web. 10 June 2014.
- Cibber, Theophilus. *The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland, Volumes 1 - 5 (1753)*. Project Gutenberg, digitized 2004. Web. 25 April 2014.
- Clark, Suzanne. "Introduction to 'Sentimental Modernism.'" *Gender in Modernism*, edited by Bonnie Kime Scott. University of Illinois Press, 2007, pages 125 - 132.
- Cockerell, Sidney Carlyle. *Friends of a Lifetime*, edited by Viola Meynell. London, 1940.
- . Letter to Charlotte Mew. 8 July 1918. Manuscript box "Cockerell, Sydney Carlyle. 128 ALS to Mew." Charlotte Mary Mew collection of papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

- Collecott, Diana. *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism 1910 - 1950*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Coleridge, Henry Nelson. "Modern English Poetesses." *The Quarterly Review* vol. 66, June - September 1840, pp. 374 - 418. Google Books. Web. 2 April 2014.
- Cowley, Abraham. *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Abraham Cowley*. Blackburn, Lancashire, England: The Reverend Alexander Grossart, 1881. Google Books. Web. 11 April 2014. books.google.com
- Culler, A. Dwight. "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue." *PMLA* vol. 90, 1975, pp. 366-385.
- The Daily Mirror*, September 5, 1914. Newspaper Archive. Web. 28 April 2017.
- Curran, Stuart. "The I Altered." *Romanticism and Feminism*, edited by Anne K. Mellor. Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 185 - 207.
- Davidow, Mary. *Charlotte Mew: Biography and Criticism*. Dissertation, Brown University, 1963.
- Davis, Tracy C. and Postlewaite, Thomas, editors. *Theatricality*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Demoor, Marysa. "Power in Petticoats: Augusta Webster's Poetry, Political Pamphlets, and Poetry Reviews," *BELL. Belgian Essays on Language and Literature*, 1997, pp. 133 - 40.
- Denisoff, Dennis. "Grave Passions: Enclosure and Exposure in Charlotte Mew's Graveyard Poetry." *Victorian Poetry* vol. 38, Spring 2000, pp. 125 - 140.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Comedy of Charles Dickens: A Book of Chapters and Extracts Taken From the Writer's Novels by His Daughter Kate (Mrs Perugini)*. London, 1906. Google Books. 15 June 2015.
- . *The Humour and Pathos of Charles Dickens*. Selected by Charles Kent. London, 1884. Google Books. 15 June 2015.
- . *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- . "Mrs Gamp With the Strolling Players: An Unfinished Sketch." New York, 1899. Google Books. 15 June 2015.
- Dix, John. "A Memory of Mrs. Hemans." *Pen and Ink Sketches of Poets, Preachers, and Politicians*. London: David Bogue, 1846. 94-106. *Spenser and the Tradition: English Poetry 1579 - 1830*. Web. 1 May 2014.

Dumas *fils*, Alexandre. *La Dame aux Camélias*, translated by David Coward. Oxford, 1986.

Duplessis, Rachel Blau. "To 'bear my mother's name': *Künstlerromane* by Women Writers." *Aurora Leigh*, pp. 463-466.

Durbin, Kate. "In Favor of Women as Objects: Propositions." *Her Kind*. October 20, 2012. Web. 28 July 2017.

Eliot, T.S. "Portrait of a Lady." *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Penguin, 1998, pp. 3 - 8.

---. *Prufrack and Other Observations*. Knopf, 1920. Google Books. Web. 3 June 2015.

Ellis, Sarah Stickney. *Wives of England*. London, 1843. Google Books. Web. 29 October 2016.

Elliott, Brian P. "'Nothing Beside Remains': Empty Icons and Elegiac Ekphrasis in Felicia Hemans." *Studies in Romanticism*, Spring 2012, pp. 25-40.

Finch, Annie. "Dickinson as a Poetess." *Dickinson Electronic Archives*. Web. 2 June 2014.

Fitzgerald, Penelope. *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends*. Collins, 1984.

Fletcher, Robert P. "Convent Thoughts: Augusta Webster and the Body Politics of the Victorian Cloister," *Victorian Literature and Culture* vol. 31, 2003, pp. 295 – 313.

---. "The Perverse Secrets of Masculinity in Augusta Webster's Dramatic Poetry." *Victorian Secrecy: Economies of Knowledge and Concealment*, edited by Albert D. Pionke, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 149 - 164.

Flint, Kate. "' . . . As a Rule, I Does Not Mean I': Personal Identity and the Victorian Woman Poet." *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Roy Porter, Routledge, 1997, pp. 156 – 66.

---. "The 'hour of pink twilight': Lesbian Poetics and Queer Encounters on the Fin-de-Siècle Street." *Victorian Studies* vol. 51, Summer 2009, pp. 687 – 712.

Fluhr, Nicole. "Telling What's O'er: Remaking the Sonnet Cycle in Augusta Webster's *Mother and Daughter*," *Victorian Poetry* vol. 49, 2011, pp. 53 – 81.

Frank, Sam, et al. "A Note on Counterfactuals," *Triple Canopy* vol. 14, 2011. Web.

Gallagher, Catherine. "Who Was That Masked Woman? The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Comedies of Aphra Behn." *Rereading Aphra Behn: History*,

Theory, and Criticism, edited by Heidi Hutner, University of Virginia Press, 1993, pp. 65-85.

Gent, J.H. *The Generall History of Women, Containing the Lives of the Most Holy and Prophane, the Most Famous and Infamous in All Ages, Exactly Described Not Only from Poeticall Fictions, But from the Most Ancient, Modern, and Admired Historians, to Our Times*. London: Printed by W. H. for W. H., 1657. *Collected Biographies of Women: An Annotated Bibliography*. Web. 25 January 2014.

Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979.

Glaser, Ben. "The Gender of Modern Meter." Poetry & Poetics and Modernist Studies Graduate Student Group meeting, 7 March 2014, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Workshop.

Glenum, Lara and Greenberg, Arielle, editors. *Gurlesque: The New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics*. Saturnalia Books, 2010.

Gopnik, Adam. "Go Giants." *The New Yorker*, April 21, 2014, p. 104.

Gould, Robert. "A Satyricall Epistle TO THE FEMALE AUTHOR OF A POEM, CALL'D SILVIA's REVENGE, &c." London: Printed for R. Bentley, 1691. Early English Books Online. Web. 5 October 2014.

Greer, Germaine. *Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection, and the Woman Poet*. Viking, 1995.

Gregory, Melissa Valiska. "Augusta Webster Writing Motherhood in the Dramatic Monologue and the Sonnet Sequence." *Victorian Poetry* vol. 49, 2011, pp. 27 - 51.

Hale, Sarah Josepha. *Woman's Record, or Sketches of All Distinguished Women from "The Beginning" Till A.D. 1850, Arranged in Four Eras, With Selections From Female Writers of Every Age*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853. Google Books. Web. 25 April 2014. books.google.com

Hardy, Thomas. *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy, Electronic Edition*. Edited by Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate. Clarendon Press, 1978-88. Intelext Past Masters Full Text Humanities. Web. 29 April 2014.

Harvey, Gabriel. *Pierce's Supereogation*. London: John Wolfe, 1573. Internet Archive. Web. 10 April 2014. archive.org

Harrington, Emily. "Appraise Love and Divide: Measuring Love in Augusta Webster's *Mother and Daughter*." *Victorian Poetry* vol. 50, 2012, pp. 259 - 278.

---. *Second Person Singular: Late Victorian Poets and the Bonds of Verse*. University of Virginia Press, 2014.

Helsing, Elizabeth, et al. *The Woman Question: Literary Issues*. Vol. 3 of *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837 – 1883*. Manchester University Press, 1983.

Hemans, Felicia. "The American Forest Girl." *Records of Woman*, pp. 69 – 71.

---. "Arabella Stuart." *Records of Woman*, pp. 7 – 16.

---. "The Bride of the Greek Isle." *Records of Woman*, pp. 17 – 24.

---. "Costanza." *Records of Woman*, pp. 72 – 74.

---. "Edith, A Tale of the Woods." *Records of Woman*, pp. 39 – 46.

---. "The Grave of a Poetess." *Records of Woman*, pp. 84 – 86.

---. "Imelda." *Records of Woman*, pp. 35 – 38.

---. "The Indian City." *Records of Woman*, pp. 47 – 52.

---. "The Indian Woman's Death Song." *Records of Woman*, pp. 57 – 58.

---. "Joan of Arc, in Rheims." *Records of Woman*, pp. 59 – 62.

---. "Pauline." *Records of Woman*, pp. 63 – 66.

---. "The Peasant Girl of the Rhone." *Records of Woman*, pp. 54 – 56.

---. "Properzia Rossi." *Records of Woman*, pp. 29 – 32.

---. "The Queen of Prussia's Tomb." *Records of Woman*, pp. 80 – 81.

---. *Records of Woman With Other Poems*. Edited by Paula R. Feldman, The University Press of Kentucky, 1999.

---. *Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*. Edited by Susan J. Wolfson, Princeton University Press, 2000.

Hoagwood, Terence Allan and Opdycke, Gina Elizabeth. Introduction. Landon, Letitia Elizabeth. *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-book 1836*. Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 2004, pp. 1 – 13.

- Holcroft, Thomas. *Alwyn, or the Gentleman Comedian*, volume 2. London: printed for Fielding and Walker, 1780. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Web. 29 October 2014.
- Horne, Richard Hengist. "An Essay on Tragic Influence." Horne, Richard Hengist. *Gregory VII: A Tragedy*. London: C Mitchell Red Lion Court, 1849. Google Books. Web. 21 July 2017.
- . *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning Addressed to Richard Hengist Horne*. London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1877. Archive.org. Web. 29 August 2016.
- . *The New Spirit of the Age*. London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1844. Archive.org. Web. 29 August 2016.
- Houston, Natalie. "Order and Interpretation in Augusta Webster's *Portraits*." *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* vol. 47, August 2007. Web. doi 10.7202/016701ar
- Hughes, Derek, "The Masked Woman Revealed: or, the Prostitute and the Playwright in Aphra Behn Criticism." *Women's Writing*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2000, pp. 149 – 164.
- Hughes, Linda K. *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Hunt, Leigh. "Pocket-Books and Keepsakes." *The Keepsake for 1828*. Quoted in Lee Erickson, "The Poet's Corner." *ELH* vol. 52, 1985, p. 909.
- Jackson, Shannon. *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity*. University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Jackson, Virginia. "The Poet as Poetess." *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, edited by Kerry Larson. Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 54- 75.
- Jackson, Virginia and Prins, Yopie. "Lyrical Studies." *Victorian Literature and Culture* vol. 27, 1999, pp. 521 – 530.
- , editors. *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- Jerdan, William. Review of *The Golden Violet*. *The Literary Gazette*, 16 December 1826, p. 785. Google Books. Web. 7 July 2014.
- Kaplan, Cora. Introduction. *Aurora Leigh, with Other Poems*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Horizon, 1978, pp. 5 – 36.

Kendall, Tim. "The Passion of Charlotte Mew." *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, edited by Matthew Bevis, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 640 - 651.

Klemantaski, Alida. See "Monro, Alida."

Kurnick, David. *Empty Houses*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

Landon, Letitia Elizabeth. "Erinna." *Selected Writings*, pp.87 – 99.

---. *Heath's Book of Beauty*. London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1833. Internet Archive. Web. 31 July 2013.

---. "A History of the Lyre." *Selected Writings*, pp. 115 – 127.

---. *Medallion Wafers*. *Selected Writings*, pp. 43 – 45.

---. *The Improvisatrice; and Other Poems*. London: Hurst, Robinson, and Co., 1825. Internet Archive. Web. 31 July 2013.

---. "Preface." *The Venetian Bracelet*. *Selected Writings*, pp. 102 – 103.

---. *Selected Writings*, edited by Jerome McGann and Daniel Riess. Broadview Press, 1997. Print.

Langbaum, Robert. "The Dramatic Monologue: Sympathy versus Judgment." *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Literary Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957. Reprinted in *Robert Browning's Poetry*, edited by James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer, Norton, 2007, pp. 521 – 542.

Lawford, Cynthia. "Bjoux Beyond Possession: The Prima Donnas of L.E.L.'s Album Poems." *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, edited by Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 102-114.

Leighton, Angela. *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. University of Virginia Press, 1992.

Lootens, Tricia. "Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine 'Internal Enemies,' and the Domestication of National Identity." *PMLA* vol. 2, March 1994, pp. 238 – 253.

---. *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization*. University of Virginia Press, 1996.

---. *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

- . "Receiving the Legend, Rethinking the Writer: Letitia Landon and the Poetess Tradition." *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, edited by Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt. University Press of Kentucky, 1999, pp. 242 - 259.
- . "States of Exile." *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, edited by Meredith McGill. Rutgers University Press, 2008, pp. 15 - 36.
- Lowell, Robert. Foreword. *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath. London, 1965, pp. vii-ix.
- Luxborough, Lady Henrietta Knight. *Letters Written by the Late Right Honourable Lady Luxborough to William Shenstone, Esq.* London: Printed for J. Dodsey, 1775. Google Books. 3 November 2014. books.google.com
- McDonald, Gail. *Learning to Be Modern: Pound, Eliot, and the American University*. University of Michigan Press, 1990.
- Mandell, Laura. "Introduction: The Poetess Tradition." *Romanticism on the Net* vol. 29 – 30, February 2003. Web. 8 July 2014.
- Mansfield, Katherine. "Je ne parle pas français." *Bliss, and Other Stories*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1920. pp. 71-115.
- Marcus, Sharon. *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London*. University of California Press, 1999.
- . "'Salomé!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity.'" *PMLA* vol. 126, 2011, pp. 999 – 1021.
- "The Theatrical Scrapbook." *Theatre Survey* vol. 54, no. 2, May 2013, pp. 283 - 307.
- Martin, Meredith. *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture 1860 – 1930*. Princeton University Press, 2012.
- "Matilda." "On Reading the Poems of Phillis Wheatley, the African Poetess." *New York Magazine*, vol. 1 (October 1796), pp. 549-550. Google Books. Web.
- Mayer, David. "Supernumeraries: Decorating the Late-Victorian Stage with Lots (& Lots & Lots) of Live Bodies." *Ruskin, the Theatre and Victorian Visual Culture*, edited by Anselm Heinrich et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 154 – 168.
- McGann, Jerome. *The Poetics of Sensibility*. Clarendon, 1996.
- McGill, Meredith. *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834 – 1853*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

- . "Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*." *American Literary History* vol. 19, 2007, pp. 357 – 374.
- . "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry." *Early African American Print Culture*, edited by Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, pp. 53-74.
- . "Introduction." *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, edited by Meredith McGill, Rutgers University Press, 2008, pp. 1 – 14.
- McMullen, A. Joseph. "Overstepping Otherness: Christine de Pizan and Letitia Elizabeth Landon's Genealogical Retranslations of Canonized Text." *Comparative Humanities Review*, Spring 2009. Bucknell Digital Commons. Web. 29 December 2014.
- Meisel, Martin. *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth Century England*. Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Mellor, Anne K. "The female poet and the poetess: two traditions of British women's poetry, 1780 – 1830." *Studies in Romanticism* vol. 36, 1997, pp. 261-76.
- . *Romanticism and Gender*. Routledge, 1993.
- Mermin, Dorothy. "The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet." *Critical Inquiry* vol. 13, 1996, pp. 64-80.
- . *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830 – 1880*. Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Mew, Charlotte. *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*. Edited by Val Warner, Routledge, 2003.
- . "The Farmer's Bride." *Collected Poems*, pp. 1 – 2.
- . "The Fête." *Collected Poems*, pp. 4 – 8.
- . Letter to Sidney Carlyle Cockerell. 10 July 1918. Manuscript box "Cockerell, Sydney Carlyle. 128 ALS." Charlotte Mary Mew collection of papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, NY.
- . Letter to Sidney Carlyle Cockerell. 20 July 1918. Manuscript box "Cockerell, Sydney Carlyle. 128 ALS." Charlotte Mary Mew collection of papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

- . Letter to Sidney Carlyle Cockerell. 24 January 1922. Manuscript box "Cockerell, Sydney Caryle. 128 ALS." Charlotte Mary Mew collection of papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, NY.
- . "Saturday Market." *Collected Poems*, p. 37.
- . Typescript: Part 1 of "Thic Theer Kayser." Undated. Box "Add MS 83382." Charlotte Mew papers, British Library, London, UK.
- . Typescript: Part 2 of "Thic Theer Kayser," Part 2. Undated. Box "Add MS 83382." Charlotte Mew papers, British Library, London, UK.
- Milhous, Judith and Hume, Robert D. "New Light on English Acting Companies in 1646, 1648, and 1660." *Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language*, November 1991, pp. 487-509.
- Miller, Andrew. "'A Case of Metaphysics': Counterfactuals, Realism, *Great Expectations*." *ELH* vol. 79, 2012, pp. 773 - 96.
- Mills, Ernestine. *The Life and Letters of Frederic Shields*. London, 1912.
- Mitford, Mary Russell. *Recollections of a Literary Life*. London: Richard Bentley, 1857. Google Books. Web. 23 May 2014.
- Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*. 1977. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Monro, Alida (See also Alida Klemantaski). Typescript of "Introduction to 'A Fatal Fidelity.'" Undated. Box 57755. Charlotte Mew collection, British Library, London, UK.
- Moody, Jane. *The Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770 – 1840*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Moon, Michael. "No Coward Souls: Poetic Engagements Between Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson." *The Traffic in Poems*, pp. 231 – 249.
- Morlier, Margaret. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Felicia Hemans: The 'Poetess' Problem." *Studies in Browning and His Circle* vol. 20, 1993, pp. 70 – 79.
- Moser, Kay. "The Victorian Critic's Dilemma: What to Do With a Talented Poetess?" *Victorian Institute Journal* vol. 13, 1985, pp. 59 – 66.
- "Mrs. Crackenthorpe." *The Female Tatler* vol. 41, October 7 - 10, 1709. *Issuing Her Own: The Female Tatler* (University of Michigan student project.) Web. 29 October 2014. umich.edu

Nevinson, Henry Wood. "The Lyric." *Nation*, 8 July 1916. pp. 442, 444. Google Books. Web. 19 June 2015.

Newton, John. "Charlotte Mew's Place in the Future of English Poetry." *New England Review*, Spring 1997, pp. 32-48.

Olverson, T.D. "The Limits of Liberty: Gender, Power, and Freedom in Augusta Webster's *In A Day*." *Victorian Poetry* vol. 55, Spring 2017, pp. 19 – 38.

Orr, Peter. *The Poet Speaks*. New York, 1966.

Ostriker, Alicia. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. The Women's Press, 1987.

Pascoe, Judith. *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship*. Cornell University Press, 1997.

Pearsall, Cornelia D. J. "The dramatic monologue." *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, edited by Joseph Bristow, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 67 – 88.

Pearson, Richard. *Victorian Writers and the Stage*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Peterson, Linda H. "Rewriting A History of the Lyre: Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and the (Re)Construction of the Nineteenth-Century Woman Poet." *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, edited by Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 115-132.

Pettit, Claire. "Topos, Taxonomy, and Travel in Nineteenth-Century Women's Scrapbooks." *Travel Writing, Visual Culture, and Form*, edited by Mary Henes and Brian H. Murray, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 21 – 41.

"Philo-Lyristes." "Gray and Collins." *Gentleman's Magazine* vol. 52, January 1782. Internet Archive. Web. 9 July 2017.

Pionke, Albert D. "Erotic, Prosodic, and Ethical-Aesthetic Forms of Triangulation in Augusta Webster's *Dramatic Studies* and *A Woman Sold and Other Poems*." *Victorian Poetry* vol. 51, 2013, pp. 465 – 486.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals*. Edited by Karen V. Kukil, Anchor Books, 2000.

"The Poetesses of Our Own Day: No 1, Felicia Hemans." *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 10, pp. 129-141. Google Books. Web. 10 June 2014.

Pratt, Samuel Jackson. *Family Secrets, Literary and Domestic*. London: T.N. Longman, 1797. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Web. 3 November 2014.

- Preston, Carrie. *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Prins, Yopie. "Poetess." *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- . "Victorian Meters." *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, edited by Joseph Bristow, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 89-113.
- . *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton University Press, 1999.
- . "Voice Inverse." *Victorian Poetry*, Spring 2004, pp. 43-59.
- Ranger, Charles. *The Gray's Inn Journal*, vol. 38, June 15, 1754. Google Books. Web. 3 November 2014.
- Rappaport, Jill. "Buyer Beware: The Gift Poetics of Letitia Elizabeth Landon." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* March 2004, pp. 441-473.
- "Review of *Dramatic Studies* from the *Athenaeum*" (August 11, 1866). *Portraits and Other Poems*, edited by Christine Sutphin, Broadview Press, 2000, pp. 406 – 407.
- "Review of *A Woman Sold* from the *Saturday Review* (February 9, 1867)." *Portraits and Other Poems*, pp. 409 – 414.
- "Review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Poems*." *The Weekly News*, 30 November 1850. 1142. *The Brownings' Correspondence: An Online Edition*. Web. 10 June 2014.
- "Review of *Portraits* from the *Nonconformist*, (May 11, 1870)." In *Portraits and Other Poems*, pp. 416 – 417.
- Review. "'The Sceptic; A Poem.' By Mrs. Hemans." *Edinburgh Monthly Review* vol. 3, April 1820, pp. 373 – 383. Google Books. Web. 20 July 2017.
- Reynolds, Margaret. "Allusion in the Verse-Novel: Experimental Bricolage." *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Edited by Margaret Reynolds, Norton, 1996, pp. 552-557.
- . "Critical Introduction." *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ohio University Press, 1992, pp. 1-77.
- Rice, Nelljean McConeghey. *A New Matrix for Modernism: A Study of the Lives and Poetry of Charlotte Mew and Anna Wickham*. Routledge, 2003.
- Richards, Eliza. *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

- Ricks, Christopher. *Tennyson*. University of California Press, 1979.
- Rigg, Patricia. "Augusta Webster and the Lyric Muse: The *Athenaeum* and Webster's Poetics" *Victorian Poetry* vol. 42, 2004, pp. 135 – 164.
- . "Augusta Webster, Dramatic Forms, and the Religious Aesthetic of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*," *Victorian Poetry* vol. 53, 2015, pp. 1 - 14.
- . "Augusta Webster: The Social Politics of Monodrama," *Victorian Review* vol. 26, 2000, pp. 75 – 107.
- . *Julia Augusta Webster: Victorian Aestheticism and the Woman Writer*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009.
- Robinson, Mary. *Walsingham, or, the Pupil of Nature*. Edited by Julie A. Shaffer, Broadview, 2003.
- Rolland, John. *Ane Treatise Callit The Court of Venus*. Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1884. Internet Archive. Web. 25 April 2014. archive.org
- Rosenbaum, Susan. *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading*. University of Virginia Press, 2007.
- Ross, Marlon B. *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Rossetti, Christina. "Monna Innominata." *The Complete Poems*. Penguin, 2001.
- . *The Letters of Christina Rossetti: A Digital Edition*. Edited by Antony H. Harrison, University of Virginia Press, 2006. Web. 25 May 2014.
- Rossetti, William Michael. Introductory Note. *Mother and Daughter* by Augusta Webster. London: Macmillan, 1895. Google Books. Web. 3 February 2014.
- . Preface. *Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. London: Ellis and Elvey, 1890. Google Books. Web. 25 May 2014.
- Rowton, Frederic. *The Female Poets of Great Britain, Chronologically Arranged*. Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1849. Google Books. Web. 29 April 2014.
- Rudy, Jason. *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics*. Ohio University Press, 2009.
- . "Hemans' Passion." *Studies in Romanticism*, Winter 2006, pp. 543-562.

- Scott, Sir Walter. *Ivanhoe*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2004.
- Severin, Laura. *Poetry off the Page: Twentieth-Century Women Poets in Performance*. Ashgate, 2004.
- Sharp, Elizabeth Amelia (Mrs. William Sharp.) *Women's Voices*. London: Walter Scott, 1887. Google Books. Web. 31 May 2014.
- Shaw, George Bernard. "Duse and Bernhardt." *Dramatic Opinions and Essays*, Volume One. New York, 1906, pp. 131 – 141.
- Siegel, Jonah. *Haunted Museum: Longing, Travel, and the Art-Romance Tradition*. Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Slinn, E. Warwick. *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique: The Politics of Performative Language*. University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- Snodgrass, W.D. "Four Gentlemen; Two Ladies." *Hudson Review* vol. xiii, Spring 1960, pp. 120-122.
- "Some Recent Women Poets." *Scribner's Monthly*, May 1875, pp. 100 - 106. Google Books. Web. 8 June 2014.
- St Clair, William. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Stephenson, Glennis (as Glennis Byron). *Dramatic Monologue*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- . (See also Byron, Glennis.) *Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L.E.L.* Manchester University Press, 1995.
- . (as Glennis Byron). "Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique." *Victorian Women Poets*, edited by Alison Chapman for the English Association. D.S. Brewer, 2003, pp. 79 – 98.
- Sutphin, Christine. Introduction. *Portraits and Other Poems* by Augusta Webster. Edited by Christine Sutphin. Broadview Press, 2000, pp. 9 – 41.
- Swinburne, Algernon. "Dedicatory Epistle." *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne, Volume I*. London: Chatto & Windus: 1911. Google Books. Web. 30 June 2014.
- T. B****s, "To Miss Hannah Moore, on seeing her new Tragedy of The Fatal Falshood." *General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, 21 May 1779, p. 226. Google Books. Web.

- Tasker, William. "Stanzas, addressed to the Author of the Lines affecting to ridicule the Poetical Productions of Miss Hannah More." *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 13 February 1778. Google Books. Web.
- Town Topics, A Journal of Society*. Volumes 29, 53, 59, 63, 71, and 74. Google Books. Web. 14 November 2014.
- Tucker, Herbert F. "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric." *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, edited by Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, Cornell University Press, 1985. Reprinted in *Robert Browning's Poetry*, edited by James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer. Norton, 2007, pp. 542 – 557.
- Tyndale, William. *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1801. Internet Archive. Web. 10 April 2014.
- Van Remoortel, Marianne. "Metaphor and Maternity: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* and Augusta Webster's *Mother and Daughter*," *Victorian Poetry* vol. 46, 2008, pp. 467 – 486.
- Vincent, Patrick. *The Romantic Poetess: European Culture, Politics and Gender 1820 - 1840*. University Press of New England, 2004.
- Walker, Cheryl. *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900*. Indiana University Press, 1983.
- Walkowitz, Judith. *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*. Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Webster, Augusta. *A Housewife's Opinions*. London: Macmillan, 1879. Google Books. Web.
- . "A Castaway." *Portraits*, pp. 192 – 213
- . "Circe." *Portraits*, pp. 178 – 184.
- . "Faded." *Portraits*, pp. 213 – 218.
- . "In an Almshouse." *Portraits*, pp. 244 – 257.
- . "An Inventor." *Portraits*, pp. 272 – 278.
- . "Medea in Athens." *Portraits*, pp. 169 – 177.
- . "A Painter." *Portraits*, pp. 265 – 272.
- . "Poets and Personal Pronouns." *Housewife's Opinions*, pp. 150 – 156.

--. *Portraits and Other Poems*. Edited by Christine Sutphin. Broadview, 2000.

---. "A Preacher." *Portraits*, pp. 257 – 264.

Wilde, Oscar. "English Poetesses." *Queen* vol. 74, no. 2189, December 8, 1888, pp. 742-743. Poetess Archive. Web. 30 May 2014.

Williams, Carolyn. "Melodrama." *Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, edited by Kate Flint. Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 193-219.

Williams, S. W. *Queenly Women, Crowned and Uncrowned*. Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1885. Google Books. Web. 19 May 2014.

Wilmot, John, Earl of Rochester. "A Letter from Artemesia in the Town to Chloe in the Country." *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, Yale University Press, 1962, pp. 104-112. Print.

Wolfson, Susan. "'Domestic Affections' and 'The Spear of Minerva': Felicia Hemans and the 'Dilemma of Gender.'" *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776 – 1837*, edited by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, pp. 128 – 166.

---. "Felicia Hemans and the Revolving Doors of Reception." *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, edited by Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Berendt, The University Press of Kentucky, 1999, pp. 214-241.

---. "Feminizing Keats." *Critical Essays on John Keats*, edited by Hermione de Almeida, G.K. Hall, 1990, pp. 317 – 357.

---. *Romantic Interactions. Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt Brace, 1929.