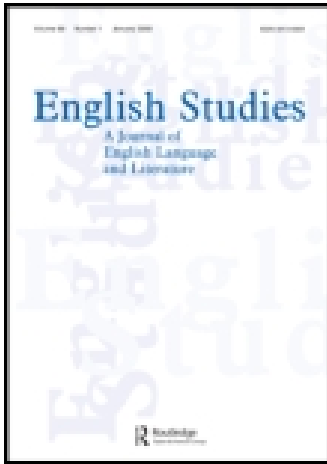


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# Negation, Selection and Substitution: Charlotte Brontë's Feminist Poetics

Ebtisam Sadiq

*This article examines an early dramatic monologue by Charlotte Brontë and finds that Brontë pre-dates Victorian women poets in use of the form. Her early practice makes her a contemporary of Robert Browning and gives her precedence over Alfred Tennyson. The study investigates both how Brontë developed the form and why she introduced it into poetry. Without denying her childhood training in depiction of fictional figures, the findings point in the direction of Brontë's readings in seventeenth-century drama and her earlier writing of a short play as a more directly relevant background that made the monologue possible. Her personal motive for using it in poetry is initially a reaction to Robert Southey's discouraging response to her experience of poetry writing. The poem complains of literary marginalisation and asserts female poetic potentials. It embodies Brontë's culturally forbidden dream in an objective manner. However, the dramatic form proves to be more than a personal mask. It allows Brontë to contradict Romantic ideology and challenge patriarchal culture. Brontë's experience with the dramatic monologue in this poem on both formal and contextual levels should grant her better recognition in the poetic canon than that assigned to her so far.*

Charlotte Brontë (1816–55) is more famed for her novels than her poetry. Critical appraisal of her poems is sporadic in nature and limited. Despite repeated publication of her poetry<sup>1</sup> and frequent anthologising of many of her poems,<sup>2</sup> the literary value of her poetry is not recognised and her poetic output is often lightly dismissed if not more directly undermined. Other female poets of both the Romantic and the Victorian eras have received more attention. Semi-contemporary poets whether of an older generation like Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), Letitia Landon (1802–38) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61), or of a younger generation like Christina Rossetti (1830–94) have had more recognition, while Brontë's post-Romantic, pre-Victorian transitional presence in the poetic canon has not received due attention. Even within her family circle Charlotte Brontë is not granted enough critical support to withstand sibling competition. Statements such as: “Charlotte was

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<sup>1</sup>Elder (1915); Wise and Symington (The Shakespeare Head, 1931) and (Poems of Charlotte Brontë and Patrick Branwell, 1943); and Winniffrith (Poems of Charlotte Brontë, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>Leighton and Reynolds (1995); and Norris (1997).

probably the worst poet in the family after her father”, introduce the Tom Winnifrith edition of her poetry, and “we do not make any exaggerated claims for the worth of the poems in this volume” seem to negate the very scholarly effort exerted in extending and classifying the Shakespeare Head edition in this subsequent publication of Brontë’s poems.<sup>3</sup> Margaret Reynolds also introduces Charlotte’s section in *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* in equally subversive language: “In terms of her technical faculty Brontë’s poetry is not as innovative as Emily’s, or as neatly achieved as Anne’s. . . .Charlotte’s poetry is quite ragged in comparison”.<sup>4</sup> The earliest responses to the poetry of the Brontës on first publication still influence late twentieth-century assessments of their relevant position to each other: “Emily’s poems” are considered “the gems of the 1846 collection”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, to judge by the number and scope of articles written on the poetic output of Emily, her name as a better poet still dominates.

My study will attempt to partly rectify such negativity and neglect by examining a fascinating dramatic poem by Charlotte Brontë, namely “Is This My Tomb”. The poem is concerned with the theme of death but explores other themes as well. It is worth attending to for its early employment of a Victorian objective poetic technique, revisionary views of Romanticism, transitional position in the female poetic canon and feminist protest. Brontë precedes in this poem most fellow Victorian poets in use of the dramatic monologue, revises the Romantic poet’s transcendental ideology, mediates between women poets of the Romantic era and those of the Victorian age and reveals a striking feminist stance. Her achievement along these lines should grant her a better position as a poet beside her recognised place as a novelist.

Brontë’s dramatic monologue was written in 1837 while the two main figures associated with this form in the Victorian age, Tennyson and Browning, are commonly known to have published their monologues in the 1840s. To be more specific, Browning’s *Dramatic Lyrics* was published in 1842 and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* in 1845 while Tennyson’s dramatic masterpieces began with “Ulysses” in 1842 and continued in the sixties (“Tithonus” in 1860) and the eighties (“Rizpah” in 1880 and “Tiresias” in 1883). Dates in this context, though not conclusive, are most revealing. Tennyson and Browning, having started publication of their dramatic monologues in 1842, could not have influenced Brontë whose poem was written in 1837. However, according to Glennis Byron’s investigation, the “first published examples of the genre are considered to be Tennyson’s ‘St. Simeon Stylites,’ written in 1833 and published in 1842, and Browning’s paired poems of 1836, ‘Johannes Agricola in Meditation’ and ‘Porphyria’s Lover’”.<sup>6</sup> So while Brontë’s precedence over Tennyson in use of the form may go unchallenged, the one-year precedence of Browning’s paired poems requires further investigation. Given the fact that these “two pieces” despite their “power and originality” have “pass[ed] without notice” in

<sup>3</sup>Winnifrith, xii.

<sup>4</sup>Reynolds, 154.

<sup>5</sup>Winnifrith and Chithan, 103.

<sup>6</sup>Byron, 81.

“a decade whose poetry was so drably predictable”, it is highly unlikely that Browning influenced Brontë in this respect.<sup>7</sup> Yet even if Brontë had accessed Browning's paired poems through their first magazine publication in the *Monthly Repository* in January 1836,<sup>8</sup> this would only prove her contemporariness with him, for it would take more than a year to develop her level of dramatic excellence and technical mastery as demonstrated in the poem. Brontë, indeed, had a long period of childhood training in imaginative invention of fictional figures and objective inscription of tales, besides her writing of *The Poetaster: A Drama in Two Volumes* in 1830. This short six-act play (text and notes first published in 1981)<sup>9</sup> is strong testimony to Brontë's independence from Browning's influence, despite his one-year precedence in the publication of two dramatic monologues. The play is an outcome of her reading in seventeenth-century drama and comes in response to “her early awareness of the War in the Theatres (1598–1602)”.<sup>10</sup> Her technical masters, I would say, are Ben Jonson and Thomas Dekker not Tennyson and Browning. Dates are also indicative of Brontë's precedence over many of the famed Victorian female poets associated with the dramatic monologue (the nearest in date to her being Christina Rossetti, followed by Augusta Webster [1837–94] and later Amy Levy [1861–89]) in their employment of this form in poetry.

Brontë's precedence over the female Victorian poets and contemporaneity with, if not also precedence over, the male Victorian poets in writing a dramatic monologue raises the question of how was she induced to turn childhood exercises in dramatic writings to use in poetry. Is her initiation of the dramatic form a result of the general influence of the spirit of the age that reacted against Romantic subjectivity in art? Or is she influenced by the preceding female poets of the period, specifically Hemans and Landon, who actually made use of the form? Is Brontë's decision a product of critical reactions to early subjective poems of the Victorian age, like John Stuart Mill's to Browning's *Pauline* (1833)?<sup>11</sup> Or is it a continuation of the previous female poetic tradition of Hemans and Landon? Which tradition prompted her to use the form in poetry, the revisionary Victorian position of Romantic art or the female Romantic tradition of the preceding decades that distinguishes itself from mainstream Romanticism in many significant ways?

Answering such questions is a challenging task but the controversy of who invented the dramatic monologue can be illuminating. In her challenge of the common view of the dramatic monologue as a presumably masculine poetic form, Isobel Armstrong gives women poets (with the single exception of Walter Savage Landor) precedence in use of the form. Negating the common consensus of male precedence, she says: “The frequent adoption of a dramatised voice by male poets in the Victorian period is, of course, to be connected with dramatic theories of poetry.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Thomas, 44.

<sup>8</sup>Hawlin, 73.

<sup>9</sup>Monahan.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 475.

<sup>11</sup>Mill's well-known censure of Browning's “morbid state” of self-worship is quoted in Abrams, gen. ed., 1230.

But Landon's and Hemans' work predates these theories." More explicitly, she goes on to say that because the dramatic monologue presents "a mask" that "is peculiarly necessary for women writers", it "should come as no surprise, then, that it was the women poets who 'invented' the dramatic monologue".<sup>12</sup> Such insights on women's primary contribution to the form would place Brontë in the literary tradition of Hemans and Landon and make her treatment of the dramatic monologue a continuation of theirs. This suggestion, we ought to note, is only feasible at a technical level and does not deny the personal element of Brontë's childhood readings and literary experience that would have made her affiliation with such a tradition possible.

Armstrong's views are challenged by Byron who denies women's precedence in initiating the form but acknowledges their contribution to a significant line of its modern development into a social critique. Stating her "reservation about the position that women 'invented' the form", Byron finds that the dramatic monologues produced by early female poets like Hemans and Landon do not use the form "to challenge the Romantic representations of the self" but rather use it in a subjective context "diametrically opposite to the way now considered characteristic of the form".<sup>13</sup> However, Byron's conclusive remarks to the controversy appear to support rather than oppose Armstrong: "Browning and Tennyson may be the poets who have been, traditionally, most closely associated with the dramatic monologue; it was the Victorian women poets, however, who appear to have been most responsible for the line of development that endured".<sup>14</sup> The challenge seems more suggestive of the differences between male and female poets' dramatic monologues than a substantial contradiction. Furthermore, Byron introduces a later poet, Augusta Webster, to trace the monologue's social line of development while a mediating figure like Charlotte Brontë, who may or may not be writing in the tradition of Hemans and Landon and precede other female Victorian poets in the use of the form, is ignored. This oblivion, however, opens the door for another significant line of enquiry. Does Brontë's monologue belong to the masculine tradition of the form that focuses on objective depiction and ironic exposure of self or to the subjectively feminine that critiques society in its cultural representation of, and attitude towards, women?

Armstrong, however, does not ignore Brontë altogether in her attribution of the dramatic monologue to female authors. Brontë's poem "Pilate's Wife's Dream" is named in that context, gaining importance perhaps through associations with another Pilate's Wife dramatic piece by Augusta Webster. But the poem under discussion, "Is This My Tomb", is not introduced. "Pilate's Wife's Dream" is definitely another beautiful piece well worthy of attention, but the dramatic setting of "Is This My Tomb", the unusual situation and peculiar nature of the speaker, the poem's precedence over other poems of similar nature in the Victorian female poetic

<sup>12</sup>Armstrong, 325–6.

<sup>13</sup>Byron, 84.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 98.

tradition, its revisionary views of Romanticism and feminist claims all invite a close consideration of both its form and content. Yet the backdrop of this paper is not a formalist reading of the poem. It adopts a feminist perspective and intends to address the set of questions that has risen so far in order to claim for Brontë a better position in the poetic canon.

Brontë's monologue is uttered by a dead woman who is resurrected in her grave to discover that she has died and been forgotten by her friends. An introductory comment on the poem in Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds' anthology suggests "[d]ifference and alienation" as possible themes.<sup>15</sup> In this brief introduction the poem gains value only through association with Christina Rossetti's poem "When I am Dead My Dearest", though the speaker in Rossetti's poem has not died yet. This reductive approach is typical of most cursory remarks on Brontë's poems. Another poem by Christina Rossetti, "After Death" (1849), closer in nature to Brontë's, has also received ample critical attention, but not Brontë's poem though preceding Rossetti's by more than a decade. Catherine Maxwell claims of Rossetti's poem that: "the dead have been made to speak in literature before, although never perhaps in quite this way".<sup>16</sup> Brontë's poem proves otherwise.

The most obvious theme of Brontë's poem is that of death, a subject she is known to be preoccupied with in her juvenilia and novels and which has been the target of a detailed biographical study by Robert Keefe.<sup>17</sup> However, the theme of death might also entail a quest for immortality; once a dead person comes back to life, the question of immortality is invoked. Resurrection is a sign that death is not deemed terminal in this context. Death has not brought life to an impasse. Brontë's poem, I would say, is also concerned with the quest for immortality. But what kind of immortality does the poem invoke and for what purpose does the poem explore it? Is it the orthodox theological type that relies on heaven and paradise for a future fulfilment of a promised happiness and eternal peace? Or is it the kind of immortality one encounters in the Romantic poets' reappropriation of theological language in their poetry, in poems like William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" or Percy B. Shelley's *Adonais*, where the spirit of the dead inhabits Nature and becomes a manifest part of its various moods and an eternal presence in its endless moves? Or is it the kind of immortality one encounters in the alternate prototype of Romantic speculation on the afterlife, of the roaming ghost of John Keats' *Isabella* that breaks through as a vision into the world of the living to secure sympathy and emotional reciprocity?

Orthodox theological creeds do not seem to have a presence in the poem. The awakening takes place in the graveyard and the context makes no reference to heaven. The coming into life includes no attention to moral accountability for one's deeds, for reward or retribution. It shows no interest in promises of heavenly bliss or

<sup>15</sup>Reynolds, 154.

<sup>16</sup>Maxwell, 154.

<sup>17</sup>Keefe.

apprehension at a possible doom to perdition. The dead woman's resurrection seems more of an extension of human existence than a transfer to a heavenly realm. The speaker in the monologue wakes up and wonders:

Is this my tomb, this humble stone  
Above this narrow mound?  
Is this my resting place, so lone,  
So green, so quiet round?<sup>18</sup>

In his speculation on Charlotte Mew as a protégée of Emily Brontë, Dennis Denisoff overrules the prospect of an orthodox acquiescence in Emily's graveyard poetry on the grounds of her negation of transcendental religion for having enforced hegemonic cultural attitudes against women: "Brontë's unwillingness to accept a model of the afterlife like that celebrated by eighteenth-century authors is partly due to her sense that such a formulation reinforces the existing secular hegemonic order that discriminates against both women as writers and women in general".<sup>19</sup> Although this study does not intend to challenge such views on Emily nor to prove that what critics discover in her poetry necessarily applies to Charlotte, still, there is further evidence that feminist poetics seems to have established an anti-transcendental tradition in which orthodox creeds are either challenged or negated on similar grounds. Feminist critics' readings of Milton seem to support the view that women writers do protest a conspiracy between Orthodox Church and hegemonic culture and resist both. Commenting on *Paradise Lost*, Christine Froula claims that "Milton's image of creation is an archetypally patriarchal image." It is an "emphatic suppression of the female in his transformation of Genesis [which] is integral to his authority in patriarchal culture".<sup>20</sup> This statement comes later in the argument as a modification of a more direct critique of the Christian Church for having "depended on the mystification of history ... in order to establish privileged texts ... [that] invested the spiritual authority of the church in certain individuals." The Church's "interpretation of the Resurrection as a historical event placed its advocates in a position of unchallengeable political dominance".<sup>21</sup> Such cultural practice caused a "revisionary female theology [to be] promoted in literary writing by women" in order to "implicitly counter ... the patriarchal theology which is already inscribed in literature".<sup>22</sup>

Charlotte Brontë seems to have sensed the weight of patriarchal cultural politics in her graveyard poem. Her poem may be an elegy on the vanity of a woman's life, but the religious statement certainly disrupts orthodox language and takes a secular turn from the poem's setting and from other elements as well. The woman's resurrection

<sup>18</sup>Bronte, *Poems*, "Is This My Tomb," lines 1–4. All quotations from Brontë's poems come from this Winnifrith edition. Henceforth references to this poem will be given in text.

<sup>19</sup>Denisoff, 128.

<sup>20</sup>Froula, 338.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 324.

takes place in the graveyard not in heaven, and she does not attend in her peculiar form of afterlife to any conventional religious icons or aspire to their paradisaical settings. On being resurrected, she inspects her grave lot and is duly amazed, because of her past social importance, to find that

Not even a stately tree to shade  
The sunbeam from my bed,  
Not even a flower in tribute laid  
As sacred to the dead. (lines 5–8)

The speaker's scrutiny of the external appearance of the tomb leaves no opportunity for considerations of a heavenly site. Brontë's poem, in fact, seems to have similar reservations about orthodox convictions as other women poets. Indeed, a lyric poem written the same year, "The Pilgrimage", speaks about life and death in an orthodox conventional manner which the poem "Is This My Tomb" does not attempt. The other poem opens with a question: "Why should we ever mourn as those / Whose 'star of hope' has ceased to smile",<sup>23</sup> and it closes with the conviction that: "On glory look, forget decay, / And know in Heaven an angel's birth".<sup>24</sup> The difference in addressing the same subject is an indication that Brontë is availing herself of the mask of the dramatised "I" to speculate on the subject of the afterlife in a way that the lyric "I" is more cautious to avoid. Contrary to nineteenth-century claims that "elegy was a masculine form and religious doubt a theme reserved for men",<sup>25</sup> Brontë boldly attempts both in her monologue. Significantly, she secularly resurrects her dead protagonist instead of conventionally lamenting her demise. Her choice of the grave lot as the site of resurrection is only one indication of the poem's concern with a secular form of immortality and challenge of orthodoxy. The poem, indeed, speculates in other ways, and for other reasons, on new forms of this highly desired state of being.

The woman's immortality is also secular in its persistent preoccupation with time. Upon waking, Brontë's resurrected woman begins to wonder: "How long is it since human tread / Was heard on that dim track?" (lines 13–14). This concern with time proves to be part of the revived woman's speculation on the length of her soul's sleep, her state of psychopannychism, an impediment in her case to actual resurrection, full recovery from the state of death and complete reappropriation of human consciousness and earthly existence:

O can it be that many a sun  
Has set, as that sets now,  
Since last its fervid luster shone  
Upon my living brow? (lines 37–40)

<sup>23</sup>Brontë, *Poems*, "The Pilgrimage," lines 1–2.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., lines 31–2.

<sup>25</sup>Mermin, 14.



Time is of primary concern to earthly consciousness rather than to heavenly existence, most definitely so to Brontë. In her attempt to come to terms with Emily's death, much later in life, Brontë wrote to W. S. Williams: "Yes, there is no more Emily in time or on earth now".<sup>26</sup> The reawakened woman's preoccupation with time confirms her secular resurrection. Her enquiry about time includes the natural processes that occurred in time during her soul's sleep:

Have all the wild dark clouds of night  
Each eve for years drawn on  
While I interred so far from light? (lines 41–3)

Such concern with time and the natural world eliminates the possibility of a timeless heavenly awakening in this poem.

The secular nature of the speaker's interest in time and process is enforced through the sense of limitation that time consciousness generates in the speaker's assessment of her own case. Indeed, the lapse of time during the woman's psychopannychism creates a gap in her consciousness and a lack in her knowledge. The absence of human consciousness from time's processes makes her ignorant of how she died and was prepared for burial before the final interment. Wondering about the manner of her death, the reawakening woman asks: "Who turned the blood that ran so warm / To Winter's frozen sleet?" (lines 35–6). There is a possibility of an unnatural, victimised death being inflicted on the speaker that her resurrected consciousness can neither confirm nor eradicate. Burial rituals have also occurred within this break in knowledge: "Who then disrobed that worshipped form? / Who wound this winding sheet?" (lines 33–4). Her inability to bridge such gaps stamps the speaker's recovery with an earthly human mark.

In the absence of an authorial omniscient voice in the poem, the missing part can only be surmised but never wholly retrieved. Prior to her writing of the poem, Brontë held a correspondence with Robert Southey, then poet laureate, requesting his advice on her experience of poetry writing. Southey's cruel response to Brontë came on 12 March 1837. His well-known discouraging remark states: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and ought not to be."<sup>27</sup> Brontë needed four days to recover from the shock and write back to him on 16 March 1837 in modest concession to his opinion.<sup>28</sup> But she needed almost three months to compose a poetic response to his letter. The poem was written on 4 June 1837. It indirectly voices Brontë's sense of cultural victimisation as a woman poet, and her need for self-reappropriation and self-assertion as such. The speaker in her monologue has died, probably a victimised death, but she wakes up to prove that she still exists. Such a resurrection comes to tell Southey that Brontë's poetic sensibility has survived the censure and that literature can be a woman's business but on woman's terms and

<sup>26</sup>Brontë, *Letters*, 2:29.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:155.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:157–8.

within the sphere of a woman's poetics. The first sign of belonging to such poetics comes to light in her use of the dramatic monologue.

In her speculation on women poets' use of the dramatic monologue, Dorothy Mermin notes that "[w]omen poets most often use dramatic monologues to allow female speakers to express passion, rage and rebellion against social constraints".<sup>29</sup> Brontë's monologue transcends passion into melancholic protest. She transforms rage into calm reappropriation of the female self and replaces rebellion with a fictionalised type of self-assertion. Her decision to employ a dramatic form that she has mastered through childhood inscription of tales and writing of a play can be, but is indeed more than, a literary mask. The fact that she did not include the poem in the 1846 published collection despite the security of the assumed mask should not go unquestioned. She must have been conscious of encoding more than a simple act of masked protest. Brontë, I believe, objectifies her response to Southey to speak for others. The lyric "I" has disappeared to allow her to make claims for other women poets as well. As a matter of fact, Brontë is recognised as a deliberating, self-conscious artist.<sup>30</sup> The poem's posthumous publication speaks for such self-consciousness and ambitious claims.

The claims Brontë makes on behalf of women poets go to challenge not just Southey but male poetics of the time, in this instance English Romanticism. Her secular quest for immortality (evident in the poem's setting and its speaker's concern with time and process) is actually more than a feminine cultural protest against the Orthodox Church. The poem contains evidence that Brontë's protest is also a literary one that chooses to consciously negate the Romantic poet's prototype of immortality.

Epitomising the dominant Romantic pattern, William Wordsworth writes in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" of a dead soul that

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Percy B. Shelley eulogises John Keats in *Adonais* by claiming that he is not dead:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard  
His voice in all her music, from the moan  
Of thunder, to the song of the night's sweet bird;  
He is a presence to be felt and known.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Mermin, 151.

<sup>30</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, "The Buried Life," 440; Sadiq, "Between Two Episodes," 130.

<sup>31</sup>Wordsworth, "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," lines 4–8 in Perkins. All quotes from English Romantic poetry come from Perkin's edition. References in the footnotes will be made to the poet's last name followed by the poem's title and quoted line numbers.

<sup>32</sup>Shelley, *Adonais*, lines 370–3.

Contrary to these Romantic assertions, Brontë's dead woman is not a spirit in union with the natural elements to be felt in nature's "diurnal" motions and activities. She wakes up as a fully recovered human consciousness that can see, hear, think and remember: "I look along those evening hills," and find them "[a]s mute as earth may be" (lines 9–10). She listens carefully but can "hear not even the voice of rills" (line 11). She inspects the sky but with the outcome of "[n]ot even a cloud" (line 12) in prospect to be seen. Her perceptive powers are not the only faculties she has intact. She can also speculate on her current lowly situation, the "humble stone" and the "narrow mound" (lines 1–2), and contrast it with her past stately life, her "dwelling proud" and "princely hall" (lines 22, 18). Besides her perceptive and speculative powers, her memory is equally vivid:

Methinks the flash is round me still  
Of mirrors broad and bright;  
Methinks I see the torches fill  
My chambers with their light. (lines 25–8)

Indeed, her ability to recall and depict her past life reaches out to the smallest details of the silk robes and jewels she was accustomed to wear, the music she used to play and songs to sing as part of her past life of luxury and indulgence. The woman's monologue leaves no doubt that she has full possession of the human faculties of perception, recollection and speculation. Unlike the Romantic state of transcendental immortality, she is a resurrected human consciousness distinctly separate and markedly independent from nature. Brontë challenges male poetics and reappropriates the female self in an anti-Romantic fashion both secular and humanistic (and, significant to my argument, richly feminine).

The previous pattern of secular and humanistic form of immortality not only challenges the abstract, transcendental Romantic faith in nature's capacity to immortalise the human soul, it also presents a significant variation on another type of Romantic immortality often encountered in Keats, prominently surfacing in his poem *Isabella*. Keats' prototype is a secularised and humanised version of his fellow Romantic poets'. He essentially negates the principle of abstract "presence" in nature. The ghost of Lorenzo sleeps in nature but is not "one" with it:

Isabel, My sweet!  
Red whortle-berries droop above my head,  
And a large flint-stone weighs upon my feet.<sup>33</sup>

He is a dead human being buried in nature without fusing with its elements. His awakening also remains to a large extent within the domain of human experience. Lorenzo's ghost restlessly roams and enters Isabella's dream world to voice a human

<sup>33</sup>Keats, *Isabella*, lines 297–9.

complaint and to convey the gruesome facts of his death to her. Keats seems to be challenging his fellow Romantic poets in their depiction of spiritual immortality by denying the human soul fusion with nature and giving it, no matter how ghostly, a human dimension. After all, nature has failed, in Keats' Romanticism, to protect the symbolic figure of the poet, as epitomised in Lorenzo, from moral evil. The protagonist's attachment to nature, his confiding of personal emotions and love of Isabella to its "sun" and "western sky" is not rewarded.<sup>34</sup> Nature, contrary to Wordsworth's assertion, "did betray / The heart that loved her".<sup>35</sup> Lorenzo is killed in an isolated nook of nature. The sword employed to slaughter him is washed in a small stream running nearby. Nature's supposed sympathetic relation to human existence does not extend beyond mechanical reflection of human forms, the purity of Lorenzo's heart, prior to his death, and the evil souls of his murderers. Otherwise, nature has shown neutrality, if not indifference, to human existence.

Though indicating a remarkable point of departure from the older Romantic pattern, Keats' concept of immortality is not as secular and humanistic as Brontë's. His ghost is as capable of seeing, hearing and remembering as Brontë's resurrected woman is, but he is still a ghost, a fact that compromises Keats' revisionary views of fellow Romantic poets and grants Brontë's revisionism a more emphatic presence in this context. Keats' ghost has a metaphysical side to his entity. He can achieve a spiritual breakthrough and enter Isabella's dream world and communicate with her. The act is far from making him human: "I am a shadow now, alas! alas!",<sup>36</sup> he exclaims in agony to Isabella, concluding: "And thou art distant in Humanity."<sup>37</sup> Lorenzo's ghost also possesses metaphysical knowledge of the manner of his death and burial. Keats challenges the Romantic tradition but is still influenced by its immateriality. He is not as secular as Brontë.

Brontë's version of humanised and secularised immortality is far more emphatic than Keats' own. Contrary to Reynolds' cursory remark that the speaker in Brontë's poem is "a ghost who haunts her self", the resurrected woman is a humanly possible earthly consciousness.<sup>38</sup> She is not a restless ghost that claims metaphysical knowledge, penetrating powers or stalking moves. She wakes up, contemplates her current humble state but makes no attempt to go back to her "princely hall" (line 18) to clarify her present uncertainties, her "doubtful dream" (line 21) about her past glorious life. She prefers to dwell on the speculative term of "Methinks" to invoke memories of the past. She even imagines that she hears the music she was in the habit of playing but does not roam back to human habitations to see who is playing it now: "O was that music like my own? / Such as I used to play" (lines 57–8). Furthermore, as in Lorenzo's case, the possibility of a victimised death is also present but, in the absence of Romantic metaphysical powers, can never be eliminated or confirmed.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., lines 80 and 79.

<sup>35</sup>Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 122–3.

<sup>36</sup>Keats, *Isabella*, line 305.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., line 312.

<sup>38</sup>Reynolds, 154.

Brontë's speaker in the monologue has a limited capacity as a human consciousness. The limitation along such metaphysical lines positively speaks for a deeper revisionary stance of the Romantic quest for immortality. Brontë's revisionism goes beyond speculations on orthodox afterlife and self-preservation in the hereafter. She is making an uncompromising literary attempt at negating Romantic ideology and at reappropriating the female self in the face of self-negating Romantic powers.

Elizabeth Fay discerns an "accretion of romantic aggression against the female poetic voice manifested most tellingly in the poetry of Keats" particularly in the nightingale poetic convention that runs through Coleridge to this younger Romantic poet.<sup>39</sup> Within such convention the "nightingale is not a male but a female poet, and her story tells of the cutting of tongues." It is a "story of rape and silencing" of the female voice.<sup>40</sup> In her assessment of "the Victorian woman poet's response" to such silencing and aggression, Fay highlights two voices, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's and Christina Rossetti's. In Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, she discerns an inversion of the old "troubadour convention" that silenced the woman and allowed masculine speakers solely to express love and adoration. Barrett Browning, Fay argues, is intent on silencing the male voice and "invert[ing] the power relation of the troubadour convention to the woman's advantage and voice".<sup>41</sup> In Rossetti, on the other hand, Fay discovers a continuation of the monologue convention of Coleridge and Keats which the poet paradoxically employs to retort at Keats' aggression by undertaking "a thorough investigation of an attempted murder of a woman poet's voice, and denial of the efficacy of his voice." Though it "encloses that voice in its own world" the monologue form Rossetti employs "is only one step further to the internalised voice of Modernism".<sup>42</sup> Brontë's poem is a precedent of Rossetti's line of response, though more assertive as a feminist stance, I would say. If Rossetti has had "her apprehension that Barrett Browning has incorrectly reversed the troubadour tradition in singing of love instead of loss", she still believes that singing of the absence of love and its melancholy is a major constituent of a woman's poetic convention.<sup>43</sup> Lawrence Lipking also suggests, in his theoretical venture, a female "poetics of abandonment", where man "leaves, she stays and pines" in a "secret story of the greatest passions" that women presumably often incorporate into their literary writings.<sup>44</sup> Brontë, however, dispenses with the emotional dependence of love and sings of creativity. She sings of it in the same monologue form that presages, in the case of Rossetti, Modernist poetics.

The literary claims that Brontë makes for the female poet are also evident in her assertion that women are as capable of being inspired by nature into poetic creativity as the Romantic poet is. Challenging Southey, English Romanticism and western

<sup>39</sup>Fay, 213.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 223.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 224.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 223.

<sup>44</sup>Lipking, 75.

culture for what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar call, in another context, its “patriarchal interdictions that have historically caused women poets . . . anxiety and guilt about attempting the pen”,<sup>45</sup> Brontë embraces nature’s inspirational powers on behalf of women poets and voices the act. Her challenge of the Romantic transcendental ideology becomes in this context more intricate. She rejects poetic transcendence not because she is not capable of attaining it, but because she does not approve of its humanly, and more explicitly womanly, subversive implications. Transcendental immortality is self-dissolving and female-negating and has to be deconstructed. Inspiration by nature is generative and can be embraced. In the presence of a written reproof by Southey it ought to be embraced.

Brontë’s resistance of the principle of immaterial fusion with nature after death is, therefore, coupled with deep faith in nature on behalf of the living. The woman’s relationship with nature before death proves to be one of love, fascination and Romantic sublimation in its presence. The resurrected woman vividly recalls nature’s inspirational influence on her song. Like a Romantic poet, the speaker is engrossed by nature’s beauty. Recollections of her past musical performances in social gatherings bring back memories of how nature touched and sublimated her:

When soft and clear and holy shone  
The summer moon’s first ray,  
And saw me lingering still to feel  
The influence of that sky? (lines 59–62)

Indulging nature’s charms, the woman speaks of “rose and bower” (line 65) and “how far beneath” (line 66) they

Hung down o’ercharged with dew  
And sighed their sweet and fragrant breath  
To every gale that blew the hour for music. (lines 67–9)

Overwhelmed by nature’s powers, the speaker records how nature’s magnanimous presence “fettered” her “tongue” and how her “lips” “could not with their strain / Break Earth’s and Heaven’s repose” (lines 74, 71–2). Initial intimidation by nature gradually subsides, “first a note and then a line / The fettered tongue would say,” before it gives way to full sublimation, for “the whole rich song divine / Found free a gushing way” (lines 73–6).

The process resembles the Romantic poet’s inspiration by nature and his act of sublimation and poetic creation. On recalling the “beauteous forms” of the natural landscape of Tintern Abbey during his London years, Wordsworth sings of a “gift . . . sublime” whereby “the affections gently lead us on, / Until, the breath of this corporeal frame” is “Almost suspended” and “we are laid asleep / In body and become a living soul”.<sup>46</sup> This sublimation effected through recollected contacts with

<sup>45</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, eds., *Shakespeare’s Sisters*, xxiii.

<sup>46</sup>Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” lines 22, 36–7, 42–3, 45–6.

nature occurs with more immediacy in Shelley's response to the Ravine of Arve in "Mont Blanc". Addressing it as: "Dizzy Ravine!", Shelley exclaims: "And when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange".<sup>47</sup> His sublimation is interactive in nature; his "human mind" holds "an unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around" and would result in poetic creation, for the place where this exchange occurs is "the still cave of the witch poetry".<sup>48</sup>

Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" is more secularly aware of the human struggle against limitation in nature's presence than any of the other two. The speaker feels his "heart aches" and experiences "a drowsy numbness" upon listening to the song of the nightingale. His desire to "fly" "away!" with the bird "on the viewless wings of Poesy" undergoes, as in Brontë's case, initial fettering, "the dull brain perplexes and retards," before the desired sublimation of "Already with thee" is attained.<sup>49</sup> In Keats' poem, as in Brontë's, the "tender" night, the "Queen-Moon ... on her throne", the balmy flowers, the "incense" and the breeze similarly charm the speaker into poetic creation.<sup>50</sup> His imagination ultimately transcends the present to recreate the past. The striking resemblance between Keats and Brontë suggests that she believes that women can, in the presence of beautiful nature, become poets. Her speaker in the monologue is not just an aristocratic woman of social consequence; she is a sublimated Romantic poet. Brontë seems to address this assertion to Southey, significantly across a sphere of female poetics. The dramatic monologue is only one element of such poetics. The poem contains other manifestations of the tradition.

Besides her acts of selection and negation that she employs in the revisionary stance of Romantic poetics, Brontë empowers the female poet through an act of substitution. She begins in the same revisionary manner of Romantic ideology only to subtly insert a substitutive female poetics. Brontë introduces a new anti-Romantic relationship between her woman artist and nature in death. Without denying nature's power to inspire women poets in life, she revises nature's capacity to influence posthumous existence. The woman's relationship with nature differs in her resurrected state from what it was when she was alive. In life after death, Brontë negates the Romantic poet's idealised conception of nature. The awakened human consciousness is strongly challenged by the natural landscape and remarkably rises up to the occasion. The challenge partly comes from revived memories of past fear of deserted places and burial grounds and partly from present roughness of landscape. The speaker's first realisation of her lonely burial in nature comes when on reawakening she inspects the scene and discovers it to be a graveyard site: "and I have slept where roughest hind / Had shuddered to pass by" (lines 49–50). But, immediately she finds it within her capacity to confirm: "And no dread did my spirit find" (line 51). Similarly, memories of nature's outdoor cruelty on winter nights and its "strange and hollow sound" (line 55) do not scare the speaker. They are made so

<sup>47</sup>Shelley, "Mont Blanc," lines 34–5.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., lines 36–40, 44.

<sup>49</sup>Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," lines 1, 31, 33–5.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., lines 34–5, 42, 39.

“That living veins might freeze” (line 56), but not those of the dead. In her current posthumous exposure to wild nature she remains untouched by fear. Even prior to resurrection, her peaceful psychopannychism has gone on undisturbed while “the wild dark clouds of night / Each eve for years drawn on” and “When the wind’s high and warming strain / Swells loud on sunless hill” (lines 41–2, 47–8). Until the end of her speech she is not intimidated by the fact that she has “slumbered thus alone” and is deeply “interred so far from light”, for she continues to assert: “I feel no fear, / I sleep—how calm I sleep” (lines 44, 43, 79–80). Her human sleep contradicts the immaterial fusion between nature and dead people conceived of in Romantic poetry. The revived human consciousness is highly aware of its own separateness from nature, lonely state of being, the presumed fear involved in facing rough nature unarmed by human companionship and unprotected by mortal dwellings. Significantly, the resurrected woman is content with this uncanny form of existence.

The woman’s peaceful sleep in her own tomb or in nature’s womb is an act that has its own feminist cultural roots and self-assertive implications. Her “bold alliance with nature” is more than a “scorn” of “the meek fears of the . . . living”.<sup>51</sup> The speaker’s unflinching composure and calm resignation to mother earth point to a significant kind of relationship of deep trust between Brontë and nature unimpeded by conventional stereotypes of its power manifestations. Such a relationship is an important part of Brontë’s substitutive, feminist, female poetics.

The feminist implications of Brontë’s poetics are not a personally promoted set of conceptions or a privately developed conviction but an outcome of deep intellectual involvement in a culture that has its sources of empowerment for women beginning with the seventeenth century. Although some literary critics and historians believe that “late eighteenth-century feminism” had “died a swift and natural death, not to be revived again till the twentieth century”,<sup>52</sup> feminist critics like Anne K. Mellor and Mitzi Myers contradict this view by tracing cultural roots in female writings of the nineteenth century back to politicised female voices of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Feminist literary and cultural elements of these two centuries might have been challenged along the way to the twentieth century but never died out. Brontë’s poem is a proof that they did not.

Myers meets the challenge of the death of early feminism through deconstructing the dichotomy between Mary Wollstonecraft and Hanna More that has made More “the premier villain; Wollstonecraft, the lonely exception” in eighteenth-century feminism.<sup>53</sup> Both writers as well as female preachers and instructors of the eighteenth century, in her opinion, have equally empowered women within a religiously acceptable frame of reference. Wollstonecraft and More, Myers believes, tried in “their different ways . . . to endow woman’s role with more competence, dignity and consequence”.<sup>54</sup> In Wollstonecraft there is a “female strategy of self-assertion

<sup>51</sup>Reynolds, 154.

<sup>52</sup>Lawrence Stone quoted in Myers, 201.

<sup>53</sup>Myers, 201.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.



through virtue”.<sup>55</sup> While “a More text is alive with ... a positive power of ability, competence, energy ... [and] the right to say no to custom, on Christian grounds of course.” More also “infuses ... domestic vocation with social and political resonance”.<sup>56</sup> Female instructors were also “prodding their auditors to take responsibility for realizing their own potential” and “to become ... mistresses of their own—and the nation’s—destiny”.<sup>57</sup>

Mellor’s challenge tends to be more theory-oriented. She critiques contemporary absorption in the tradition of the poetess that she and other critics, like Isobel Armstrong, Angela Leighton, Cheryl Walker and Glennis Stephenson have promoted at the expense of “the tradition of the female poet”.<sup>58</sup> The critiqued tradition in this context is that of Hemans and Landon that she claims to narrowly focus on “the primacy of love and the domestic affections” as necessary means to women’s happiness, and that also promotes “rejection or condemnation of poetic fame ... and the acceptance of the hegemonic doctrine of separate spheres” in female literary output.<sup>59</sup> Depending on her readings in literary history (in Margret Ezell and Christine Krueger), Mellor diverts attention to a politicised female poet tradition that “originates in the writings of the female preachers or prophets who embraced seventeenth-century Quaker theology ... that authorized them to speak in public at Quaker Meetings”.<sup>60</sup> In this alternative tradition and “by the end of the eighteenth-century women preachers had learned to invoke scriptural authority for the right of women to speak in public ... on both religious and political issues”.<sup>61</sup> These “women preachers grew in number and influence throughout the early nineteenth century”.<sup>62</sup> They “established ... a literary precedent for woman” in the “political” sphere, a tradition that Mellor believes to include Anna Barbauld, Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, Lucy Aikin, Ann Yearsely, Mary Robinson, Helen Maria Williams and Amelia Opie. Mellor calls it a “romantic ‘female poet’” tradition.<sup>63</sup> To her list of poets I would add Charlotte Brontë. The suggestion is particularly feasible because of Brontë’s good “understanding of seventeenth- ... century literature”, recognised on discovery of the text and notes of *The Poetaster*, rich as they are with “literary allusions” and indicative of the author’s “extensive literary background” and knowledge of the literature of that era.<sup>64</sup> Such knowledge is not exclusive to male texts by Ben Jonson and Thomas Dekker, for one of the libraries that Brontë is highly likely to have accessed is that of Miss Currer, a scholar and head of all female

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 207.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 209.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 202.

<sup>58</sup>Mellor, 262.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 262.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 262–3.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 263.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 276.

<sup>64</sup>Monahan, 475.

collectors in Europe who owned educational works by women writers such as Hester Chapone and Maria Edgeworth.<sup>65</sup>

Although Mellor recognises a lapse before the middle of the nineteenth century in application of feminist principles to female writings and cultural attitudes, a lapse she attributes to the fact that the practice of the Quaker women had its “ideological limitations” that drew women into a state of subordination to “patriarchal Christianity” around the 1840s,<sup>66</sup> the early practice, I would say, not the later one was in operation during Brontë’s literary growth and maturation early in the nineteenth century. Brontë must have been influenced by almost two centuries of politicised and progressive cultural views on women’s social and literary role before Quaker women’s teachings became reactionary and began to empower patriarchal culture around the middle of the nineteenth century. Brontë’s challenge of Romanticism on both ideological and technical levels and her substitution of female poetics must have been largely supported by this feminist tradition that started in Quaker teachings of the seventeenth century and was highly active in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cultures. Though likely to have been encouraged in her use of the dramatic monologue by Hemans’ and Landon’s practice, her feminist predecessors, I would argue, are Mary Wollstonecraft, Hanna More, Charlotte Smith and Lucy Aikin. She belongs to the tradition of “the female poet” not to that of the poetess. The poem under discussion has ample evidence to testify to this suggestion.

The dead woman’s physical sleep in nature’s womb as it differs from the Romantic poet’s transcendental fusion with nature’s elements is a manifestation of the influence of the early female literary tradition on Brontë. Within that tradition, the biblical story of Eve’s creation is revised. Eve is depicted as being created not from Adam’s rib but from mother earth. In Lucy Aikin’s epistolary challenge of Alexander Pope’s derogatory views of women “the slumbering Adam pressed the lonely earth” and “forth to light the infant-woman sprung.”<sup>67</sup> Eve is thus made within this tradition “morally superior to Adam because she, unlike Adam, has a mother and because she will become a mother”. Although, she will not become a mother, perhaps for a different type of feminist stance, Brontë’s resurrected woman peacefully sleeps in the womb of mother earth not only in challenge of patriarchal hegemonic cultural attitudes and Romantic transcendental loss of self in nature, but also in concurrence with a cultural background of female poetics that has its faith in nature as a concrete physical sanctuary for the female body and self.

Mellor’s perspective of female nature poetics is not absolute. Teddi Lynn Chichester sums up what can be explained as a variation in such poetics. The view is that “propounded by Sherry B. Ortner, Gilbert and Gubar, Margret Homans and others” who believe that “women identify—because they are traditionally identified

<sup>65</sup>Thormählen, 247, 248.

<sup>66</sup>Mellor, 264.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

with—nature, and therefore find trouble seeing themselves as (speaking) subjects.” Chichester argues that Emily Brontë rebels against this traditional conception of femaleness through a Gondal character who “distances herself from (mother) Earth in order to survive, to renew herself and—most importantly for the poet Brontë—to speak”.<sup>68</sup> Emily thus presumably departs from this element of female poetics in order to enhance her own challenge of the Romantic tradition and be on an equal footing with its subversive masculinity. In Charlotte’s case the departure is from male into female poetics, though of a different type than that proclaimed the most common. The speaker in Charlotte’s monologue is physically aligned with nature without necessarily having to be silenced. Her monologue proves she would not be silenced by death. She posthumously speaks while peacefully sleeping in the womb of mother earth.

The physicality of this restful sleep in nature is not the only indication of Brontë’s possible belonging to this alternate female literary tradition. Her poem is, in fact, rich with evidence that attests to this possibility. Mellor, for example, criticises Hemans and Landor’s tradition of the poetess for celebrating the “hallowed ministries of woman, at the cradle, the hearthstone, and the death-bed”.<sup>69</sup> Brontë’s resurrected woman has had a life of material profusion since the cradle, of inspired artistic creativity at the hearthstone and of resurrection beyond the death-bed. At every stage in life, and afterlife, she has broken with subversive social stereotypes of women.

At the cradle Brontë’s woman is born to:

That dwelling proud . . .  
Where I caught first the early beam  
Of being’s day’s spring face. (lines 22–4)

Her stately maiden home releases her from economic dependence on a masculine partner. She is empowered by birth not by marriage. Rich and aristocratic at the roots, the lady recalls her past social importance with no reference to any man or his hearthstone: “And was I not a lady once, / My home a princely hall?” (lines 17–18). The mansion is also dignified with “flash . . . / Of mirrors broad and bright” and “torches” that “fill” her “chambers with their light” (lines 25–8). Living in comfort and abundance, the aristocratic woman is also surrounded by social subordinates: “And did not hundreds make response / Whene’er I deigned to call?” (lines 19–20). She is also richly dressed and adorned:

And o’er my limbs the draperies flow  
All gloss and silken shine,  
On my cold brow the jewels glow  
As bright as festal wine. (lines 29–32)

The economic independence that the woman enjoys in life empowers her existence at her own hearthstone. Her ballroom, an outdoor natural landscape, is not an arena

<sup>68</sup>Chichester, 6.

<sup>69</sup>Lydia Sigourney quoted in Mellor, 262.

of sexual politics writers like Jane Austen exploit for romantic love, courtship and marriage. Her singing to her guests is oblivious of nineteenth-century husband-hunting social manoeuvres in which women were often trapped. It is an occasion for self-expression and self-elation. Behind her speaker's entertaining of guests, Brontë voices the female poet act of poetic creativity (that we have seen), her initial struggle in the presence of nature before the desired sublimation. First, the attempt to produce her Romantic song of self-expression

... in vain,  
 Each ancient stanza rose  
 . . . . .  
 And Then the whole rich song divine  
 Found free a gushing way. (lines 69–70, 75–6)

Cheryl Wilson's insights on late Victorian women poets' representation of the ballroom can be illuminating in Brontë's case. Wilson perceives later poets, like Amy Levy, Katharine Tynan and Mary Robinson, as having developed an "understanding that the social rules and codes employed in the ballroom attend to the needs of the wife-hunting of men but do not encourage expressions of sexuality and individual desire from women." They recognise the "ball as an institution ... that perpetuates hierarchal and oppressive gender relationships".<sup>70</sup> A similar awareness is present in Brontë much earlier in the century.

Brontë equally empowers her aristocratic woman poet at the death-bed. Rather than being silenced by death she lives on to break, with another song, the silence of the grave. Her experience subverts the feminine stereotype of a woman as "silent unless spoken to, deferential to men".<sup>71</sup> Brontë's speaker wakes up in utter negation of men in both lives. Men are not merely silenced in her monologue but dispensed with altogether. They have no presence or role to play in her past life nor does she seem to regret their absence in her present situation. The attitude is not of passive acceptance of the principle of separate spheres but genuine emotional independence and self-sufficiency. Maxwell in her discussion of Rossetti speaks of the "alienation of woman from man and the separation of her sphere from his" as "Rossetti's version of em[p]owerment" where "the male lover is consistently rejected in favor of the Heavenly Bridegroom".<sup>72</sup> In the case of Brontë's speaker, the lover is replaced with the self in past life and present resurrection. An attitude of self-indulgence dominates both states of being.

Replacing the lover with the self in Brontë represents another significant point of departure from Romantic ideology. In Keats' version of Romantic love, the ghost of Lorenzo seeks emotional reciprocity in its roaming state and is satisfied with Isabella's paleness as a sign of its realisation:

<sup>70</sup>Wilson, 201.

<sup>71</sup>Lawrence Stone quoted in Myers, 201.

<sup>72</sup>Maxwell, 153.

That paleness warms my grave, as though I had  
 A Seraph chosen from the bright abyss  
 To be my spouse: thy paleness makes me glad.<sup>73</sup>

Brontë's woman is free from emotional dependency on the other, men in this instance. Maxwell speaks of Rossetti's work as an "emptying-out of the Romantic fantasy of reciprocity, of confirmation through the other", but she also believes that the masculine other is still present to "allow her ... to chart the fictions through which she assumes her identity".<sup>74</sup> But in Brontë's case self-reliance occurs through utter negation of masculine presence. Brontë's feminist stance is more assertive than Rossetti's whose claims probably came after patriarchal culture was re-empowered through Evangelical teachings. Brontë's occurred more than a decade earlier in the century.

Though Brontë's concurrence with the culture of potential femaleness of the eighteenth century might be challenged by the presence of the aristocratic woman in her poem because of that culture's rooted faith in what Myers calls bourgeois and middle-class values like "accountability, diligence, discipline and order" and its paying homage "to mind and moral excellence" instead of "charm and modish graces",<sup>75</sup> Brontë's indulgence of the aristocratic dream as one form of empowerment of the female poet can still be located, I believe, within the cultural values of that time. For one thing, it recalls Charlotte Smith's sympathy with the victimised aristocracy of the French Revolution, a different line of Romanticised response to that political event than "liberty, equality, and fraternity". Mellor highlights this alternate response in Smith's poem "The Emigrants", where Smith is interpreted as sympathetic to "the plight of the French clergymen and aristocrats who had been suddenly and violently deprived of their homes, livings and family members".<sup>76</sup>

Brontë's aristocratic dream also still resides within the cultural norms of the eighteenth century because Brontë's aristocratic woman is as chaste as such a culture would have her (perhaps too chaste). The woman's chastity is manifest in her control of erotic desires. The speaker in Brontë's monologue, as we know by now, is a celibate woman who is never tempted into the institution of marriage. Her dwelling has proven to be her maiden home where she "caught first the early beam / Of being's day's spring face" (lines 23–4). Her desire is controlled only to be narcissistically channelled towards self-indulgence. It surfaces in her recollection: "And o'er my limbs the draperies flow" and in her erotic speculation: "Who then disrobed that worshipped form?" (lines 29, 33). Otherwise it is masked behind the cold appearance the speaker puts on for the public eye: "On my cold brow the jewels glow" (line 31). But the mask conceals from people, not from self, the warmth inside: "Who turned the blood that ran so warm / To Winter's frozen sleet?" (lines 35–6).

<sup>73</sup>Keats, *Isabella*, lines 316–18.

<sup>74</sup>Maxwell, 153.

<sup>75</sup>Myers, 205.

<sup>76</sup>Mellor, 265.

In her psychoanalytic study of Brontë's fictional works, Dianne F. Sadoff finds such narcissistic moments in "Brontë's narratives" in which the fictional figure "becomes a spectator of his or her own desire ... problematic".<sup>77</sup> The case is so because "Brontë desires to challenge ... differential thinking yet fears the consequences of questioning dominant ideologies of masculine and feminine".<sup>78</sup> Therefore, "[i]n exhibiting herself" the "necessarily narcissistic female who takes pleasure in being spectacle is unable to constitute herself as subject".<sup>79</sup> Contrary to Sadoff's view, the speaker in Brontë's monologue indulges in narcissistic self-adoration as part of a stately self-image as highly aristocratic, socially attractive and poetically creative. The poem contradicts, through total exclusion of masculine presence, Sadoff's claim that the "body of a woman being gazed at is a fetish for the gazer, who asserts his own position as subject, hers as spec(tac)ular object".<sup>80</sup> Brontë's speaker displays herself to public gaze without being psychologically hindered by attention from any particular man. She manages through her narcissistic self-indulgence to be both subject and object of the gaze and to become a masterful self.

Her chastity comes in defiance of social stereotypes of aristocracy as necessarily corrupt. She is not the stereotyped French courtesan of a "dissolute France" culturally feared in England particularly after the French Revolution, but seems to be more in line with the Evangelical teachings that developed, later in the century, in reaction to such an image.<sup>81</sup> Brontë's aristocrat remains more of a model of what Myers calls "female modesty".<sup>82</sup> Her controlled desire is a proof that Brontë's aristocratic dream is selective in its response to the culture of potential femaleness of the past. Paradoxically, her protagonist is as assertive, dignified and virtuous as More and Wollstonecraft would wish her to be and as aristocratic as Smith would sympathetically accept her for being. Brontë has deeply understood that culture and can make choices within its givens, and escape from one part of its ideology into another. Though aristocratic her female poet is virtuous. Southey's objection to the female poetic voice is once again challenged, now for lacking solid moral grounds.

Brontë's graveyard poem is an elegy that protests female literary marginalisation more than it laments the vanity of human, or a woman's, life. It takes on a dramatic monologue form. The form allows Brontë to objectify personal experience and depict the female self as capable of challenging cultural stereotypes and accomplishing a literary presence. Brontë avails herself of the mask the form lends to indirectly engage Southey and patriarchal culture in a revisionary stance of their hegemonic attitude towards women and subversive views of the female poetic voice. She contextualises her masked attack on patriarchal culture and its poet laureate as a challenge of English Romanticism and its transcendental ideology. Her resurrected woman

<sup>77</sup>Sadoff, 157.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 127.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 128.

<sup>81</sup>Myers, 199.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 200.

speaker concludes with an assertive confirmation of her own human and temporal existence: “I am here.” This secular assertion of self occurs though to the world she is: “Past, lost, forgotten, I am here” (line 77). It is attained despite the melancholic sense of “I know no hope” (line 79).

Literary theory tends to stress elements of subjectivity and emotional involvement in female poetics. In defence, rather than negation, of the principle, Lipking claims that a “literary theory true to women’s experience ... is likely to view ‘aesthetic distance’ as a sham, a denial of women’s rights to literature”.<sup>83</sup> This perspective cannot go unchallenged in Brontë’s dramatic monologue. “I am here” is simultaneously objective and subjective. It stands for both speaker and poet. Brontë’s dramatic form permits the principle of self-assertion to operate on two levels, each enforcing the other. The first is the objective tale of the dead aristocratic woman who wakes up to reclaim her past social importance, emotional sufficiency, economic freedom and self-reliant independence from everyone, including her author. But the speaker subtly beckons in the direction of Brontë via her nature song. The song becomes, in my reading, Brontë’s assertion of female poetic inspiration through the power of nature. The speaker’s resurrection is decoded, in this study, as Brontë’s dream of poetic immortality. The secular nature of the woman’s reawakening is interpreted as Brontë’s aspiration for a cultural voice as a poet. It is a feminine dream that can only be realised through a feminist poetics that rigorously challenges masculine order.

Brontë pre-dates other Victorian female poets in use of the dramatic monologue. Her early practice makes her a contemporary of Browning and gives her precedence over Tennyson (the two Victorian poets traditionally associated with the development of this poetic technique). Armstrong has named Brontë among the female poets in the use of the form without highlighting background or motives. She merely places Brontë in a general feminine context of the literary convenience of the form as a mask for women poets and a reaction against male objectification of female presence and voice in poetry.

This study has attempted to investigate both how Brontë developed the form and why she decided to introduce it into poetry. The findings point in the direction of Brontë’s childhood inscription of tales, invention of fictional figures and her empowering them to independently speak as early possible training in use of the form. But her readings in seventeenth-century drama and her writing of a short six-act play can be more directly relevant as background that made the trajectory possible. Her private motive for using the form in poetry is the personal criticism she received from poet laureate Southey. Her initial meek response to Southey and compliance with his rebuff must have been followed by a subsequent need for self-appropriation and a desire to assert her sensibility as a sensitive soul equally capable of being inspired by nature into poetic creativity as any male Romantic poet.

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<sup>83</sup>Lipking, 70.

The intricate manner in which the dramatic monologue is employed as a retort to Southey and patriarchal culture is obvious in Brontë's creation of an unusual dramatic setting and eerie situation that can best be depicted through such objective form. A first person lyric voice or a third person narrator, even if omniscient, could not have attained the same level of absorbing plausibility. No one could have gone into the grave to describe what it is like to be dead and buried but the resurrected dead. Brontë's use of the form thus proves to be more than a simple mask that permits an encoding of a personal injury or a voicing of cultural victimisation. It is a matter of aesthetic necessity. The intertwining of theme and technique is a marvellous artistic achievement that was attained through the absence of the author's voice and the uninterrupted flux of the revived woman's speech. The fact that the form allows Brontë to contradict Romantic ideology or challenge patriarchal culture should come next in consideration. The chance it affords Brontë to embody her ambitious, culturally forbidden, feminine dream of poetic immortality is intriguing because it is accomplished in a highly objective manner.

Brontë's critique and assertion receive support from feminist culture, a literary stream, or sub-stream, of potential femaleness running through two centuries, starting with the seventeenth and becoming more intense during the last decades of the eighteenth century. This tradition must have suggested a prototype of the physical and the concrete that can be embraced in place of the transcendental and the abstract. It must have helped her legitimise her self-assertive stance, independence and self-sufficiency through alternative models of how to challenge patriarchal culture and, ultimately, how to negate Romantic ideology. The culture of feminist poetics is a rich culture that allows for varied responses. Brontë opts for the less homely (though not necessarily less richly feminine) and the more assertive. She belongs to the female poet tradition not to that of the poetess. Even if her use of the monologue seems to fit into the poetic model of Hemans and Landon, it does so only on a formal not a contextual level. Moreover (though offhandedly), she remarkably improves on their practice through the single, unaided and objective voice of her speaker.

Brontë's experience with the dramatic monologue in this poem on both formal and contextual levels should grant her better recognition in the poetic canon than that assigned to her so far. Reynolds' claim that "Charlotte's poetry is quite ragged in comparison" to Emily's and Anne's "but it is still powerful, mainly because it enacts the struggle between her early Romantic inclinations and her later Victorian suppressions" is out of context now even in its seemingly positive attempt to restore some critical balance in favour of Charlotte Brontë.<sup>84</sup> Brontë's intricate and purely objective use of the form should be an asset to her reputation in the canon beyond the stereotype of Romantic and Victorian poetics (though this dichotomy was deemed, back in the 1980s, a revolution on the earlier biographical approach to her fictional prose work).<sup>85</sup> For instance, if the latest readings of Rossetti recognise her as

<sup>84</sup>Reynolds, 154.

<sup>85</sup>Sadiq, *Brontë's Journey*.



falling into the monologic stream of Coleridge and Keats and providing a link in a chain towards Modernist poetics, Brontë should also be considered along similar lines. She preceded Rossetti by more than a decade in producing a well-rounded, multidimensional, single-voiced dramatic monologue and should not therefore be excluded from this tradition. Furthermore, Brontë's insights on sexual politics are also ahead of her time. Similar understanding to hers has been recognised in later Victorian poets (like Amy Levy, Katharine Tynan and Mary Robinson) but not in an early poet like Brontë. Brontë's comprehension of masculine politics and reactionary attitude to their subversive implications are differently experienced by Rossetti who fell under the influence of the increasing popularity of Evangelical teachings. Brontë pre-dates that anti-feminist cultural retreat. Rossetti's dependence on male presence to identify the female self is absent from Brontë's monologue. Male figures are absent and the female self proves capable of speaking quite independently nevertheless.

The poem analysed in this study is not an isolated instance in Brontë's poetic career. She wrote other dramatic monologues (and narrative poems too) that deserve attention. Further readings in Brontë's poetry should attend to her pioneering use of objective forms in poetry and its relevance to Modernist poetics. Critical assessment of her poetry ought to appreciate her progressive claims for women poets and feminist protest against patriarchal suppression of their poetic voices. Literary theory should consider her feminist poetics of negation, selection and substitution challenging in remarkable depth and complexity both the "poetics of abandonment" and that of subjective involvement. It ought to recognise her literary affiliation with the tradition of the "female poet" as distinct from the less assertive stream of the "poetess". Receptivity to such elements in her performance will definitely improve her position as a poet and simultaneously enrich our understanding of female poetics as distinct from the still dominant masculine tradition in the canon.

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