

IDENTITY AND THE VICTORIAN WOMAN POET: WORKING IN AND
AGAINST THE POETESS TRADITION

by

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ABSTRACT

This study asserts that many Victorian women poets were engaged in processes of challenging, interrogating and reconstructing the Poetess Tradition. In doing so, these women asserted control over the construction of their identities as women writers. This contradicts the image unfortunately constructed by previous scholarship, where reclamation of Victorian women poets has depicted them as passive victims of culturally institutionalised oppression. Instead, many women poets devised and applied a complex amalgamation of poetic styles and methods to trouble the limitations placed upon them due to their gender. This study investigates some of the many methods by which women poets worked in and against the Poetess Tradition, namely the adoption of a pseudonym, the construction of a new female poetics, and the use of a dramatised speaker. Through engaging in these practices, the position and status of women poets in Victorian writing cultures will be redressed, and a more complex and nuanced picture of Victorian literary landscapes will be provided.

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INTRODUCTION

Different writers' 'understanding and acceptance or manipulation of their position... vary from period to period, from culture to culture and, most importantly, from individual to individual' (Gill 2007: 8). This acknowledgement of the 'huge differences between each [writer's] literary, cultural and indeed spiritual context' (Gill 2007: 8) asserts that the Victorian literary marketplace was immensely diverse and in a constant state of flux. However, statistical evidence from Joanna Russ (1983), Jeni Couzyn (1985) and Vicki Bertram (2005) shows that the majority of anthologies fail to reflect even a tiny portion of this diversity. This has resulted in a distorted canon which many late-twentieth-century critics became interested in repairing. One sub-group which suffered marginalisation from mainstream literature was women writers. The reasons behind this neglect can be traced to various traditionally institutionalised prejudices and ideas concerning literary worth, ranging from assumptions over women's inferior intelligence (Showalter 1979: 76-8) and a fierce masculine rationality that despised feminine writing (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: xxxvi), to the control male editors wielded over anthology compilations as they satisfied their own interests at the expense of diversity (Armstrong 1993: 322). However, initial attempts at recovery became skewed, for, as Elaine Showalter (1979) posits, women's literature suffered from John Goss's 'residual Great Traditionalism', where it has been reduced and condensed into a tiny band. As a result, the majority of twentieth-century recovery attempts resulted with the novel being the main embodiment of women's literary efforts (Gill 2007: 11). Women poets predominantly remained in the background of literary interests until Margaret Homans' groundbreaking *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* of 1980. Victorian women poets are now not only being recovered, but also analysed. This study will build upon the

previous three decades' worth of attention on Victorian women poets, to focus on their consciousness of the gendered ideologies that influenced their critical reception.

Over the last three decades there has been a focussed effort by academic research to rediscover the work of women poets from previous centuries, inspiring critics to redress the exclusion of women poets from the literary canon. In relation to the Victorian literary landscape, investigations led by Margaret Homans (1980), Kathleen Hickok (1984), Dorothy Mermin (1986), Deidre David (1987), Virginia Blain (1988), Isobel Armstrong (1993), Joseph Bristow (1995) and Angela Leighton (1996) provided a far more complex and nuanced picture than canonical anthologies traditionally indicated. This has resulted in the previously maligned and under-valued Victorian female poets being re-evaluated by those sensitive to female writing cultures.

While these anthologies of the 1980s and 1990s succeeded in retrieving works by neglected poets, they failed to fully acknowledge the poets' own consciousness of their literary and cultural contexts. This study will, therefore, focus on the methodologies used by those women who have already been granted a position in these new anthologies. This re-assessment takes the form of the Victorian women poets' awareness of their precarious position in their contemporary literary societies, and the formation of literary history. My argument is that Victorian women poets' relationship with contemporary literary cultures was conscious and intentional. By investigating this awareness of the gendered politics of their society and women poets' active engagement with and interrogation of them, then the diversity, accomplishment and complexity of their work will be recognised. Although Susan Brown has already argued that 'the voice of the poetess...took the form of a self-consciously feminine self-staging in verse' (2000: 184), this thesis will develop this notion further, by

exploring how Victorian women poets reconstructed ideas of ‘poetess’ and ‘feminine’ as well as poetical identity.

There are several key terms used throughout this thesis which require specific attention. For the purposes of this research, the ‘Poetess Tradition’ is understood to be the designated feminine space within the Victorian literary marketplace. Although feminine writing was popular and welcomed by the reading public, it was positioned as separate, or ‘other’, to serious and intellectual scholarly pursuits. From Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1979) to Armstrong’s ‘A Music of Thine Own’ (1993) and beyond, critics have recognised the presence of this separate feminine writing which encouraged women’s texts, but simultaneously defined them according to restrictive criteria of what was considered ‘feminine’. The idealisation of femininity was exemplified by influential literary critic and social commentator, Coventry Patmore (1854), through his figure of the ‘angel in the house’. Patmore’s parodying of femininity also shows how, although insisted upon in women, it was also aligned with inferiority and triviality. Although the feminine styles of writing of the Poetess Tradition were a performance which could be adopted by any writer who wished to capitalise on the lucrative popularity of such texts, all poetry written by women was consigned to the Poetess Tradition. This occurrence has been termed the ‘gender as genre paradox’ in recent scholarship, as the texts of women writers were categorised according to the gender of their writer, as opposed to textual or linguistic signifiers. This thesis commences with thorough investigations into the Poetess Tradition and its criteria, as well as the gender as genre paradox. The first chapter also explores what it meant to conform to and deviate from the Poetess Tradition, and identifies potential motivations for such behaviour. Gaining a full and complex understanding of these contexts is crucial in order for this research to progress onto identifying how Victorian women poets negotiated and subverted

them. Three different methods of negotiation and subversion adopted by a variety of Victorian women poets will then be explored in the remaining three chapters.

Chapter two will investigate the adoption of a pseudonym as a response to women's struggle with gendered expectations of their writing. The conventional reading of pseudonymous or anonymous publication as the masking of gender by the writer is overly simplistic. The pseudonym can be approached as a method by which women poets acknowledged, deviated from and subverted gendered expectations of identity. This chapter suggests that the use of a pseudonym had more to do with women asserting autonomy and authority over the construction of their own identities. In this context, the pseudonym can be read as a method by which women not only rhetorically manipulated expectations of their persona, but also troubled definitions of gender and constructions of identity.

However, there were many women who did not choose to use a pseudonym, and so interrogated gender ideologies through other methods. Chapter three will use *Aurora Leigh* (1856) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning to investigate an attempt at the creation of a new feminine poetics, distanced from the conventional Poetess Tradition. Barrett Browning was acutely aware of the gendered politics that affected her society and sought to challenge them through her poetry, a self-prescribed vocation that is obvious throughout her impressive oeuvre. She was also very aware of her literary heritage, or rather, lack of it, experiencing feelings of isolation after commenting in 1845 that 'previous to Joanna Baillie there was no such thing in England as a poetess' (cited in Forster 1988: xvii). She subsequently decided it was her duty to become the grandmother figure she felt the poetesses required. This led onto her unorthodox experimentation and refusal to believe that 'women should be restricted to those forms [of poetry] thought most suitable' (Forster 1988: xviii). This resulted in the creation of a new female poetics, inspiration for other women to follow her lead, and the

inability for critics to continue to ‘assume women to be limited to certain kinds of “easy” verse’ (Forster 1988: xviii). However, despite her efforts to the contrary, she remained defined and restricted by gender. Compiler Elizabeth Sharp had Barrett Browning’s photograph printed on the inside cover of *Women’s Voices* (1887), which Sharp claimed was ‘an anthology of the most characteristic poems by [...] women’, and so clearly located Barrett Browning in a feminine tradition. A persistent myth surrounding Barrett Browning, which has been used to argue her transcendence of gendered restrictions, was that she had been seriously viewed as a contender for the position of Poet Laureate, but this is actually untrue. Barrett Browning’s name was patronisingly put forward by the *Athenaeum* as part of a series of gossip-column articles spanning April to June 1850, which mocked the very existence of the position of Poet Laureate (in Forster 1988: xvi). Because the article argued that the title of ‘Poet Laureate’ was meaningless, the idea of Barrett Browning occupying the position was not a compliment, and only served to scorn the concept more thoroughly. However, although Barrett Browning remained defined by her gender, she was recognised as the ‘first poetess’ (Forster 1988: xvi), hence her selection for this thesis. Barrett Browning accepted her gender, but not the restrictions her society placed upon her because of it. This third chapter will explore how Barrett Browning used her considerable intellect, talents and daring to create a new female poetics and, consequently, an alternative identity for the women poet.

The final chapter will discuss a further method by which Victorian women poets attempted to resolve gendered problems in their poetry. As opposed to constructing alternative pseudonymous identities or forms of female poetics, this chapter will examine how many women embraced gendered expectations and the Poetess Tradition by incorporating them into their poetry. In doing so, these women remained connected with the

positive aspects of the Poetess Tradition, but provided themselves with the potential to achieve authority and prestige. By examining the dramatic monologue, this final chapter will explore how different women appropriated a diverse selection of poetical tools and methods from masculine traditions while retaining their association with the Poetess Tradition. Through the complex and nuanced combinations, we can trace how these women negotiated their gendered literary society in order to not only be heard, but also remembered.

I have decided take a liberal stance in the choice of poems for this study and remain flexible in my terminal dates for including certain poets. The poems discussed have been selected on the grounds of their significance in terms of literary or political accomplishment, rather than publication date. Consequently, the shortlist of women poets appropriate for investigation has been decided for this research by recent scholars. These scholars have compiled collections of women poets on grounds of both an abstract aesthetic attainment and contemporary success, rather than gendered prejudices. The anthology *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets* (first published 1996), compiled by Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow and Cath Sharrock, is used as the leading authority on this process of selection. The editors' credentials firmly establish them as experts in this field who are consequently aware of and sensitive to contextual issues surrounding gender. In their introduction, they assert the intellectual worth of their collection by only including those 'poets whose achievements are unquestionable' (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: xxiv). This anthology has been chosen above the earlier groundbreaking equivalent by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds. Their *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (1995) features more examples of poetry by individual poets than Armstrong et al., but consequently, features only half the number of individual poets. As this research is concerned with both diversity and development of approaches to gendered restrictions and identity construction, the anthology

which featured the wider scope of poets was understandably preferable. This is clear when it is observed that Leighton and Reynolds commence their anthology with the poetry of Felicia Hemans, but Armstrong et al. present eighteen earlier women before their equivalent entry. These additional entries include Hannah More, Amelia Opie, Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Tighe and Caroline Bowels. Each of these predecessors to Hemans have proved to be invaluable to this thesis as it is these earlier examples of very subtle subversion which have hitherto been mostly unrecognised by critics, but which set a precedent for the more obvious and influential women to build upon. Armstrong et al. also made great effort to include women poets from marginalised sub-groups other than gender, such as the uneducated and working-class poets Charlotte Richardson, Ellen Johnston and the anonymous 'A Factory Girl'. While this provides a more rounded and thorough selection of Victorian women's poetry, I am concerned with those poets who have been maligned due to gender alone. Unfortunately, the more the complex prejudices of double marginalisation that working-class or non-white poets experienced require a far more detailed investigation than this thesis can provide.

The poetical innovations, developments and challenges of various women poets were not simple, linear progressions. As such, a conventional chronological arrangement, such as those used by anthologies, has been disregarded in favour of an arrangement that allows a multiplicity of thematic cross-connections to emerge. The chapters of this study do not correspond to a generational progression through the nineteenth-century. Each chapter reflects the variety of approaches to particular methods adopted and formed by different women poets. Critical attention will be paid to poems predominantly from the turn of the nineteenth century through to the 1880s, a time span which has been felt necessary to provide the complex contextual composition that these women were writing within (Warwick and

Willis 2008: 1). Although poetesses such as Felicia Hemans were not strictly Victorian, their work demonstrates the condition of female literary culture at the start of the period.

Furthermore, their poetry continued to enjoy high sales and many reprints throughout the century (Blain 2001: 3), showing that their popularity and relevance to the reading public did not completely fall out of favour. The decision to not follow through until the end of Queen Victoria's reign is because, by the 1880s, the poetess had undergone a thorough makeover, through to the highly complicated figure of the New Woman (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: xxiii). Again, it is unfortunate that this research cannot fully evaluate the position of the New Woman to the Poetess Tradition, or the impact of the many highly influential social changes occurring at the *fin de siècle*. Additionally, contemporary anthologies of Victorian female poetry, such as Elizabeth Sharp's *Women's Voices* (1887) and *Women Poets of the Victorian Era* (1890?) were already being compiled by 1880, indicating a conscious nostalgia and almost generational break as Victorian society and culture were giving way to something new.

This research is focused on exploring the relationship of Victorian women poets with and against the Poetess Tradition. This will encompass explorations into reasons behind the marginalisation of women's writing, the construction of female identities, and attempts to overcome and rework women's position in the Victorian literary landscape. As these women poets operated within Victorian literary cultures, this research is concerned with evaluating their relationships and interactions with their environments on their own contextual terms. This will in turn enable the variety of tone, voice, subject matter and form in female-authored poetry (Gill 2007: 187) to be acknowledged and appreciated, which will provide a far more comprehensive idea of Victorian literary operations.

CHAPTER ONE: THE POETESS TRADITION

Identifying the Poetess Tradition

The term ‘poetess’ raises conflicting and confusing expectations for readers, especially when viewed against the highly gendered background of the Victorian poetical landscape. For the modern reader it suggests the sentimental, feminine and ‘extraordinarily popular, but much criticised, flowery poetry written...between 1750 and 1900’ (Mandell 2006), associated with hack work (Brown 2000: 192) and triviality (Reynolds 1995: xxv). Angela Leighton is quick to place the ‘dissociation of sensibility from the affairs of the world’ (1992: 3) as one of the woman poet’s most disabling inheritances, as it meant that women were denied the experiences and education, as well as the authority, required to participate in public life. While women’s poetry was welcomed, it was not considered to have any relevance to the world, and so was not taken seriously. Furthermore, the annuals in which most female-authored poems were published during the first half of the century, tended to consist of ‘a light, readable mixture of poems, stories, letters and fashionable chit-chat’ (Leighton 1992: 11). This meant that female-authored poetry was categorised as frivolous, trivial and unliterary due to its place of publication. Margaret Reynolds adds the ‘experiments of modernism...a new feminist sensibility [and] a critical value placed on the dry, the intellectual, the dispassionate early twentieth-century writers’ (1995: xxxiii) to the list of external bodies and theories that associated the label ‘poetess’ with inferiority, and then assigned that label to all Victorian women poets (Mellor 1997: 260). Isobel Armstrong clarifies this dismissal of the Victorian concept of poetry and its relationship with gender when she argued that ‘twentieth-century modernism conceive[d] itself in terms of a radical

break with the past' (1993: 3). This attitude can be seen to have relegated all earlier women poets to 'the past', constructing them as a mass entity under the label 'poetess'. It has only been since the 1990s that scholarship has questioned these standards of value, and has suggested that 'individual figures must be reassessed in relation to the conditions under which they wrote and were read' (Brown 2000: 199). The Victorian poetess was a respected and established figure in her own time (Armstrong 1993: 321-2), and was not necessarily instantly associated with inferior writing. Furthermore, not all Victorian women poets identified themselves as poetesses. This chapter will explore contemporary understandings of the Victorian Poetess Tradition, in order for this thesis to progress onto exploring the poetesses' own understanding of and relationship with it.

The notion of two separate spheres describes Victorian society as divided according to gender; with the public and political being masculine, and the feminine positioned as opposite or 'other'. This led to the rhetoric of domestic ideology, with females located away from worldly experience and extensive education, and placed in identities of passive and aesthetically pleasing roles. In the literary landscape, this limited female writers to styles, forms and subjects which matched the properly feminine attributes which their society expected of them. Lyn Pykett's *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992) identifies the 'properly feminine' as the behaviour expected of women in order to achieve 'the ideal of domestic ideology, according to which woman was defined primarily in terms of her reproductive and domestic functions' (1992: 12). Judith Butler's identification of 'the body' as 'the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsive sexuality operate' (1999: 164) is exemplified here, with the properly feminine being the system of sexuality and gender placed upon the female body. Women's primary identities were as support figures for male relatives, meaning women were

associated with emotion, sacrifice and subservience. Consequently, properly feminine writing comprised of sentimental, domestic, moralistic texts, which were deemed unworthy of literary merit (Reynolds 1995: xxvi). This undervaluing took the form of professional scorn for the places where women's writing was published (such as the annuals), the dismissive pigeon-holing of the 'sloppy' feminine style and prejudicial belief in women's incapacity for revision. Above all, there was an overriding assumption throughout literary circles that only men could be the producers of 'true' poetry (Reynolds 1992: 4). Although male writers could take advantage of a lucrative career by writing for the annuals, prestige and authority were granted only to male-authored poetry. Female-authored poetry was aligned with popular but trivial conventions of piety, feeling and emotion, which led to many critics, such as Victorian anthologist Eric S. Robertson, believing that 'women have always been inferior to men as writers of poetry; and they always will be' (Robertson 1883).

The requirements of the domestic ideology and properly feminine supported this gendered prejudice as the domestic woman did not need an extensive education, knowledge of the Classics or worldly experience to serve as comfort to her male relatives, or to care for children. Margaret Homans identifies in her pioneering study of Victorian women poets that 'expectations about women's minds were self-fulfilling because women were denied a formal education and experience of public life and were confined within a domestic circle' (1980: 5). This denial was enforced by the 'structural or institutional barriers...which...count against women writers' full and equal participation' (Gill 2007: 11). Women's writing was further inhibited by the demands of the properly feminine to remain in the domestic. This extended further than simply restricting writing topics to the domestic and familial, also dictating the public presence of the female poet. The woman who abandoned the domestic to operate in public was aligned with the improperly feminine prostitute. The figure of the

prostitute troubled Victorian domestic ideologies as she disrupted families and matrimony. She also troubled gendered power structures as she was a business woman with financial independence (Pykett 1992). The parallels drawn between the woman writer, who actively participated in public debate and courted the male gaze through her publishing, and the prostitute, could endanger the woman writer's reputation. Subsequently, women writers' adherence to the properly feminine in their writing was of crucial importance. The act of publishing in itself could be considered improper, and so additional improper worldly experience or knowledge evidenced in the text could irrevocably damage a woman's character as well as her writing career.

Here we see a complex contradiction of ideology and criticism as women were expected to comply with the properly feminine, and then criticised when their writing suffered from being properly feminine. A further barrier to critical appreciation of women's literary efforts was the overriding assumption of women's intellectual inferiority, such as how women were unable to conceive of the abstract or move away from the triviality of the everyday (Anonymous in *North British Review* 1858: 467). The denial of education, experience and intellectual potential for women meant that their poetry could not be considered of serious literary merit, hence female-authored poetry was seen as a leisure pursuit, or a feminine accomplishment. Poetry as a serious, vocational career was for the male poet (Avery and Stott 2003: 65); as literary scholar and poet Robert Southey informed Charlotte Brontë in his March 1837 letter: 'literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be' (Wise and Symington 1932: 154-6).

It was not only these practical matters and social prejudices which were troublesome for many Victorian women poets. Dorothy Mermin's groundbreaking essay 'The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet' (1986) identified that the major problem for women

poets was that the roles of 'artist' and 'muse' were gendered. As Susan Brown summarised, 'women *are* poetry. They live and inspire it but they do not write it' (2000: 181). The properly feminine, which defined 'woman' in terms of her domestic function and reproductive role, positioned her as the passive object against which men act. Women could not be poets because they were the muses. Vocational poetry would also detract from women's domestic function, which was to dedicate themselves to their families. Women were encouraged to write the pretty, sentimental lyricism that was considered to be a simple extension of themselves. This complied with the domestic ideology because it was neither time nor energy consuming, and so was seen as an accomplishment or pastime. They were deemed to not have the intellect, creative abilities, or privilege to attempt poetry (Brown 2000: 181).

However, many women did write intellectual, creative, sophisticated and publicly engaged poetry, and were well received. Furthermore, both men and women writers appeared together in publications, so the notion of the separate spheres was clearly not a simple separation of men and women, but rather masculine and feminine styles. When discussing gender and performance, Judith Butler, influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, argues that 'the body' is figured as a mute facility, anticipating some meaning [to] be attributed' (1999: 164). For the Victorian woman poet, this meant that gendered meaning was attributed to her body, not her poetry. As the female body was indistinguishable from female identity, and therefore also indistinguishable from the properly feminine, 'female-authored' meant 'feminine', although 'feminine' did not necessarily mean 'female-authored'. While male writers could write in a feminine style and so benefit from the popularity of the annuals, the properly feminine restricted women writers to feminine styles, or rather, the texts that women writers wrote were classified as feminine styles. This separation of

feminine poetry from masculine accomplished two very different and important consequences: firstly, it defined feminine styles of writing through a set of conventions and expectations ‘other’ to masculine mainstream literature. Secondly, it created a network of women’s writing across the Victorian period. These two outcomes created a recognisable tradition which women poets understood as belonging to them (Armstrong 1993: 323): the Poetess Tradition.

Anne Mellor identifies some conventions of these feminine styles of writing in ‘The Female Poet and the Poetess’ (1997), but fails to note their flexibility and fluidity. As ‘feminine’ was defined as ‘other’ to what was considered masculine, the specificities of the properly feminine were open to individual interpretation. While Homans recognises that female subjectivity has had to be ‘forged out of materials of otherness’ (Homans 1980: 12) because women have always been the ‘other’ or ‘object’, she does not recognise the implications it had on the properly feminine and consequently on the conventions of feminine writing. As long as ‘femininity’ and ‘woman’ were defined as ‘not masculine’, they could encompass whatever the woman poet wanted. However, it is ‘undoubtedly the case that women wrote with a sense of belonging to a particular group defined by their sexuality’ (Armstrong 1993: 323), which means that there are some similarities and trends across women’s poetry that can be considered as a set of conventions for the Poetess Tradition.

Angela Leighton commenced *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992) with an attempt to identify the early-Victorian poetess. She argues that the cult of sensibility which Victorian women inherited had changed into a ‘sober voice of public duty and domestic virtue’ (Leighton 1992: 26) in response to the moral excesses of Romanticism. The Victorian woman poet had to be sentimental in order to assure her reader that she was a clean, contented ‘angel of the house’ (Patmore 1854). To achieve this, properly feminine

writing consisted of an excess of emotion, the spirit of sweetly suffering womanhood, holiness, propriety boarding on saintliness (Leighton 1992), conventional piety and didactic feeling (Armstrong 1993: 320). Once again we see how 'woman' was defined as 'not man', because conventional masculinity had to be completely absent from women's poetry. Based on her readings predominantly of Isobel Armstrong, Cheryl Walker and Glennis Stephenson, Anne Mellor identifies further conventions of the Poetess Tradition as 'the adoption of the mask of improvisatrice' and 'the rejection or condemnation of poetic fame' (1997: 260). The rejection or condemnation of poetic fame, or the performance of modesty, was not an exclusively feminine convention as the tropes of modesty affected men as well as women. The performance of modesty kept poetry free from the taint of baseness and business. For women writers in particular, however, the performance of modesty was also the performance of the properly feminine as it diverted the public gaze, enabling the poetess to remain veiled in the domestic. Adelaide Anne Proctor was remembered for her modesty as she claimed 'Papa is a poet, I only write verses', yet 'such an understatement can distract from the complex emotions articulated in her work' (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: 472). By disarming her readers with her performance of modesty, Proctor could include a sophisticated and subversive politics in her poetry. By performing modestly, the poetess also portrayed herself as humble and aware of her inferior place in both the literary landscape and in society as a whole. This contradicts Homans, who claims that 'in poetics of female experience, the poet's own female 'I' must be unabashedly present in the poem, in order for the poem to be true' (1980: 218). While the presence of a poetic 'I' did not undermine the convention of modesty, it is unreasonable to demand that it be the poet's own female 'I'. The creation of a poetic persona, separate from the body of the poet, was common and accepted poetic practice. Homans' insistence on the presence of the poet's personal 'I' conflicts with

the recognised and expected presence of a poetic persona in a poem. Specifically for women poets, the poetic persona could be used to avoid accusations of personally courting celebrity, praise or attention, as it was the persona which was scrutinised under the public gaze. Thus the performance of modesty met both poetical practice and properly feminine requirements.

The adoption of the mask of improvisatrice also conformed to expectations of the properly feminine as it gave the impression of a spontaneous flow of femininity. Women's poetry could appear to have been written with no intellectual effort, rather than being a determined, intentional piece of composition which was laboured over intensively (Leighton 1992: 28). While these elements were favourable for all poetry, regardless of the gender of the poet, the mask of improvisatrice gave the impression that the poem was a natural continuation of a woman poet's equally effortless duties within the home, as well protecting her from accusations of any illicit education or experience.

By defining feminine writing so closely with the properly feminine and therefore also with the female body, a specifically feminine writing space was created. It was a space that welcomed female thought and style, while a specifically female aesthetic developed. Isobel Armstrong states that 'it does seem as if they [female poets] worked within a recognisable tradition understood by them to belong to women' and that this tradition 'created a discourse which could accommodate a poetics of the feminine' (1993: 323). The search for, or formulation of, a poetics of the feminine, where terms of expression, styles of imagery and composition of phrases were compatible with feminine thought and concern, became an important aspiration to enable the assertion of a female voice. The Poetess Tradition, with its feminine forms of language and expression and community of other women writers, offered this specifically female aesthetic. Many women poets found a route to politics and public debate through these feminine writing styles through the adoption of the properly feminine

poetic persona of the mother, daughter and wife. The purity of the properly feminine granted these roles the authority to include moral arbitration and teaching, and so allowed women to explore issues surrounding slavery (see L.E.L. with ‘The African’), prostitution (Sarah Stickney Ellis with *Janet: One of Many*), poverty (Adelaide Anne Procter’s ‘Homeless’) and child-labour (Barrett Browning’s ‘The Cry of the Children’). This first step then allowed for further exploration and debate surrounding gender, class and racial politics, and economics. Within the Poetess Tradition, women poets found a framework through which they could explore and develop their own poetics, and which allowed traditionally exclusive-masculine activities to be attempted through a properly feminine approach. The foundations for a successful feminisation of the masculine sonnet (Bristow 1995: 7), for example, grew from the Poetess Tradition. Many women poets dismissed masculine styles of writing as the male pen was recognised as clumsy and awkward in the female hand (Virginia Woolf 1929), and so melded traditional poetics with a feminine aesthetic. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), Christina Rossetti’s *Monna Innominata* (1881) and Augusta Webster’s *Mother and Daughter* sequence (1895) are outstanding landmarks of poetic achievement, yet were not always understood and appreciated. Literary critic Edith Sitwell asserted seventy-five years after Barrett Browning’s sonnet sequence was published, that ‘no woman writing in the English language has ever written a great sonnet’ (1925: 117). This demonstrates the persistent association of Victorian female-authored texts with sentimental triviality.

The label ‘poetess’ was not, or at least, did not start out as, an identity for the writer of a particular style of sentimentality, but was simply the name given to a female poet. Conversely, women poets whose work did not satisfy the properly feminine were defined as angry hysterics, and likewise dismissed from acknowledgment of literary merit (Gilbert and

Gubar 2000). The individuality and uniqueness of each woman poet was apparent by way of her specific relationship with and against the loose conventions of the Poetess Tradition and interpretations of the properly feminine. Within the Poetess Tradition there is a long history of women appropriating properly feminine identities, and then manipulating them to suit their personal message, politics or viewpoint, thereby overcoming traditional female stereotyping (Homans 1980: 9). Susan Brown argues that while ‘Sappho was by default the proper name for the poetess’ it was not the only identity used by women poets, who also spoke in the voices of Mother Nature, Eve, Corinne, Eulalie, Arabella Stuart, Properzia Rossi, Caterina, Bertha, Beatrice, Laura and the Pythoness, (2000: 184). This automatically acts as a challenge to the expectations of a reader, who comes to the poem with pre-determined ideas of the development of plot, narrative or character, and is then confronted with alternatives. Here the diversity of poetesses is apparent, and challenges the assumptions that the Poetess Tradition consisted of one identity of woman poet and one style of poetry. A clear example of the flexibility and opportunity for diversity offered by the Poetess Tradition is shown by Felicia Hemans and L.E.L.; both considered true ‘poetesses’ personally, by their readers and by their successors, but also both very different. Hemans represented herself as the ‘angel in the house’ and her poetry celebrated the domestic ideal. In her poetry, she adopted the identity of the mother, caring and protecting her children, and so performed the expectations of the properly feminine. L.E.L., in contrast, marketed herself as an idealised feminine victim, whose readers ‘happily swallowed the projected image of a mournful poetess who had turned to her lyre for consolation only after her heart had been broken’ (Blain 2001: 4). This identity too met the criteria of the properly feminine and the Poetess Tradition, and yet was markedly different to Hemans’ construction. Thus we see two different strains of the poetess; both acceptable, both successful, and both powerful positions

from which to communicate with a reader. As each woman poet was able to construct her own identity as a poetess, the Poetess Tradition is revealed as an immensely diverse and varied literary space.

Furthermore, by corralling female-authored texts into a few specific publications, a network of women writers emerged. Women contributed, edited, engaged with and then supplied responses within the same literary journals or annuals. They read, judged and were inspired by their fellow women writers, which evoked a sense of professional kinship, as well as creating a nourishing and supportive environment. This troubles traditional readings of women poets becoming disillusioned and confused due to experiencing only negative portrayals of female identity from 'reading poetry almost exclusively by men' (Homans 1980: 8). Rather, current literary theory recognises how this close literary circle (Reynolds 1995) enabled women poets to develop alternative identities through which they could enter the public world. This environment encouraged a female audience and dialogue as women alluded or responded to each others' work (Brown 2000: 191). As well as providing practical benefits such as a source of independent finance, professional recognition and supportive literary friendships (Reynolds 1995: xxvi), the Poetess Tradition became a means by which women could legitimately participate in politics.

The poetess remained restricted by the notion that women were poems, not professional poets, and so women's voices were swallowed by their identities as muses, rather than artists. It was within the Poetess Tradition, where constructed identities and prescribed notions of femininity and femaleness were located, that many women poets experimented with their identities as poets. The Poetess Tradition was a space to explore the tensions that gender caused women poets, and consequently, it became a space used to create a new female poetics. By playing with the conventions and troubling the expectations of the

Poetess Tradition, the poetess could separate herself from the automatic classification of trivial sentimentality. The Poetess Tradition was a way for women to participate in public life and political debate without being deemed improper and so silenced. It contained the trite as well as the politically critical (Reynolds 1995: xxvii), yet it was unfortunately with the trite that it was persistently and overwhelmingly associated.

The Gender as Genre Paradox

While the Poetess Tradition can be seen to have been a supportive and encouraging space, providing role models, literary connections and a foundation for a feminine poetics, it could also be limiting and restrictive. The same vagueness which defined 'female' as 'not male' failed to differentiate between different facets of femaleness. All femaleness was 'other' to masculinity, so all femaleness was 'feminine'. This resulted in a Victorian aestheticism that 'frequently conflate[ed] the woman poet's body with her literary corpus' (Brown 2000: 181). Butler identifies the three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance (1999: 175). Here, this can be seen to be interdependent: the female body of the woman poet, her subsequent identity as a poetess, and her expected performance of the properly feminine. While male writers could choose to adopt feminine styles of writing to take advantage of their lucrative popularity, female poets were assumed to write feminine texts, and so were subsumed and assimilated into the Poetess Tradition. Not only did this result in a reduction in appreciation for the breadth, scope and diversity of Victorian women poets, it associated them with sentimentality, melancholy, domesticity and other unfavourable traits which became the stereotype of female writing and the Poetess Tradition. As Catherine Judd argues:

The inclusions and exclusions of the literary marketplace are vexed and complex topics, and there is little doubt that women writers experienced prejudice in the largely masculine world of publishing...[and] had their publications reviewed unfairly, based solely on their gender.

(Judd 1995: 251)

Female-authored poetry was categorised as belonging to the Poetess Tradition because it was female-authored. This assumed association has been termed the ‘gender as genre paradox’. Damaging consequences of this include the extensive lack of recognition of the diversity of women poets and their individual relationships with their contexts, the inability to firmly define conventions of the ‘Poetess Tradition’, and the frequent association of female-authored texts with low-brow, sentimental and trivial hackwork.

The term ‘gender as genre paradox’ has come from recent critical attention to the composition of the Poetess Tradition. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain’s highly regarded anthology *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian* (1998) was subtitled ‘Gender and Genre’, and the 2002 conference, *Women’s Poetry and the Fin de Siècle* developed the phrase into ‘gender as genre’. This paradox has caused the conflation of all women’s poetry as it categorises according to gender, not genre. The Poetess Tradition, in actuality, comprises an immense variety of genres, as all female-authored texts are included. Augusta Webster, for example, mastered the lyric, dramatic monologue and sonnet, and yet her entire oeuvre was located in one tradition, that of the poetess. As a result of the conflating effect of the gender as genre paradox, it is crucial to read women poets in their critical and historical context. The writer of Felicia Hemans’ obituary in the *Examiner* (24 May 1835: 324) provided the image which influenced records and thoughts of Hemans for decades to come. He focussed on the essentially feminine nature of her poetry, and neglected to mention her unfeminine preoccupation with war. The politics, violence and destruction featured in poems such as ‘England’s Dead’ and ‘Casabianca’ was ignored in favour of attention paid to

Hemans' nationalistic pride and motherly feeling. This construction of her identity as a traditional, conventional poetess was compounded by publishers favouring her more sentimental verses, printing them with greater frequency than her political works. Similarly, Isobel Armstrong's examination of the reasons for the continued critical neglect of Christina Rossetti concludes that it is due to the regular application of demeaning, properly feminine adjectives to her and her work. She was complimented for her lightness of touch and lyrical sweetness by contemporaries through to influential scholars of the 1950s. William Rossetti wrote a condescending memoir of his sister, emphasising her self-abnegating behaviour within the family, her shyness and her mediocrity (Rossetti 1904: lv-lvi). These shallow tributes and reframing of identity perpetuated the Victorian understanding of Rossetti as purely feminine (Armstrong 1987: 122), leading to her dismissal by subsequent generations of critics. Further example of posthumously constructed identities can be found with poets such as Emily Brontë, whose sister Charlotte tried to protect her from accusations of immorality by painting her as ignorant of her actions and their true meaning or impact in her notorious 'Bibliographic Note' of 1850.

The composition of anthologies has perpetuated the gender as genre paradox by reducing all Victorian women poets to the same chapter, grouped by gender alone, if they are included at all. This is in stark contrast to the dedication of entire chapters to individual influential male poets. Victorian publisher Alfred H. Miles' original publication of *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century* (1891-97), consisted of ten volumes, the first six of which were styled as a historical overview and featured exclusively male poets. He combined the female poets together as part of the 'marginal' selection in the final four volumes. This approach was continued with very little deviation through to *English Poetry of the Victorian Period 1830-1890* by Bernard Richards, published as recently as 1988. This anthologist celebrates the rich

variety of male poets and arranged his history thematically, acknowledging the multitude of different themes, genres and styles: ‘escapism and realism, frivolity and utility, activity and lethargy, religiosity and secularity, solidarity and alienation, elitism and populism, ruralism and urbanism, obscurity and clarity, euphony and cacophony...’ (Richards 1988: 4).

However, Richards’ history of Victorian poetry completely fails to mention women poets.

Furthermore, his contemporaries, who were focusing on women writers, fail to recognise the same diversity and complexity in the Poetess Tradition as Richards grants the men.

Conflating female poets in this way gives a picture of false unity when actually there were vast differences between each woman poet’s literary, cultural and spiritual context (Gill 2007: 8), and they wrote in a vast array of styles and genres with greatly differing approaches and opinions. Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Hannah More were publishing contemporaries and are combined in anthologies under the same heading, that of ‘women poets’, even though they were remarkably different. More remained rather conservative and content with the emerging domestic ideology, in stark contrast to Barbauld’s French Revolutionary ideals which claimed that men and women could enter civic life on equal terms. This arrangement in records of literary history shows that women were defined first by their gender and secondly by genre. Moreover, there are clear differences between More’s poem ‘Sensibility’ (1783), which takes a distrustful view of systems of female education, and her contemporary Helen Maria Williams’ poem of the same name, yet these works have been included together in collections of women’s poetry. The corralling of all female poets into the Poetess Tradition on the basis of their gender alone denied women their individuality. Consequently, the Poetess Tradition has to encompass a wide range of genres, styles and philosophies as it is poet-defined, not poetry-defined. Yet the association of the Poetess Tradition with mercenary, low-brow, derivative work remained. As a result, the majority of Victorian

women poets remained excluded from serious critical attention and praise, despite their various creative accomplishments. Even Barrett Browning, whose ambition and achievements outstripped her contemporaries, only received serious praise in comparison to other women and not in the context of all Victorian poets: '[Elizabeth Barrett Browning is]...probably, of her sex, the first imaginative writer England has produced in any age – she is, beyond comparison, the first poetess of her own', (*Athenaeum* (1850) cited in Forster 1988: xvii).

The gender as genre paradox also meant that women poets working against the label of 'poetess' have repeatedly failed to found a separate tradition of female poetics, as their deviations from the Poetess Tradition have eventually become included in it. In addition to the negative critical reception instantly assigned to female-authored poetry, the gender as genre paradox also complicated attempts to recognise or define deviancy or conformity. The difference between female-authored poetry and feminine-poetry appears not to have been recognised, so all female-authored poetry was aligned with the inferior, marginalised and neglected Poetess Tradition. It is this fusion of all poems by women that makes the poetess so difficult to define, as it genders the whole of poetical literary history. It also means that the conventions of the Poetess Tradition were in a constant state of flux as they had to continually expand to include all of the innovations and deviancy created by women in attempting to avoid this assimilation. Even the long history of women's protest poems, from L.E.L.'s 'The Marriage Vow' in 1841 to Amy Levy's *A Ballad of Religion and Marriage* almost a century later, became constructed as univocal. Isobel Armstrong acknowledged in her opening of 'A Music of Thine Own' that this paved the way for all women's poems to become seen as poems about women's oppression, because individuality was obliterated by

the concentration on a single theme (1993: 319). Thus identification of deviation becomes difficult as the deviations became conventions.

The Victorian woman poet could not disassociate her poetry from her body, and so while the boundaries and conventions of the Poetess Tradition expanded to include all manner and variety of texts, the association of literary inferiority remained attached to all female-authored work. The woman poet could not separate herself from her body and all of the associated gendered connotations and expectations. However, she could choose to carefully negotiate an identity for herself that simultaneously conformed to but deviated from the Poetess Tradition. By doing so, she performed the gendered expectations of the properly feminine, but also accessed alternative traditions which granted literary high-status and authority and greater creative freedoms. For many women poets, this awareness of reliance upon, but dissatisfaction with, the Poetess Tradition led to a sophisticated ability to negotiate the performance of their roles as writer. While inhabiting the Poetess Tradition, many women also attempted to reform it into something more suitable for themselves.

The woman poet's cautious negotiation of her position and identity was complicated by the positive, constructive and beneficial aspects of the Poetess Tradition. It encouraged a legitimate writing style suitable for the female pen; women no longer had to struggle with masculine, misogynistic and inappropriate symbolism or language, nor fight for the right to write. Additional complication came from the 'time-honoured belief that poems ought to be "beautiful", or at least pretty...[and] some female poets seem almost reluctant to abandon it, fearing, perhaps, that they will lose something essential if they do' (Blain 2001: 13). Furthermore, it also provided an ancestry of fellow women writers from whom to take inspiration, comfort and reassurance. Consequently, the majority of Victorian women poets did not aim to reject their femaleness, but rather have it appreciated and accepted as a

potential benefit to their writing. Victorian woman poet Mary Coleridge believed that ‘if we do not retain sex I don’t see how we can retain identity...it is of the very essence of our nature’ (Sichel 1910: 234), and so a renegotiation of the identity of the woman writer was undertaken, rather than the denial of gender. The problem lay not in the existence of a separate female literary space, but in the prejudices associated with that space. The derogatory critical reception of properly feminine writing did not truly reflect the quality and merit of the work assimilated into the Poetess Tradition. Thus we see attempts in the work of these women to carve a separate space for themselves within the Poetess Tradition that was distanced from the stereotype of the poetess. This simultaneous conformity to, and deviation from, the identity of the poetess challenged the gender as genre paradox as it created multiple different types of women poets. Thus, the frivolous, trivial, flowery stereotype of women’s writing could exist in parallel with a new, authoritative, prestigious form.

Negotiation of Identity

The decision to conform to conventions of the Poetess Tradition was a conscious and intentional one made by each woman. Furthermore, the extent to which each convention was adhered to reflects the diversity of women’s poetry, and also the poets’ differing relationships with the Poetess Tradition. A clear example of this can be found in contemporaries Felicia Hemans and L.E.L., both of whom were considered to be conventional poetesses, but whose poetry and poetic identities were markedly different. Hemans constructed herself as the ‘mother poet’ (Leighton 1992: 16), while L.E.L. was the lovelorn young woman (Blain 2001: 4). Both identities were properly feminine and conventional of female writing, and so both were labelled as poetesses, despite their differences. Leighton argues that ‘the idea of subjectivity as a performance...conceals as much as it reveals’ (1995: xxxvii), and so in

complying with expectations of feminine writing, women participated in revealing their contradictory nature. Beneath the simple feminine surface of many seemingly conventional poems by poetesses, a subtle subversion has been identified. Anne Brontë, who has often been placed in the shadows of her sisters' achievements, has found critical appreciation in this manner. The ostensibly conventional conclusion of the pastoral 'The Arbour' accepts the constraint and restriction of winter. However, upon closer inspection, a subversive undercurrent can be found. That the arbour is evergreen suggests that despite the winter's best efforts, it remains alive and flourishing; the evergreen has no need to challenge or resist the winter, because it has no effect. Here, Brontë completes her message of patience and quiet confidence to her literary sisters as the conventional cyclical nature of the seasons means that although winter may have control in the poem's present, spring will come to free the arbour and the remainder of the garden. In this poem, and many others, Brontë followed the logic of feminine poetry, rather than deviating from its conventions, and thereby produced a solid, almost unchallengeable, criticism of the confinement placed upon and subservient attitude expected of women. Here the properly feminine conventions of the Poetess Tradition are actually operating as an investigation or interrogation of that convention. Armstrong labels this ostensible adoption of an affective mode that masks subversion as 'the doubleness of women's poetry', and holds that 'the more simple the surface of the poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it' (1993: 324).

Far from being dictated to, the poetess can now be seen as a very self-aware individual, highly attuned to the expectations of her readers and her relationship with the Victorian literary landscape. The Poetess Tradition was not necessarily a trap or prison for the female poet, but rather a space which she could locate herself within, and a set of

conventions against which she could construct her own identity. Armstrong notes during her attempts to identify and understand the Poetess Tradition that 'women poets relate to it in an ambiguous way and interrogate it even while they negotiate [it]' (1993: 323). Although women poets found a poetics of the feminine within the Poetess Tradition, they were not necessarily satisfied with it, and many took it upon themselves to redefine and reconstruct the Poetess Tradition to suit themselves. Armstrong uses Christina Rossetti, Dora Greenwell and Jean Ingelow to show how the religious lyric was renegotiated to allow these three women to comment on female sexuality, despite them being spinsters and so prevented by the properly feminine from doing so (1993: 345). Other women poets chose to deviate from the Poetess Tradition in an attempt to distance themselves from the associations of prolific, sentimental hack work, most notably Barrett Browning and Augusta Webster. Nevertheless, all Victorian women poets had a relationship with the Poetess Tradition, however individual, distanced or disparaging it was. Indeed, Leighton concludes her investigation of Hemans as the stereotyped poetess by positioning her as the starting point for future women poets, 'even if it is to start to walk away' (1992: 41). This indicates that Anne Mellor's attempt to define 'the female poet' is flawed, because there could not be a woman writer who was separate from the poetess; all women poets had a relationship with, or against, the Poetess Tradition. Even those who seemed to rebel against it by writing about women's oppression were still defined by their position against the Poetess Tradition. As a result, we see a form of self-consciously feminine self-staging in verse (Brown 2000: 184), as the individual woman poet chose the extent to which she conformed to each convention, and the method by which she did so. Each individual decision troubled expectations of the properly feminine, and the boundaries of the Poetess Tradition. While Leighton notices that conventions of feminine writing included lyrical melancholy, for example, she also notes that many women poets used this convention

to undermine the assumption it perpetuated, that heartfelt despair was natural for women (1995: xxxvi). Christina Rossetti had her poetic protagonists sing their lyrical melancholy after their own deaths, rather than the conventional situation of the woman who was abandoned by her lover, either by the lover's betrayal or his death. By having her female protagonists die first, Rossetti relocated the source of action into the female body, rather than portraying conventional passivity and inaction. However, the action is death, which is a conventional punishment for improperly feminine transgression, and so Rossetti does not initially appear radical in her poetry. But Rossetti grants her deceased female figure a voice, thereby transmuting death into a freedom rather than its traditional purpose as punishment. In particular, in 'After Death', the death of the female 'I' is not made apparent to the reader until the final line, thereby giving the impression for the majority of the poem of a powerful, articulate female voice that is sure of its own identity. That she is then revealed to be dead means the poem complies with the properly feminine, but Rossetti was still able to make a powerful statement about female subjectivity and identity.

As Victorian women poets were aware of the traditions in which they were performing and conventions that were expected of them, they would have also been aware of their poetical heritage (Bristow 1995: 4). In addition to prolific interaction between contemporaries, as correspondence shows us, these women were aware of their precursors and their debt to them. They were also aware of their precursors' limitations and the effects of literary history on female writers. Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata*, both noted for critiques of gender, have their antecedents in sonnets by Mary Tighe and Helen Maria Williams. Elements from masculine traditions can also be found in both Barrett Browning and Rossetti. These two women created poems that were simultaneously feminine and prestigious, thus expanding the

conventions of the Poetess Tradition to make space for high-status feminine work. While Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are love-sonnets which conform to the properly feminine in terms of content as they express romantic love, the construction of this love within the sonnet form distances it from the Poetess Tradition. The sonnet, as opposed to the lyric, was a masculine expression and was established as having authority in literary traditions through Shakespeare and Petrarch (Distiller 2008). Barrett Browning was initially hesitant to publish the poems due to their personal nature, which could have problematised issues concerning female public exposure to the male gaze. To deflect both accusations of arrogance and the male gaze from her personal self, Barrett Browning disguised them as translations of foreign sonnets rather than original work, thus performing the properly feminine act of modesty. However, rather than being limited and restricted by this necessary performance of the properly feminine, Barrett Browning can be seen as having manipulated it. The act of translation is usually seen as one of the points on the learning curve, also known as 'poetical trajectory', in which an able and ambitious poet must become proficient before progressing to original contributions. Furthermore, the use of Renaissance language in the 'thee', 'thine' and 'thou' pronouns not only associates the poet with the established sonnet tradition, but also with the Classics, a masculine realm and indicator of education and talent. Thus, through the performance of the properly feminine, Barrett Browning aligned herself with conventions of prestigious masculine traditions. In these ways Barrett Browning can be seen to exercise her great talents while putting forth the markers of her ambition, but still retaining the essential feminine aspects which kept her in tune with, but not constricted by, the Poetess Tradition.

The reconstruction of this particular element of the Poetess Tradition was continued as the lineage of Tighe, Williams, Barrett Browning and Rossetti was built upon with

Webster's 'Mother and Daughter' sequence and Eliot's 'Brother and Sister' (1869), again both simultaneously conforming and deviating from the traditionally feminine. This poetical inheritance can again be seen in Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children' (1843), which was anticipated by Caroline Bowles's *Tales of the Factories* (1833) and Caroline Norton's *A Voice from the Factories* (1836). These women can be seen to have manipulated properly feminine motherly concern for the lives of children into a powerful social critique against industry and capitalism. In this way, Bowles, Norton and Barrett Browning allowed politics, business, capitalism and social critique to find a place within the Poetess Tradition. Barrett Browning also demonstrated her awareness of her place in literary history and her indebtedness to the poetess-ancestors, most noticeably with her epitaph-style poems *Felicia Hemans* (1835), which was dedicated to L.E.L., and 'L.E.L.'s Last Question' (1839). Christina Rossetti's 'L.E.L.' (1863), both followed and deviated from Barrett Browning (Bristow 1995: 6), demonstrating a conscious manipulation of this properly feminine performance of paying tribute to L.E.L., who had become the stereotyped poetess figure. Augusta Webster's highly accomplished volumes, *Dramatic Studies* (1866), *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* (1867) and *Portraits* (1870) each reveal her skilful remodelling of the dramatic poetry of Hemans, Robert Browning and Tennyson, blending the Poetess Tradition with other masculine traditions to form a poetics that was both feminine and prestigious, properly domestic but authoritative. Mathilde Blind translated some of the work by David Friedrich Strauss, and by doing so can be argued to have intentionally followed in the footsteps of George Eliot, who was worthy of imitation as she was a female poet who earned the praise of the notoriously misogynistic *Saturday Review*. These careful negotiations, compromises and blends show that while the ancestor-poetess was not forgotten, she was not considered a satisfactory aspiration by many women. These women chose to construct their

own identities as poets through individual selection and application of a variety of conventions from different sources, creating infinite combinations and hybrids in order to redefine their position in literary culture.

These negotiations reflect the self-consciousness of the Victorian woman poet in that she was aware of the expectations of her society, the overriding influence of her gender upon her critical reception and the fates met by her predecessors (Bristow 1995: 3). While poets such as L.E.L. chose to take advantage of the popularity of sentimental writing by marketing themselves as idealised feminine victims who were adored by a generation of readers (Blain 2001: 4), the decision shows that they took control of their position within the Poetess Tradition. Other women were dissatisfied with the restrictions of the properly feminine, and so chose other ways by which to negotiate their position within and against the Poetess Tradition. However, it is still this struggle which defines the woman poet, and so women's writing continues to be defined in terms of gender. The gender as genre paradox persists in assimilating women poets into the Poetess Tradition, regardless of their attempts to reposition themselves. As a result, the Poetess Tradition has come to be viewed as static and monolithic as all women's poetry was examined primarily in terms of how much it deviated or conformed to the Poetess Tradition and gendered ideals of identity.

However, the Poetess Tradition was, in actuality, an infinitely complex, flexible and ever-changing concept that meant a multitude of different things to a variety of different people. While the 'poetess' became a stereotype as the nineteenth-century progressed due to critical normalising of an increasingly idealised woman (Pykett 1992: 9), ideas and attitudes towards female poetry were as varied as the poetry itself. This is clearly shown by the variety of periodicals which published different types of poetry by women, from the liberal and celebratory *Athenaeum* to the conservative *Saturday Review*. These ideas and attitudes

changed over the course of the century as different women experimented more with poetry. Yet, despite the wide range of their works, they were still labelled as part of the same movement, which is evident from how they were positioned within anthologies. The poetry of Victorian women was pre-emptively classed in a certain poetical tradition before it was even written, let alone read, due to the gender as genre paradox, and this tradition was seen as inferior in terms of literary quality or merit. To understand the negotiations and compromises these women undertook as they struggled against the inherited structures of poetry which supported this automatic classification, it is crucial for the reader to be fully aware of the contextual background of each poet and each poem.

We must be careful to not force modern views of the Poetess Tradition on the Victorian literary landscape because we need to re-establish the authority, validity and complexity of the Poetess Tradition in terms of how it was formulated, not how it has been re-cast. We need to read the Victorian women poetess as aware of her position in society, of her audience's expectations and of the literary history and traditions she operated in. Constructs of female behaviour and criteria of the properly feminine were constantly changing and being re-evaluated, not least because the women poets increasingly contributed to the debates on the Woman Question and challenged restrictive gendered ideologies. These challenges came in the form of self-conscious deviation from expected traditional behaviour, and the female poet herself can be seen to have contributed to the destabilisation of these social norms by deviating from the properly feminine role of the poetess.

One method used by women poets to frustrate the gender as genre paradox and challenge constructs of female behaviour and the restrictions of the Poetess Tradition was to complicate the gendered expectations associated with the writer. By confusing the reader as to the gender of the text's author, the text itself may not automatically be judged according to

gendered conventions. The next chapter will explore a variety of Victorian women writers' use and application of pseudonyms. The adoption of a pseudonym allowed women poets to distance themselves from their texts, and so protect their poetry from expectations of convention and tradition associated with their personal identity as women. By using a masculine name, women poets were able to avoid conflation with the conventional poetess, avoid criticism for not conforming to the properly feminine and avoid the restrictions of the Poetess Tradition. This sanctuary from gendered prejudices could provide the anxious woman poet with the reassurance and space she required for her writing, as well as offering her a position external to the Poetess Tradition from which to criticise it. However, many women also used a feminine or gender-neutral pseudonym, which complicates this standard view of a pseudonym as a simple gender-veil. For many women, the decision to adopt a pseudonym had more to do with asserting autonomy and authority over the construction of their own identities, than merely concealing their gender. Judith Butler's work on drag can be applied to women poets' use of pseudonyms, as both 'effectively mock both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity (1999: 174), in this case the properly feminine, and that 'female' always means 'feminine'. Furthermore, by impersonating or parodying gender, both drag and pseudonyms reveal the imitative structure of gender (Butler 1999: 175), and therefore frustrate the gender as genre paradox. By acknowledging the complexity and variety of pseudonymous styles, a more comprehensive picture of Victorian literary culture is uncovered as they reflect the diversity of the agendas, politics and creativity of female-authored texts. The pseudonym can be seen as one way by which Victorian women poets negotiated and created their own identities.

CHAPTER TWO: PSEUDONYMS

Due to the restrictions that expectations of properly feminine writing placed on women poets, many women attempted to write against the conventions of the Poetess Tradition. However, the gender as genre paradox caused female-authored writing to continually be associated with the properly feminine, regardless of the poet's intention. One method used by many women to overcome this was to adopt a pseudonym, in particular, a masculine or gender-neutral pseudonym. This had the effect of distancing the text from the author, in the hope that the female poet's body was not confused with her literary corpus (Brown 2000: 181). In addition to separating the individual woman from the unappealing connotations of the 'poetess', the adoption of a pseudonym also troubled audience expectations of texts and so consequently troubled the concept of innate masculine and feminine differences. As such, pseudonymous writing can be seen as one of the many methods Victorian women chose to adopt in order to challenge constructions of gender and traditions of writing. The distance created between poet and poem by using a pseudonym, allowed women poets the space to create their own writing identities, rather than have socially predetermined constructs forced upon them. The women poets who chose pseudonymous authorship chose to not be defined by social constructs of properly feminine behaviour. The pseudonym provides a performative space where notions of identity could be experimented with, and consequently it could diffuse the gender as genre paradox by permitting multiple different identities for women writers to inhabit. Thus the woman poet retains the legitimacy of the properly feminine and appropriateness of a feminine poetics, but can be separate from the negative connotations of sentimental, low status work.

Many factors have led to the neglect or dismissal of women's pseudonymous writing. Many predominant critical opinions of the last two centuries, from Victorian contemporaries such as Anthony Trollope, to feminist scholars of the 1970s, such as Elaine Showalter (1979) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984), have portrayed the creation of a pseudonym as a form of gender-veil. While this was undoubtedly the case for some Victorian women, this chapter will argue that for others, the reasons behind such a decision and the utilisation of such a method were far more complex and sophisticated. This chapter consists of three main sections, each of which explores the pseudonym as a method intentionally used by many women poets to overcome the gender as genre paradox. The first section complicates the simple idea of employing a pseudonym as a gender-veil, on the grounds that using a pseudonym demonstrates the artificial, performative nature of gender. Pseudonyms show that reader expectations of a text can be separate or unrelated to the actual body of the author, and so they were a method through which many women interrogated the assumptions and expectations associated with gender. The second section will build on the distance a pseudonym creates between author and text, and show how a pseudonymous identity could be used by women as an identity separate from that of the properly feminine. By inhabiting a designated writing identity, the woman poet could temporarily free herself from the restrictions of the properly feminine and so become an authoritative, public figure. The final section will conclude by demonstrating how pseudonyms allowed women poets to challenge and usurp their society's gendered constructs of identity and rebuild them into more fluid and creatively-enabling spaces.

This chapter will focus on a small selection of Victorian women poets in order to demonstrate the complexity and multifarious nature of their pseudonymous identities. George Eliot and the Brontë sisters have been selected due to their established writing reputations,

both in terms of literary accomplishment and as famous pseudonymous writers. L.E.L.'s decision to reside in a pseudonymous identity is particularly interesting in connection with her intentionally properly feminine writing, and Elizabeth Siddal appears to have had two separate and contradictory identities: one as an anonymous poet; and the other as celebrity model. Michael Field has been chosen as the representative of the culmination of the century's pseudonymous writing, and was such a complex identity created for multiple reasons, that they richly reward scholarship. These five manifestations of pseudonymous writing will be the predominant focus of this chapter allowing the different applications and effects of pseudonyms to be explored.

The Pseudonym as a Gender-Veil

For women, the adoption of a pseudonym, especially a male pseudonym, has traditionally been seen as a veiling or masking of gender. Showalter expressed this understanding in her landmark book, *A Literature of Their Own*, identifying pseudonyms as a signal of the 'role-playing required by women's effort to participate in the mainstream of literary culture' (1979: 19). She also drew attention to Anthony Trollope's article 'On Anonymous Literature' (1865), which argued for women poets to be exempted from accusations that 'it was dishonest to conceal one's identity' because the properly feminine timidity and weakness of women meant they were dependent on the pseudonym to cope in the literary marketplace (Showalter 1979: 60). Gilbert and Gubar summarised a wealth of nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism with their statement 'certainly, as we all now recognize, by the mid-nineteenth century the male pseudonym was quite specifically a mask behind which the female writer could hide her disreputable femininity' (1984: 28). A woman writer's decision to assign herself a name different from her own is traditionally viewed as 'a

temporary defence, in gaining access to particular kinds of literary production...against gender-specific prejudices' (Swindells 1985: 103). Consequently, the pseudonym was judged simply to be a sign of women's continued oppression and their unsophisticated attempts to hide their troublesome femaleness. By using a male pseudonym to shroud the 'disability' of femininity, many women overcame the prejudices of the marketplace, were able to compete in the world of publishing, and fulfilled their literary potential. Caroline Norton published her political essays under 'Pearce Stevenson', in a similar way to Violet Paget, who became 'Vernon Lee' for her published essays, and Mary Leman Grimstone, who chose to write her verses under the male pseudonym 'Oscar' but published conventionally feminine novels under her own name. Therefore, while many more recent critics have argued that by retaining the 'as a disguise' argument we 'sacrifice a more complicated picture of a Victorian literary culture' (Buurma 2007: 27), it should not be dismissed entirely as it did function that way for some. However, it is now important to recognise the possibility for a far more complex gender challenge to have been in operation through the use of a pseudonym. After all, Gaye Tuchman's research shows that male poets used pseudonyms just as much as women, and that the majority of female poetical pseudonyms remained the same gender as their creator (Tuchman and Fortin 1989). Therefore, the motivation for adopting a pseudonym was more complex than the mere veiling of gender. Catherine Judd's essay 'Male pseudonyms and female authority in Victorian England' (1995) drew attention to the hitherto neglected possibility that the Victorian woman's pseudonym could operate in a far more complicated way. While Judd acknowledges that Victorian women writers had their texts reviewed unfairly, due to the 'prejudice in the largely masculine world of publishing' (1995: 251), she acknowledged that for some women, at least, their pseudonyms could be indicative of a more intentional, autonomous reconstruction of their identities as writers.

A more complex and nuanced understanding of function and effect of a pseudonym in the Victorian literary landscape must be ascertained. The idea that a pseudonym acted as a gender-veil was a point of contention for many twentieth-century feminist scholars. The pseudonym was seen as indicative of a form of self-imposed self-oppression (Showalter 1979: 58-60) as the woman writer found fault with her gender and tried to hide it. This in turn created problems because authorship is marked by factors other than the name of the author, such as style, language and composition (Showalter 1979: 91). To take refuge in a masculine name, the tone of the poetry had to reflect the gender change. Consequently, the pseudonymous woman poet exchanged one set of gendered expectations for another, at the cost of the poetics of the feminine, causing her writing to suffer (Woolf 1929: 99-101). By masking her gender with a pseudonym to lose negative associations with the Poetess Tradition, the woman poet also forfeited many of the positives, such as the poetics of the feminine and the close literary support with fellow women poets. With such positive associations at stake, the decision to reside in a pseudonymous identity must be motivated by reasons more complex than the desire to veil one's gender.

Dorothy Mermin succinctly summarised the failures of this simplistic reading of the pseudonym, acknowledging that:

She [the female poet] could not just reverse the roles in her poetry and create a comparable male self-projection, since the male in this set of opposites is defined as experienced, complexly self-conscious, and part of the public world and therefore could not serve as a figure for the poet.

(Mermin 1986: 68)

Masculine and feminine ideologies were not simply interchangeable; they were identities which needed to be performed through every aspect of the writing, from topic, to language, to expression (Butler 1999: 173). Consequently, a pseudonym appears to be a crude method by which to resolve women's gendered problems with writing, unless the pseudonym

functions in a more complex way from that of a gender-veil. Early-nineteenth-century poetess L.E.L. retained her pseudonym even after her identity was uncovered. Also, her verses conformed to the properly feminine criteria of the Poetess Tradition, even though, by operating as a public figure and celebrity, she did not. These factors indicate that L.E.L. used her pseudonym to enhance her performance of the properly feminine, not as a gender-veil. By using her pseudonym to distance her private, domestic, properly feminine self from the male gaze, L.E.L. could enter the marketplace without being accused of selling herself. Catherine Gallagher's paper, 'Who Was that Masked Woman? The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Comedies of Aphra Behn' (1988) explores how seventeenth-century dramatist Aphra Behn constructed an innocent self that existed outside the exchange of writing. Behn consciously separated her writing self from her personal self, protecting her personal self from the publicity that her writing self courted, but with the added effect of protecting her writing self from the restrictions of the feminine on her personal self. Gallagher used Behn to show that by the nineteenth-century, the view of the 'woman writer as whore' had transmuted into 'woman writer as man', and as a result, the female poet could overcome accusations of prostitution by creating and performing a masculine role when she ventured into public. By switching the perceived gender of the writer, a pseudonym deflected direct gaze and removed the woman writer from the public eye. L.E.L. followed on from Behn, Amelia Opie ('N'), Mary Leman Grimstone ('Oscar'), and Caroline Clive ('V'), and was later joined by Menella Bute Smedley ('M.S.' and 'S.M.'), the Brontë sisters (the Bell brothers), George Eliot and Mathilde Blind ('Claude Lake'), in using masculine- or gender-neutral pseudonyms to deviate from the restrictions of the Poetess Tradition without bringing the self into disrepute. By creating a separate identity with which to negotiate the public arena, the woman poet avoided accusations of prostitution. Instead, it was her pseudonym

which was subjected to the invasive male gaze, because it was the pseudonym which functioned as her sense of public self (Judd 1995: 256).

In addition to this separation of personal and public selves, L.E.L.'s pseudonym also functioned as the label for the specific writing persona she created to perform a carefully constructed version of the properly feminine. Letitia Landon created the pseudonym 'L.E.L.', who was known to her readers as the creator of the voices of many abandoned and betrayed young women, most of whom died in a mournful, sentimental and properly feminine manner, in verses such as 'The Phantom Bride', 'The Haunted Lake' and 'Calypso Watching the Ocean'. The use of that particular properly feminine identity in many poems served to cast 'L.E.L.' as an 'idealised feminine victim [who] was adored by a generation of readers' (Blain 2001: 4). This identity was popular and fashionable at the time and so it assisted sales of L.E.L.'s poetry, which was necessary for her to financially support her family. Yet labelling this persona with a pseudonym distanced L.E.L. from the popularity of her poetry: Letitia Landon the woman was not to be confused with 'L.E.L.' the celebrity. Thus the pseudonym can also be read as a method by which the woman poet performed the conventions of modesty that were expected of her as a poet and as a female. It correctly positioned the female self in the private sphere, and gave the impression that celebrity had been forced upon her, rather than something she had herself courted. Rather than using the pseudonym as a genuine veil, L.E.L. adopted it as a social function or courtesy, towards the properly feminine, as opposed to using it as a means for concealing her gender. This indicates her awareness of the performative nature of the gendered expectations of behaviour, which she took advantage of for both financial gain, and to reveal their artificial construction. While her pseudonym seemed to act as a modest veil which endeared her to her public, L.E.L.

manipulated it to expose the superficiality of the need of such a veil, thereby performing the conventional so precisely, and exposed its artificiality.

L.E.L. used her pseudonym to manipulate gendered expectations of her contemporaries and construct her own identity on her own terms. When analysing L.E.L.'s poetry, the reader is struck by how the poems are not tales of love but poems *about* tales of love. L.E.L.'s poems are characteristically about artifice, because they take on the narration and construction of emotion and feeling as their subject matter. This is exemplified by the title poem of her book *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems* (1824) which makes an intentional show of her artificial preoccupation with the artificiality of art. L.E.L.'s retention of her superfluous pseudonym can be seen as mimicry of the demands and expectations made of female behaviour and identity. Additionally, L.E.L. cultivated the art of double poetry enabling her readers to enjoy the conventions of sentimentality while she exposed them as artificial. Her poetry, in fact, mocks, parodies and criticises these illusions of sentimentality, exposing the artificialness, contradictions and shallowness of the position female writers were placed in by following the gender rules absolutely. The audience's awareness of the reality behind the performance was irrelevant, because L.E.L. performed the properly feminine by not putting herself on public display. For L.E.L., her pseudonym was an opportunity to expose, through participation in, the elaborate masquerade of gender and identity. She conformed to the Poetess Tradition while demonstrating her calculated performance and manipulation of its conventions. By doing so, L.E.L. asserted her intentional, autonomous construction of her own identity, without compromising her gender.

Mary Coleridge's insistence on the retention of gendered identity means that Coleridge's own choice to use the pseudonym 'Anodos' appears self-contradictory if the notion of a pseudonym as a gender-veil is retained. Detailed exploration into her use of this

pseudonym reveals a far more complex negotiation of identity. Firstly, she claimed it was to distance herself from association with her ancestor Samuel Coleridge in order to avoid accusation of celebrity or nepotism. Furthermore, the exact style of the pseudonym positively associates her with a prestigious, conventionally masculine, classical Greek lineage. This association is particularly complex as, according to Macdonald's *Phantastes*, the appeal of this hero lies partially in the elusive nature of his identity. Rather than acting as a gender-veil, Coleridge's pseudonym functioned as a symbolic marker to her readers. The dynamic ambiguity and idiosyncrasy of this figure is recreated in many of Coleridge's poems (McGowran 2003: 585-6), communicating her intended experimentation with different modes, voices and identities to her reader. Most notable is 'To Memory', which explores a confusion of identity and feeling in relations to whether the 'strange power', assumed to be love, is the 'murderer or mistress' (L. 1-2) of the speaker's heart. The poem is resolved in the recognition that love is both identities, and the speaker accepts it by deciding that love dictates whether she dies. Furthermore, in 'Mortal Combat', the identity of the speaker for the addressee suddenly changes from defender and friend in the first stanza, to murderer in the second. In the first poem, the speaker struggles to identify what 'love' means to her, and her relationship with it, and in the second, the speaker struggles with her own identity because a change in circumstance causes a different identity to emerge. Coleridge's pseudonym further complicated these tensions between identities as, under 'Anodos', the identity of each speaker becomes even more ambiguous. The assumption that Coleridge's pseudonym is a simple gender-veil is undermined because it is a message from the poet to enlighten and focus her audience toward the exploration of identities, and relationships with those identities, prevalent in her poetry.

The idea that a pseudonym is used to conceal a poet's gender is clearly flawed. In addition to L.E.L.'s complicated application of it as a multifaceted mask, the pseudonym could be employed to deflect the male gaze away from the poet's female body. By doing so, the woman poet actually performs the properly feminine in an attempt to hide her gender. Also, a woman's precise styling of her pseudonym, with her awareness of all its connotations, can function as a communication with her readers as to what to expect. In this way she is not simply masking her gender, but actively constructing a set of conventions for her text. The idea of a pseudonym as a simple gender-veil is unsophisticated because Victorian women writers knew that their texts would be gendered. A masculine pseudonym still asserted a set of gendered conventions upon a text, albeit a set that offered far greater creative freedoms. To this extent, the woman poet still found herself restricted and dictated to by gender. However, the use of a pseudonym showed how fluid and flexible constructions of gender were, and that they could be broken, exchanged and performed. The purpose of a pseudonym was to break the association between the gender of the text and the gender of the poet who wrote it, complicating the reader's expectations of the text, which would have been influenced by the author's name. By employing such a device, many women were able to overcome the gender as genre paradox. Thus, the true identity of an author was not necessarily the focus of a reader's attention, so much as the identity the author created and put forward and alongside the text itself.

The Pseudonym as a Stage Persona

A pseudonym could be used to negotiate the restrictions and conventions of the Poetess Tradition and overcome the gender as genre paradox by distancing the writer from her text. In his third section of 'What is an Author', Foucault suggests that the term 'author' does not

refer purely and simply to a real individual as he can be an 'alter ego' for the actual flesh-and-blood 'writer' (Foucault in Bouchard and Simon 1977). For both male and female writers, the naming of this alter-ego recasts it as a separate pseudonymous identity which can be inhabited and acted out during the process of writing. This theory makes the pseudonym particularly useful for the woman writer whose writing persona was frequently confused with her personal identity. By attaching a specific label to her writing identity and separating her private self from writing self, the woman writer avoids causing confusion in her readers. This distancing frustrates the gender as genre paradox, and enables the woman writer to separate her domestic roles of daughter, wife and mother from her role as poet. Building on L.E.L.'s method of using her pseudonym to keep her private self away from the male gaze, other women used theirs to grant themselves access to public debate and articulate their experiences and opinions, but without having to compromise their commitment to the properly feminine. Lady Jane Wilde published radical Irish nationalist poetry under the name 'Speranza'. In doing so, her identity remained hidden, removing gendered barriers to participation in political debate, and also helped her to avoid arrest by the British authorities. The actual choice of name added emphasis and gravitas to her poetry as 'speranza' is the Italian for 'hope'. This would have instantly indicated the tone of her politics to her readers, and so both prepared them for her revolutionary texts as well as informed them on how they were to interpret them. The refrain 'Kyrie Eleison' of 'A Supplication' elicits a mournful pathos in the reader as it divides up a long list of human pain and traumas. Yet it being written by 'hope' gives the final few stanzas a needed boost, as they call on the rewards of a Christian heaven to validate earthly sacrifice and suffering. Jane Wilde also used the pseudonym 'John Fanshaw Ellis' to publish another political criticism, *The Stricken Land*, in 1847 at the height of the Irish famine. Jane Wilde compartmentalised her identities, from that

of wife and mother, through to political radical and emotive nationalist. She had a different name for each role, and thus for each audience, and so was able to target her writing without allowing the prejudicial gendered ideologies to compromise her political authority or creative ability. Through the use of a pseudonym, these women demonstrated an awareness that ‘gender is not a fixed or stable category; rather, it is an imitative practice or set of practices’ (Gill 2007: 56) and they manipulated these performance expectations for their own benefit, in turn exposing the superficiality of gender constructions and expectations of the properly feminine.

Pseudonyms can be seen as a method through which a woman could frustrate the gender as genre paradox, via a separation of poetic text from feminine body. By enabling women to venture in to public debate on unsavoury subjects without risking their personal morality being questioned, using a pseudonym effectively diversified the topics women poets could voice in their work. Without a pseudonym, a woman poet risked her poetic voice being confused with her own, which could compromise the properly feminine (Mermin 1986: 76). Pseudonymous publishing, however, allowed women to leave the properly feminine and explore a variety of conventionally ‘masculine’ social issues (Easley 2004: 1). This course of action was well established for women poets. Early-Victorian Amelia Opie’s career began with anonymous verses, including the satiric lines ‘Written on Seeing a Bust of Minerva’ (1791), a jibe at the current MP of Norfolk, and her subsequent political poetry was signed with the initial ‘N’. Mid-Victorian novelist and poet Mary Louise Molesworth became ‘Ennis Graham’ for her social commentary as it allowed her access to male cultural authority and a position of power from which to judge. For both of these women, their masculine pseudonyms were necessary for their acts of political satire or chastisement.

Furthermore, the adoption of a masculine pseudonym did not only grant women writers access to masculine subjects, but it could also be used to recast the traditionally feminine as worthy of literary attention. By creating a male or gender-neutral pseudonym, the woman writer retains the properly feminine in her personal, domestic life, but resides in a non-feminine identity when operating in a non-feminine environment (the marketplace), through a non-feminine activity (writing). Charlotte Brontë's life was characterised by her biographer Elizabeth Gaskell as 'divided into two parallel currents – her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman' (Gaskell in Shelston 1975: 334). This enabled Charlotte-Brontë-the-artist to 'conceal herself in a feminine, domestic, and hidden space, thereby invoking the Romantic image of creativity as an idiopathic and clandestine enterprise' (Judd 1995: 258), elevating female-authored poetry to a higher status than the Poetess Tradition was usually granted. Brontë's gender-veiling can be read as a challenge to the gendered prejudices which marginalised and derided women's poetry. Her separation of her properly feminine, domestic self from the act of writing allowed her writing to be taken seriously and authoritatively by her readers. The loneliness of the wife in Brontë's 'A Wife's Will' (1846), the depression of the teacher in 'The Teacher's Monologue' (1846) and the frustration with the enforced passivity of the proper feminine in both, were transformed into valid poetical topics and important social concerns because of their apparent male-authorship. The feminine and domestic were no longer marginalised once written through the influence of male cultural authority. The adoption of a masculine pseudonym allowed the woman poet to politicise the domestic sphere. As a result, female frustration over domestic confinement and limited, constructed identities for women were recognised and became public concerns. This in turn renegotiated the boundaries of the Poetess Tradition as the gender as genre paradox included this politicised-femininity into the tradition. Brontë did not depart from the

Poetess Tradition as she addressed common female identities and experiences of wife and teacher, but by assuming masculine authorship, she also assumed masculine authority and was able to pass political comment on the feminine. The pseudonym allowed Brontë to access and transfer cultural authority to female writing, and consequently expand the conventions of the Poetess Tradition.

Despite the opportunities to subvert and challenge conventional constructions of gender, the use of a pseudonym to break the automatic association of a female writer with the Poetess Tradition still indicated that being a woman was somehow damaging or troublesome to the role of writer. This seems incongruous in the light of Tuchman's research, *Edging Woman Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change* (1989), which showed that women writers were no more inclined to use pseudonyms than their masculine counterparts. Moreover, female authors were far more likely to adopt a pseudonym from their own gender than to cross over: Christina Rossetti chose 'Ellen Alleyne'; Adelaide Anne Proctor was 'Mary Berwick'; the song writer 'Claribel' was Charlotte Barnard; and Mary Montgomerie Lamb became 'Violet Fane', a name which she took from Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Vivian Grey* (1826). A pseudonym that retained the original gender of the poet does not function as a gender-veil. Interestingly, Tuchman also showed that men were more likely than women to use a cross-gendered pseudonym: Percy B. Shelley as 'Margaret Nicholson', William Makepeace Thackeray as 'Theresa MacWhorter', and Algernon Swinburne as 'Mrs. Horace Manners'. This complicates the assumption that masculine-authorship was the more desirable. Clearly, the assumption that a pseudonym was a gender-veil and a symbol of female oppression is far too simplistic. The overriding purpose of a pseudonym was to distance the writer from their text. While this enabled the gender of the text to be different from that of

the author, it had other benefits as well, such as providing a barrier against critical backlash for the anxious poet.

The opportunity to separate the private self from the public writer can be seen to have appealed to many women poets as they embarked on their first tentative steps into the marketplace. These women were aware of the demanding expectations of the properly feminine and had inherited a potentially crippling anxiety of authorship (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 48-9). The use of a pseudonym enabled the woman poet to try her hand at poetry, to explore the opportunities it offered and experiment with its possibilities, without risking her personal reputation. Many women who were not satisfied with the conventional range offered by the Poetess Tradition chose to deviate from it, and they published these experimental and potentially controversial first volumes under pseudonyms. Christina Rossetti, for instance, submitted her first published poems to the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ* under 'Ellen Alleyne' to judge reader response before continuing. Similarly, Augusta Webster was first published in 1860 as 'Cecil Homes', and Adelaide Anne Proctor submitted poetry to Dickens's *Household Words* as 'Mary Berwick' for ten years before Dickens realised who she was. As both Proctor and Rossetti chose feminine pseudonyms, it is clear that they were not using them as a gender-veil. More likely, it was to avoid accusations of nepotism: Proctor, through her friendship with Dickens, and Rossetti through her family. By sending their work out for scrutiny under a pseudonym, these women could access criticism and reviews of their poetry without risking public damage. Mary Ann Evans published under 'George Eliot' for many reasons: the need to conceal familial or provincial sources, her fear of humiliating herself in a new genre, and the scandal surrounding her relationship with George Henry Lewes (Judd 1995: 264). Similarly, the Brontës' desire to hide their literary projects from their father stemmed from a fear that they were writing second-rate works.

With the Brontës in particular, we see a female awareness of the patronising leniency many critics and reviewers bestowed on female-authored texts. Angela Leighton notes how Victorian male critics were reluctant to be critical to women. Lockhart, writing for the *Quarterly Review* in 1840, admitted to preferring to lose himself in sentimental femininity, rather than ‘lift a pen against women’ (*Quarterly Review* 1840: 374-5). The ‘misting over of the critical eye...renders the reviewer impotent to carry out his task’ (Leighton 1992: 28), and so women poets were not given due critical attention, and were, instead, indulged. The presence of weeping-inducing sentimentality was assumed in female-authored texts, and consequently, female-authored texts were not taken seriously. Charlotte Brontë gave a detailed account of the reasons behind the decision to use male pseudonyms in her Biographical Notice of 1850 which was prefaced in *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. Charlotte stated that ‘the Brontës’ decision to use pseudonyms came from an anxiety that their work would be dismissed as typically ‘feminine’ writing. This suggests a desire for distance between themselves and the large group of women who were writing domestic fiction: ‘we veiled our own names...because – without at the time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’...we noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flatter, which is not true praise’ (Brontë 1994: 6). The Brontës did not veil their gender because they feared that their literary production was forbidden or unladylike (Judd 1995: 264). Rather, they wanted to be judged by high literary standards rather than the indulgence frequently granted to the poetess. We also find this desire for distance from the patronising leniency to female-authored texts in the writing of George Eliot, vocalised most strongly in her harsh critical essay ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ (1856). It was this critical permissiveness that Charlotte Brontë and Evans claimed to loathe more than uncharitable appraisal (Judd 1995:

253). This contextualisation of the decision to adopt masculine pseudonyms refutes the assumption that these women were simply masking their gender, and instead suggests that they were trying to avoid the derogatory associations their society placed upon it. In doing so, they drew attention to the conventional dismissal of female-authored texts simply because they were female-authored. These pseudonyms forced the reading public to accept that female-authorship did not solely comprise of the type of poetry with which the Poetess Tradition had been stereotyped. Instead, female-authored texts and, by extension, the Poetess Tradition, were infinitely more complex, far-reaching and worthy of literary merit than they had been granted.

The separation of the author from their text allowed women poets to deviate from the Poetess Tradition by challenging the constructions of female identity which defined it. As well as enabling a woman poet to benefit from masculine- or gender-neutral literary conventions and associations, pseudonyms also allowed for one writer to create and inhabit multiple identities. Lady Jane Wilde wrote as ‘Speranza’ and ‘John Fanshaw Ellis’, Caroline Clive used ‘V’ for her poetry and ‘Paul Ferroll’ for prose, and Mary Ann Hearn became ‘Marianne Farningham’ for poetry and ‘Eva Hope’ to write biographies and editorial work. In contrast to the identity she used for her poetry, Hearn expressed feminist sympathies (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: 571), when writing as ‘Eva Hope’. As ‘Marianne Farningham’, Hearn could appear in *The Gospel Magazine* and *The Sunday School Times*, publications which would not have looked favourably upon Eva Hope’s feminist opinions due to their Christian focus. Here we see a highly complex literary negotiation and exploitation as one writer performed two conflicting roles for different audiences. Different pseudonyms allowed a writer to write across multiple genres, access multiple traditions and associate herself with a diverse range of other writers. However, the impression created by

the gender as genre paradox is that the Poetess Tradition consisted of one type of feminine writing. Therefore, the use of multiple pseudonyms can be seen as a direct challenge to the gender as genre paradox. Poet and model Elizabeth Siddal also performed different roles for different audiences. She was known by her full name when she was performing the properly feminine role of muse as a popular model for the Pre-Raphaelites, but Siddal created a new identity through anonymous publication of her own poetry to shroud herself from public scrutiny. While performing the role of muse, Siddal was performing the properly feminine, but while performing as artist, she had to negotiate constructs and restrictions placed upon her gender, and so formed a new identity through which to do so.

The reasons behind adopting a pseudonym are not necessarily concerned with veiling gender. Rather, the focus should be on why the poet wanted to create a particular writing identity, why they felt the need to separate their text from themselves, and why they created a particular persona to label their work with. Pseudonyms are indicative of Victorian women writers' conscious and intentional engagement with their contextual environments, and their ability to intelligently negotiate the various conventions and restrictions posed to them because of their gender. Through their use of pseudonyms, many women demonstrated the performativity of generic conventions and constructed identities, ultimately revealing the properly feminine to be a performance. If identity can be proven to be a performance, then conventions can be manipulated, expectations challenged, traditions broken and identity reconstructed.

The Pseudonym as a Constructed Identity

A pseudonym can enable a woman poet to take control and responsibility for the construction of her own writing identity. The creation of a name, with specific connotations and scripted

performance expectations, can create a writing persona that frustrates the gender as genre paradox. The reader's awareness of the possibility that the name signed on a poem may not be that of the poet troubles their expectations of female-authored texts. The presence and variety of pseudonyms indicates that many Victorian female poets were engaged in a process of deconstructing and then reconstructing the identity, role and possibilities of the female poet. This included using pseudonyms to resolve, rather than mask or ignore, the tensions created by gender in women's poetry.

By separating private person from poetic persona, Elizabeth Siddal can be seen to have used her poetic anonymity to overcome the traditional relationship of the muse to artist, the gendering of which was troublesome to women poets. An objection to female-authored poetry was that women were unable to be original because traditionally the female muse must inspire a male artist. This traditional gendering of poetic roles meant that if the artist was female then the acts of inspiration and creativity were confused, sterile or dubious. While Siddal could and should inhabit the role of muse while she was performing as an artists' model, when she inhabited the role of artist, her gender was a barrier. To overcome this barrier, Siddal distanced herself from her text by placing her role of as artist in a separate, anonymous identity. By doing so, she was able to make herself the subject of her poetry, allowing the muse to remain female and granting her authority as an artist. Here, feminine experience becomes a legitimate source of poetry, because artist and muse occupy the same body, breaking the traditions of poetry. This elevates the Poetess Tradition above accusations of derivative work or superficiality. Although the speaker of Siddal's 'True Love' (c.1860) laments the loss of her lover, and conventionality dictates that this poem be in praise of the life of Earl Richard and a celebration of their mutual love, Siddal's speaker focuses on herself. By having her speaker predominantly concerned with her own fate (asking the dead

to 'Pray for me' (L. 5)), and speculating how the rest of her life will unfold, Siddal centralised female emotion and experience. Similarly, the speaker of 'He and She and Angels Three' (c.1860?) is the female partner, who is again separated from her lover by death. This poem is particularly unusual because, whereas traditional love poetry takes the form of the bereaved lamenting the loss of the dead, this poem is articulated from the perspective of the lover who died. Siddal's reversal retains the passivity of the properly feminine as the female speaker has to wait as an angel, yet she is the subject and focus of the poem. By allowing her speaker to take the focus of the poem in death, Siddal allows the properly feminine woman to digress from her traditional role and assert her subjectivity, while remaining properly feminine. By finding her voice in death, Siddal's speaker mirrors Siddal herself, for Siddal found her poetic voice in anonymity. Neither death nor anonymity are considered active identities, yet the female voice can rework this passivity into empowering identities. Siddal's anonymous identity as a poet deflected the male gaze, displayed proper modesty, and in all other ways enabled her to perform the properly feminine, but it also allowed her to access her voice and creativity. Siddal used her alternative writing identity to rework the Poetess Tradition into a creative space that allowed her the active freedoms of the traditionally masculine poet, but did not demand the rejection of her female gender.

Rather than confront the inconsistencies, hypocrisies and flaws of the ideology of the properly feminine, Siddal conformed to properly feminine conventions in her choice of anonymity. In doing so, her conformity highlights the influence of the properly feminine over women's writing, while simultaneously highlighting how her use of an anonymous identity allowed her to overcome the barriers to poetic creativity that gender caused. This subtle modification of traditional poetry was explored further in Christina Rossetti's poem, 'In an Artist's Studio' (1890). This poem was written about Siddal, and was Rossetti's response to

the tendency of male Victorian poets to objectify women in their experiments with aestheticism. This poem is an exploration of Siddal's relationship as model and lover to Christina's brother Dante, indicated by the poem's recollection of Pygmalion in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the stereotyped active artist who creates the perfect woman, constructing his own version of female identity, and becomes so enamoured with his own creation that he asks the gods to bring her to life. In Rossetti's poem, the artist conceived of his female subject as a passive, emotionless object which he can mould to fit his own fantasies and projections, 'Not as she is, but as she fills his dream' (L. 14), which evokes immediate connotations with the Galatea myth and constructions of female identity. Christina Rossetti used her poem to describe how she saw Siddal function as an empty canvas onto which Dante painted his version of femininity, creating a female identity separate from the actual woman. The description of the female subject is consistent with the stereotypical Victorian view of female patience, passivity and selflessness, which is reflected in Siddal's characterisation of her female angel in 'He and She and Angels Three'. Rossetti showed that when Siddal performed as muse, she fulfilled the role traditionally assigned to women in artistic creation because she allows her identity to be identity constructed by the male artist. This adds further complexity to the issue of identity, because Rossetti showed how Siddal's performance as a model allowed her identity to be removed by the artist. As a model, Siddal was 'nameless' (L. 6), however, she worked as a model under her own name. It was as a poet that Siddal chose to set her name aside. Here the hypocrisy of the properly feminine is exposed, because women who complied with and performed the properly feminine lost their identities in favour of the identity constructed for and placed upon them. However, to retain their sense of self, many chose pseudonymity or anonymity. In deviating from the properly feminine, women could construct their own identities according to their own wishes.

Through Siddal's conformity and Rossetti's comments, the inability for the properly feminine and the Poetess Tradition to enable a specifically feminine poetics which allowed for the identity of the active female artist is exposed.

While Siddal's decision to reside in anonymity can be read as intentionally troubling her society's gendered constructs of identity, she failed to resolve the tensions her gender caused her poetry. While the creation of an anonymous identity allowed Siddal to perform the gendered role of poet, it also fractured her identity, as she performed one identity as poet and another as model. It is through Michael Field that we see the pseudonym challenge and then reconstruct the Poetess Tradition into a more fluid and creatively-enabling space.

'Michael Field', defined by Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock as 'neither a pseudonym nor a mask...[but]...the name under which two writers collaborated' (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: 694), appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century from Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper. It was a sophisticated and purposeful challenge, interrogation and reconstruction of female identity. Due to their inheritances, both Bradley and Cooper were able to write for purely aesthetic reasons, without needing to conform to the expectations of the properly feminine to enhance sales. Consequently, they could explore radical ideas and experiment through their poetry without fear of disapproval. The reasons behind Bradley and Cooper's decision to use the masculine pseudonym 'Michael Field' may have been a simple reaction against acknowledged gendered prejudices in both the literary marketplace and intellectual communities. Indeed, while their genders remained unknown due to their pseudonym, Bradley and Cooper enjoyed critical comparisons with everyone of a high literary status, from Shakespeare to Swinburne (Donoghue 1998: 39). However, upon revelation that 'Michael Field' was actually two women, their work was no longer taken seriously (Blain 2001: 6) and their popularity began to wane. This sudden

change in critical reception reflected the prejudice against female-authorship that still existed in the Victorian marketplace, even towards the end of the nineteenth-century, and that Bradley and Cooper were both aware of it. In choosing to use 'Michael Field', Bradley and Cooper chose to be in dialogue with the numerous pseudonymous identities which had preceded them, and with the inevitable act of unveiling that the adoption of a pseudonym invited. They would have also been aware of the failure of previous pseudonyms to grant their writers access to long-lasting critical prestige. Greater complexity can be sought in 'Michael Field', and the decision to adopt the name can be seen as a culmination of the attempts through pseudonyms of previous years towards identity reconstruction. Firstly, it is indicative of more than the simple desire to avoid gendered prejudices because it is one name representing two writers. That these two women chose a singular pseudonym indicates that it functioned in more complex ways than a simple gender-veil, because although 'collaboration was extremely common at the end of the nineteenth-century...it was thought to smack of amateurism' (Donoghue 1997: 37). Collaboration was not a route by which to gain critical appreciation and literary prestige, and so the pseudonym 'Michael Field' communicated a singular poetic identity to the reader, rather than indicate collaboration. Bradley and Cooper had experienced this negative feeling before as their first collaboration, *Bellerophon* (1881), published under the separate pseudonyms of Bradley's established 'Arran Leigh' and Cooper's 'Isla Leigh', was received with very little notice or comment. While this does indicate that their choice to use a pseudonym was motivated by more than a simple gender veiling, the decision to use a masculine name places gender issues at the centre of discussion.

Bradley and Cooper created and discarded many pseudonyms throughout their literary careers. That they always published under pseudonyms, and that most of those pseudonyms were revised, demonstrates a preoccupation with public and writing identities

that haunted these women throughout their literary careers. The pseudonym 'Michael Field', however, appears to have been comfortable for them, potentially because it did more than simply hide undesirable aspects of their identity, such as their gender and their collaboration. The masculinisation of it allowed access to an exclusive realm of male privilege, including the power to write free from the restrictions of conforming to proper feminine behaviour, thought and experience. This, in turn, granted them cultural authority to comment on society, as well as to approach a broader range of topics through a diversity of poetic styles, accessing poetical traditions other than that of the poetess. After Robert Browning revealed their true identity, Bradley wrote reproachfully to him to explain that they needed a male disguise to let them write freely, escape 'drawing-room conventionalities', and receive honest and fair criticism: 'we have many things to say that the world will not tolerate from a woman's lips' (Bradley in Donoghue 1998: 40). This performance of masculinity enabled Bradley and Cooper to aim for greater poetical status as the majority of Michael Field's work has clear and direct connections to Classical myth and poetics, most notably the 'Long Ago' series, which is directly connected to Sapphic fragments. While the links between the Classics, masculine education and poetical status were firmly established and entrenched in tradition, Classical mythology also allowed Bradley and Cooper to 'avoid the penitential meshes of conventional Christianity that troubled so many women poets' (Blain 2001: 6). Christianity was used to justify many imbalanced gendered ideologies, from keeping women enclosed in the domestic sphere on the grounds of ensuring their purity and chastity, to placing male intellect and powers of reasoning as superior. By accessing poetical traditions of language, imagery and allusion untainted by Christianity, Bradley and Cooper's poetry was free of such restrictions.

The specific Sapphic aspect of Bradley and Cooper's association with the Classics created a further separation from the Christian hegemony from which notions of both the properly feminine and domestic ideology were formed. Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889), not only associates with the Classical traditions, but is textually linked to fragments of Sappho, placing them in an alternative female tradition (Leighton 1992: 225-36). As Leighton argues, this poetry evades the tensions the heterosexual women poets encounter in dealing with the 'feminine' tradition (1992: 225-36) and so, arguably, enables a female poetics free from anxiety of authorship and unconsumed by the need to constantly justify itself. An alliance with the Sappho legend associated them with a dissident element of the Poetess Tradition of love poetry between women, providing a legitimate female writing space, free from the negatives that plagued the Poetess Tradition (Williamson 1995: 16). The poem 'A Girl' (1893) recalls Sappho's 'To Brochea' and 'To a Girl', which contained vivid descriptions of female sexuality and passion. Michael Field use the original homosexual context of this poem to create an empowering female-love identity, which is neither that of Browning's coy mistress, nor Tennyson's wasted and dying woman. In contrast to the identities offered by the properly feminine, there is a sense of unknown potential in Michael Field's girl, where 'identity is still fluid and shifting' (Leighton 1992: 232). She evokes the image of Venus emerging from the sea, rather than Christian identities of women, such as Mary, the mother and virgin, or Mary Magdalene, the whore. However, the homosexual inheritance of this poem is refigured as heterosexual by the pseudonym, so while it enabled Bradley and Cooper to locate an alternative female identity, it also enabled them to publish the finished poem.

Bradley and Cooper's use of their pseudonym also created a distance between themselves and their text, so they could evade scandalous assumptions which could have been drawn from a personal association with the sexually transgressive Sappho. Sappho

provided Bradley and Cooper with a new identity for the poetess, resolving the tensions within their poetry caused by gender. In turn, their pseudonym resolved the problems caused through this association with Sappho. This alternative poetics also enabled Bradley and Cooper to overcome the troublesomely gendered muse/artist relationship as both elements were successfully recast as female. Emma Donoghue's *What Sappho Would Have Said: Four Centuries of Love Poems Between Women* (1997) explores this previously unrecognised exclusively female practice of which many women poets, including L.E.L. and Christina Rossetti, partook.

Bradley and Cooper's continual revision of their pseudonymous identities shows their awareness of the performances expected from certain identities. By appropriating Sappho's poetics and fragments, Bradley and Cooper not only identified with her, but inhabited her, making her identity their own. In doing so, they rewrote the Sapphic legend. Although the act of translating the Sapphic lyrics was a rite of passage for many aspiring poets, the 'name of Sappho [was] signed each time by someone other than Sappho' (Prins 1999: 13), and that 'someone other' contributed to the Sapphic legend. Consequently, the identity of Sappho became a highly overdetermined Victorian trope, rather than an actual, physical identity. Sappho became a figure appropriated, moulded and exploited by many different means (Prins 1999: 5-7), and so became a subsection of the Poetess Tradition. By masquerading under the identity of Sappho, Bradley and Cooper used her in a similar way as a pseudonym, because they articulated their own desires, politics and message through an established but separated identity with connections to, but distanced from, the Poetess Tradition. Here we see Bradley and Cooper combining the cumulative benefits of the pseudonym 'Michael Field' with the established poetic identity of Sappho to elevate aspects of the Poetess Tradition to a greater

poetical status. They did not depart from the Poetess Tradition, but rather reworked it into a prestigious form through which subject matter, style and inspiration were no longer restricted.

In addition to using 'Michael Field' to establish an alternative female poetic tradition, Bradley and Cooper used this pseudonym as a way to completely absorb themselves in their writing. For Bradley and Cooper, 'Michael Field' was 'neither a pseudonym nor a mask' (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: 694). Rather, it operated as a far more complicated and complex identity. Their friends called them the 'Michael Fields' and it was how they referred to themselves, and so this name symbolised their devotion to each other and to poetry. 'Michael Field' was not a mask behind which Bradley and Cooper hid their gender, nor was it armour donned to fight their way into masculine realms, it was who they became through their poetry. Consequently, it operated on a far more intricate level than a simple pseudonym. The complexities, nuances and individualisms of the pseudonyms created by many Victorian women poets can be seen to culminate in this one identity which negotiated the social as well as the writing life. While some women poets had undoubtedly used their pseudonyms as a simple mask, others operated in far more complicated ways and for many purposes. To dismiss women's pseudonymous writing as a veil is to do it a great disservice because it draws attention to the problematic relationships experienced by women poets, both in terms of the act of writing, and within the contexts of publishing and readership. The diversity of identities refutes the conflating effects of the gender as genre paradox and allows for multiple female identities, rather than one assimilated group. Pseudonyms also enabled the creation of hybrid forms of poetry, a melding of the traditionally masculine with the traditionally feminine, and so allowed women poets to break from the conventional sentimentality of the Poetess Tradition into a more high-status realm of poetics. Finally, the decision to adopt a pseudonym shows an awareness that identity is socially constructed, a

conscious decision to perform the properly feminine, and a conscious effort on the behalf of women poets to create their own legitimate creative space. By understanding a pseudonym as a way of challenging constructions of gendered identity, we see the women poets' conscious assessment of the role and reception of the women writer through the Poetess Tradition and their attempts to reform it. Here, the Poetess Tradition is not being denied, disguised or rejected, but troubled and reassessed.

Victorian women poets used pseudonyms to embrace and comply with the properly feminine to such an extent that its artifice and performances were exposed. They used them to frustrate and complicate the gender as genre paradox by proving that women writers were capable of the same creative powers as their male counterparts. Pseudonyms also showed that the gender of the author could be separated from that of the text, which expanded the boundaries of the Poetess Tradition. Additionally, many women used pseudonyms to take control of the creation and composition of their public writing identities, asserting their autonomy and authority but without denying or masking fundamental parts of themselves.

As previously mentioned, however, the majority of Victorian women poets did not use a pseudonym (Judd 1995: 250) and 'during the 1860s the practice of anonymous publication came under attack...by the end of the century many literary periodicals began publishing the names of their contributors' (Easley 2004: 5). This study will proceed to investigate attempts made by other women poets to challenge and reconstruct the Poetess Tradition without using a pseudonym. As Dorothy Mermin suggests in 'The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet', the act of identity-splitting enabled by a pseudonym, did not resolve all of the problems gender caused women's poetry. The woman poet cannot simply reverse the roles of feminine and masculine, project herself as male, or be both the subject and object of her poetry, because the identity of the poet is far more complicated

(Mermin 1986: 68). The challenge to the properly feminine and the reconstruction of the Poetess Tradition must come from the poetry itself, rather than the simple label of its author. In her groundbreaking introduction to the text, Cora Kaplan suggests of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* that 'Aurora rejects androgyny as a mask or aspiration for women writers' (Kaplan in Barrett Browning 1978: 33), and this text confronts the negatives of the Poetess Tradition both in dialogue and composition, without the need for a pseudonym. For women poets to assert their value and talent, they have to assert their femininity rather than attempt to deny or ignore it (Jacobus 1979). Dorothy Mermin herself identified Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* laying the groundwork for a new, prestigious, feminine poetics. The next chapter will investigate how Barrett Browning used her poetry to expose the artificiality of the properly feminine, renegotiate the relationship of muse and artist for the woman poet, and attempt to carve out a new space in female literary traditions free from the negative associations of the Poetess Tradition.

CHAPTER THREE: A NEW POETICS

This chapter explores how the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning reconstructed the Poetess Tradition in her poem *Aurora Leigh* to create authoritative and prestigious poetry without compromising her female identity. The previous chapter explored how some Victorian women poets attempted this by reconstructing female identities and challenging expectations of female-authored poetry through the use of pseudonyms. However, these attempts concentrated on manipulating gendered expectations rather than overcoming them. Furthermore, the majority of Victorian women poets did not use pseudonyms, opting instead to use their poetry as a space in which to discuss and challenge the constructs of the properly feminine and the resulting restrictions of the Poetess Tradition. This chapter examines how Barrett Browning directly but subtly confronted and challenged the gendered double standards of their society through her poetry. Rather than use a pseudonym as a shield, she used her poetry as a weapon to expose the artificiality of the properly feminine, defy gendered ideologies which denied her access to literary traditions, and distance herself from the low-brow, sentimental poetess. These confrontations were located within the dialogue, narration and subject of the poem, and also in the form and construction of the poetry itself. Rather than a change of name, we see a woman poet who actively reformed the Poetess Tradition into a legitimate, female, creative space that was simultaneously authoritative and prestigious.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning will be the focus of this chapter because she was considered ‘the first woman poet in English literature’ (Mermin 1989: 1) by her contemporaries. As established in the introduction, this status is demonstrated by Elizabeth Sharp’s decision to use her portrait to illustrate *Women’s Voices* (1887), a contemporary

anthology of the most characteristic poems by women of the previous century. Recognition of her poetical talent and achievements were not contained within her own gender, as a critic in the *Athenaeum*, probably H. F. Chorley, claimed in that ‘there is no living poet of either sex who can prefer a higher claim than Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’ (*Athenaeum* 1 June 1850: 585). Additional gender-impartial praise came from John Ruskin, who wrote to Barrett Browning stating that *Aurora Leigh* was the greatest poem in the English language, and ‘the first poetical expression of the Age’, and Swinburne asserted that ‘no English contemporary poet by profession has left us work so full of living fire’ (Cooper 1988: 148). The diversity of her subject matter demonstrates a proficient skill in and genuine passion for socio-political commentary, and exploration of the thematics of women’s rights form a significant part of Barrett Browning’s oeuvre. Her personal correspondence reveals a conscious intention to challenge the boundaries of the Poetess Tradition as she insisted on engaging with contemporary issues and public debate, and her poetry was not only technically accomplished but culturally and socially resonant and popular.

It is not only Barrett Browning’s poetical accomplishment which has made her the focus of this chapter. Her awareness of her identity as both woman and poet, and subsequent place in society and the literary landscape, made her poetry some of the more enlightening and informative work in regard to the Victorian Poetess Tradition. Barrett Browning and novelist George Eliot arrived at very similar theoretical positions at the same time as they were both ‘dismayed by the silliness of so much writing by women’ (Avery and Stott 2003: 85) and so purposefully and consciously reworked their respective arts to argue and demonstrate that women writers were capable of much more than the stereotypes created and perpetuated by the proper feminine. This dismay at the lack of suitable female poets to turn to for inspiration or example, coupled with her awareness that to join the brotherhood of male

poets she would have to deny or forget her sex, prompted Barrett Browning to rewrite the role of the female poet for her society. Linda Shires argues in *Cross-Dwelling and the Reworking of Female Poetic Authority* (2002) that Barrett Browning's rewriting took the form of 'cross-dressing' because 'the vestiges of Romantic male authorship as well as a legacy of a female authorship of sensibility (Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon) have become such a sticking point for many critics of Barrett Browning as they try desperately to "explain" the conflicting ideologies of genius, authorship, and female writer which collide in her work' (2002: 331). Previous literary criticism attempted to place Barrett Browning either within or outside the Poetess Tradition, which this research will demonstrate to be an inaccurate representation of her poetical work. Rather than adhering to or rejecting the Poetess Tradition, Barrett Browning balanced deviation with conformity to carve out a new space that overlapped both Poetess Tradition and established, authoritative, varied masculine traditions. She was a 'boundary crosser, someone who from the very first words she uttered sought to reconcile in her poetics a whole series of binaries which her generation told her were absolutely gendered: reason and feeling in particular' (Avery and Stott 2003: 78). Barrett Browning interrogated gender binaries and stereotypes from first principles, deconstructing the properly feminine and rebuilding a poetics which enabled female creativity, negated the gender as genre paradox, and was separate from the previously negative connotations of female-authored poetry.

Out of Barrett Browning's impressive portfolio, *Aurora Leigh* (1856) has been selected due to its original poetical form and because it is the fictional struggle and journey of a female poet in Victorian society. The poem is a complex tale, narrating the journey of a young female poet and the obstacles and problems she encountered before she was able to write her poetical masterpiece. This poem operates as evidence of what it teaches, in that it is

a highly accomplished female-authored poem. As a fictionalised autobiography, it can be placed in a tradition which included Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Caroline Bowles Southey's *The Birth-day* (1836) (Blain 2002: 3), a tradition which crossed gendered boundaries. Its style is undeniably rooted in the epic tradition, which prompted Barrett Browning to be ranked 'among the chief English poets of this century...with Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe and Shelley' (Taplin 1957: 407) and, therefore, be included in a conventionally masculine poetics. Furthermore, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi argues that *Aurora Leigh* is a 'strikingly important Victorian poem' as it is 'historically significant in its interaction with the works of other Victorian writers and immediately relevant in its depiction of a feminist consciousness' (1981: 35). Through this poem we see Barrett Browning's awareness of the complexity and delicateness of her own position with regard to the Poetess Tradition, and her attempts to rework it into a more suitable and prestigious space. Mermin argues that we can see Barrett Browning's own complex interplay of deviance and conformity in relation to poetic traditions as her 'anomalousness was constantly present to her imagination, and questions of gender shaped and coloured almost everything she wrote' (1989: 2), but it is in *Aurora Leigh* that she addressed the problems of gender directly and made it the focus of her writing. The *Bildungsroman* plot combined with *Künstlerroman* elements made this poem a 'natural site for studying how this genre constructs and is constructed by gender' (Houston 1993: 213).

Nevertheless, it is important not to reduce the accomplishment of *Aurora Leigh* to merely its narrative. Its construction as a novel-poem or verse-narrative was groundbreaking for its day, and these generic innovations have been frequently overlooked (Tasker 2002: 24). Speculation as to why *Aurora Leigh* was not an immediate success has focussed on the unusualness of its innovative form which as a combination of two genres, found itself

without an established tradition through which it could be appreciated. Meg Tasker (2002) argues that *Aurora Leigh* has only achieved canonical status since its republication in the later 1970s as a result of a feminist movement to recover lost female texts that the genius of *Aurora Leigh* has been appreciated; this original composition is complementary to Aurora's challenge to social convention as it is a challenge to poetical convention.

It was this alignment with the novel tradition which benefited women poets (Tasker 2002: 26) as the novel was the predominant legitimate female writing space. The novel, with its emphasis on characterisation and the domestic, was a feminine genre. By introducing that tradition to the male-dominated genre of poetry, Barrett Browning arguably managed to create a style of poetry that suited expectations of feminine writing, but was an alternative to the low-status, sentimental poetess. This has led to *Aurora Leigh* being open to a multiplicity of interpretations and readings, ranging from Cora Kaplan's description of it being 'radical and rupturing, a major confrontation of patriarchal attitudes' (1978: 35), to Deidre David's assertion that the poem is an example of 'women's art as servant of patriarch[y]' (1987: 113-36), claiming that feminine poetics must meld with the novel because they were not accepted in their own right. This research will concentrate on how *Aurora Leigh* can be used as an example of Barrett Browning's thorough and conscious attempts to challenge both the constrictions of the Poetess Tradition and properly feminine, along with the barriers presented to women poets who aspired to attain prestigious and authoritative poetry. Furthermore, the diversity of these readings demonstrate Barrett Browning's skill, as she created her arguments with such complexity and subtly that her radicalism was not obvious. *Aurora Leigh* is more than an argument in verse, and more than an innovative genre style; it is a masterpiece of negotiation of gendered identity.

Identity of the Woman Poet

Barrett Browning used her character Aurora as a proxy through which to explore the restrictions of the Poetess Tradition. Her adoption of this persona suggests she needed ‘fictional characters to carry the charge of her experience as a woman artist’, so they could speak the truth (Rich 1980: 175), and so *Bildungsroman* genre was employed. The creation of a persona separate from the woman poet was necessary, and the direct voice of the woman poet was restricted by the properly feminine demands of conventional piety, didactic feeling and sentimental praise. However, the distance between character and artist was complicated as there are stark autobiographical similarities between Aurora and Barrett Browning herself (Bolton and Holloway in Barrett Browning 1995: 467). Thus, although *Aurora Leigh* was not intended to be autobiographical, Barrett Browning uses Aurora as a mouthpiece to communicate with her audience (Avery and Stott 2003: 66). She represents the complexity of the Victorian woman poet’s situation within her narrative as she ‘externalises these conflicts at once by assigning different impulses to a number of female characters’ (Blain 2002: 17), such as Marian, Lady Waldemar and Aunt Leigh, alongside the representative of masculine prejudices, Romney. This technique allowed Barrett Browning to tackle the Poetess Tradition’s multitude of restrictions and rework them, rather than have the poem read as a direct, political manifesto. We can see the construction of the narrative immediately mirror the construction of the form, as both consist of a complex melding of the traditionally masculine with the traditionally feminine to give rise to a genre with the strengths of both.

Barrett Browning acted out the process behind this overhaul of the Poetess Tradition in the direct-address style of this poem. She had the novice-poet Aurora initially reject all female styles and affiliations with the Poetess Tradition as she recoiled from and ridiculed her society’s expectations of her to become one of the ‘doating mothers’ and ‘perfect wives’

(II. 222-3). This total rejection of the feminine shows Aurora's complicity in the gendered ideologies of her time as her 'male identification has led her to scorn women' (Gelpi 1981: 44), due to the same gender-prejudiced reasons held by the rest of her society. The reader understands the roots of this rejection as they had previously been exposed to Aurora's childhood, where she read about women imprisoned by literary representations of the Muse, Psyche, Medusa, Lamia and Madonna, but nothing about the woman-as-artist. Here Barrett Browning participated in the struggle of women writers to find a legitimate form of writing that was alternative to the 'female victim' or other passive forms of femininity which firmly marked 'woman' as 'other' in opposition to the artist (Jacobus 1982: 118). Barrett Browning had Aurora attempt a complete rejection of this passive, feminine victim, and so, by implication, also of the Poetess Tradition. Yet she progressed to show that while Aurora found critical and financial success by doing so, she was left unfulfilled as an artist; 'virtue done for popularity / Defiles like vice' (V. 258-9). It is only when Aurora made peace with both sides of herself, 'A happy life means prudent compromise' (V. 923), by reconnecting with her female self, that her poetical abilities were fully actualised; 'Our work shall still be better for our love, / And still our love be sweeter for our work' (IX. 925-6). At the end of the *Bildungsroman* journey, Aurora was advanced in her acceptance of womanhood to the point where she cried over the loss of Romney, and so discovered the power and importance of feminine feeling. Although she still despised her tears as womanish, she understood the problems she experienced with her creativity were because 'It seems as if I had a man in me, / Despising such a woman' (VII.212-3). Through the complete denial of the Poetess Tradition, Aurora lost an essential element of herself, reinforcing Mary Coleridge's assertion of the necessity of women writers to retain their femininity rather than deny or mask it. Barrett Browning demonstrated through her narrative that Aurora had inherited the prejudice

against woman poets, and, therefore, against herself (Gelpi 1981: 45). We can see Barrett Browning's acknowledgement of the necessity of a legitimate female creative space and feminine expressive styles, but her rejection of the critical negativity and demeaning associations of how the Poetess Tradition was seen by her contemporaries. Her suggested solution is apparent in her employment of the text-within-a-text convention as she labels the poem *Aurora Leigh* as Aurora's completed masterpiece at the end. This tradition, where narratives were constructed to give the impression that they were character-authored, associates Barrett Browning with Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859), amongst others, thereby thwarting the attempts of the gender as genre paradox to automatically place her in an exclusively feminine space.

Although it was only through a reconnection with the Poetess Tradition that Aurora realised her full creative potential, this reconnection was on her own terms, again reflecting Barrett Browning's precise and selective manipulation of the feminine novel genre. Aurora took issue with how her society created her identity as 'woman' for her, verbalised through the character of Aunt Leigh, but she realised that her female identity was necessary for her poetry. In doing so, Barrett Browning attributed the problem to how Aurora's society construed and constructed ideas about female identity, not her biological femaleness. This strengthened Barrett Browning's argument that the legitimate female creative space of the Poetess Tradition was acceptable, but Victorian literary society's prejudiced assumptions against it were not. She demonstrated the need for the Poetess Tradition to be broken down to recognise the multiple separations and divisions within the Poetess Tradition itself, rather than a conflated assimilation of all women. This allowed her to retain her gendered identity but distance herself from the derided feminine poetess, in favour of a new space of prestigious and accomplished female-authored poetry. This revision helped to overcome the

anxiety of authorship identified by Gilbert and Gubar, because the Poetess Tradition was reworked into a supportive and inspirational heritage.

This complex process of Aurora accepting her feminine identity is evident when she stopped identifying herself as a masculine figure, but rather as female, because she recognised that to become an artist was not a simple transferral of gender, but a complete reconstruction of the terms of the female artist. She saw herself 'no longer as boyish Ganymede...but as Io' (Gelpi 1981: 46) in the gadfly analogy in Book VII, for while both Ganymede and Io were both adored by Jove, the nature of the adoration was different because of their genders. In doing so, Aurora recognised the importance of acknowledging her gender and working with it, rather than ignoring and rejecting it. In Classic mythology, Ganymede was plucked up by Jove's eagle and celebrated publicly, whereas Io was transformed by Jove to hide her from a suspicious Juno. Jove's adoration of Ganymede is legitimate and public, but his adoration of Io is seditious because Io has troubled the marriage between Jove and Juno, which is representative of how the independent female writer troubles the traditional properly feminine role of women as wives. However, Aurora manipulated this mythology by recasting the gadfly that torments Io as Jove, rather than adhering to the myth where the gadfly was a separate being sent by Juno. This recasting of the myth represents how Io was tormented as a result of her sex by masculine desires and designs on her. Thus while Aurora learnt to accept and acknowledge her femaleness, she still did not find it a comfortable or supportive creative space. Barrett Browning complicated Aurora's struggle with her gender as she showed that while the Poetess Tradition was a suitable tool theoretically, in practice it could not support its followers because it was troubled from beyond its parameters; just as Jove sent his gadfly to worry Io, social ideologies concerning the proper feminine troubled the poetess. Here we can see the interior

struggle of Barrett Browning through her negotiation of the Poetess Tradition: she was conscious of its status as a sub-genre to which she knew she belonged, ‘which she alternately feared for the damage of its inferiority could stamp upon her own work, and yet loyally defended for its innovative and creative possibilities’ (Reynolds 1992: 5). Aurora could not simply conform to the Poetess Tradition because it was not enough for the woman writer to create her own identity. The traditions, structures and language of writers did not allow for deviation. She must rework it into a suitable creative space for herself in order to deflect the gladly. Although Aurora recognised her femininity with her triumphant declaration of ‘I’m a woman, sir’ (VIII. 1130), she continued to struggle to ‘become subject rather than object in relation to Romney’ (Mermin 1989: 188). When Romney saw Aurora in Book II, he saw her as a work of art, not the artist she wished to become, and so she is cast in the passive, traditionally feminine role as muse to the masculine artist. As Leighton argues, ‘it is not, then, enough to ask of Barrett Browning, ‘Does she [Aurora] have a muse, and what is its sex?’ One must also ask, what is the relation of the muse to this woman’s writing?’ (Leighton 1986: 21). Romney, as he was, could not be Aurora’s muse: they could not simply switch their gendered roles of artist and inspiration. Thus Romney must change in order for Aurora to be able to accept both him in marriage and herself as a woman poet.

Authority of the Woman Poet

This pairing of the traditionally feminine, domestic preoccupation, such as marriage, with a classical myth was one way through which Barrett Browning carved out a legitimate but authoritative space within the Poetess Tradition. Another way can be found in how Barrett Browning kept the subject matter of her poetry domestic, but redefined what ‘domestic’ encompassed. As Stott argues, she saw a much wider range of appropriate subject matter for

poetry and had claimed that ethical subjects were the highest form of poetry in previous compositions (2003: 76). Superficially, a woman's poem which discusses rape, prostitution and illegitimacy was in defiance of the conventions of the Poetess Tradition and the proper feminine, because it cast a shadow over the woman poet's reputation, as women were thought to only be able to write from personal experience. However, Barrett Browning overcame this narrow restriction by expanding the domestic sphere to include such matters, and by doing so she made the traditionally masculine suitable for the feminine pen.

Barrett Browning's revision of the domestic sphere to include subjects conventionally associated with male worldly experience and other masculine privileges indicates a challenge to the restrictions dictated by the properly feminine and an intention to re-shape the Poetess Tradition. By approaching unconventional feminine subjects we see Barrett Browning's awareness of the gendered double standards within her society and her determination to reform it. Although topics such as war, slavery, labour and politics were traditionally the preserve of male cultural authority, we can see women throughout the nineteenth-century use their poetry to vocalise their own opinions and ideas about them, while their approach and methodology remained feminine. According to domestic ideology, for a woman, political criticism of the slave trade must come from a background of motherly concern for children, or wifely concern for the family. The laudatory contemporary reviews of Barrett's 'The Cry of the Children' (1843) were partly enabled by her attempt to legitimise her right to discuss the working class; as *The Dublin University Magazine* recognised, 'it is essentially the protest of a woman on behalf of that infancy of which woman is the proper protectress and advocate' (*The Dublin University Magazine* 1843: 364). This properly feminine approach allowed Barrett to deviate from the poem's motherly concern for the children and she 'scrutinize[d] the power structure, run by masters, brothers, and fathers, which subject[ed]

humans to the wheels of mechanization and the grind of the marketplace...it levels an attack at the ineffectiveness of religion to stop social inequities' (Shires 2002: 335). Barrett Browning manipulated the expectations of the properly feminine to break the conventional restrictions of the Poetess Tradition by demonstrating the rights and abilities of women to participate in traditionally non-feminine debates.

'The Cry of the Children' was one of Barrett Browning's first attempts at making the political a domestic concern by drawing upon traditionally feminine attributes of emotion, empathy, motherly distress for the victims of political and social injustice and motherly duty to become a moral guide. Thus Barrett Browning had already set a precedent for Aurora's encounters with Marian and Rose, and her exposure to rape, poverty and the working classes, to be legitimised and recast as suitable for feminine concern. Barrett Browning strengthened this claim to cultural authority through the problem of the public woman, a role which united the prostitute with the published woman writer, and which was a personal concern as well as a social interest. The prostitute was simultaneously political and domestic as she inhabited streets and disrupted marriages, and so it was through this figure that Barrett Browning strengthened women poets' claims to male cultural authority.

Unlike many of her contemporaries who used the stylised figure of the prostitute to discuss other subjects, such as poverty, morality or aspects of the Woman Question, Barrett Browning used the prostitute to revise female poetical politics. Marian took charge of her voice and began to construct her own identity after Aurora misjudged her on the streets of Paris. She educated Aurora, and, also the reader, that often the fallen woman had not chosen to be so, and she was a brutalized victim rather than a sexually loose prostitute (VI. 740-71). Marian 'places the blame [for prostitution and un-chastity] where it belongs, on men, rather than on its tradition recipients, women' (Cooper 1988: 176). In doing so, Barrett Browning

simultaneously achieved multiple objectives which assisted in her deviation from and renegotiation of the Poetess Tradition. Firstly, Marian was able to vocalise her experience and create her own identity independent from the proper feminine as asserted that she was raped rather than willingly sold herself. Although the outcomes are the same in that Marian is living in poverty as an unwed mother, the difference between the two scenarios is crucial as impurity was not her fault so she is still acceptable as a heroine, albeit an unconventional one. Marian was used to communicate the many differences between women and so challenge stereotypes of female identities, and thus Barrett Browning can be seen to negate the effects of the gender as genre paradox. This allowed Barrett Browning to distance herself from the perceived mediocrity of the poetess and place herself at the high end of a spectrum of female poetics through her appropriation of serious political and social concerns. Furthermore, by forcing the reader, through the persona of Aurora, to sympathise and side with Marian, Barrett Browning took control of how her readers responded to her own work by forcing them to reassess their initial assumptions and prejudices.

To all appearances, *Aurora Leigh* is exactly the sort of thing a woman poet ought to have been writing about because it is focused on domestic female experience, however, ‘instead of the languid Victorian heroine, is a witty, humorous, and vigorously intellectual women’ (Reynolds 1992: 9). Barrett Browning can be seen not to have rejected the Poetess Tradition, but to have reworked it by confronting the rigid criteria that shaped female behaviour and identity. By deviating from the conventional idealised girl constructed from masculine poetic traditions, Barrett Browning created a heroine who is simultaneously properly feminine and feminist. This hybrid allowed for *Aurora Leigh* to follow the traditional *Bildungsroman* plot with a properly feminine girl at its centre, and also enabled Barrett Browning to make social commentary and contemporary debate integral parts of

Aurora's vision. While this melding of masculine and feminine had been attempted by Barrett Browning previously in such poems as 'The Cry of the Children', and 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' (1848), it is only *Aurora Leigh* which made this combination the focus of its message as well as exemplifying it in practice through its hybrid form of a verse-novel. Indeed, in Barrett Browning's personal correspondence we find her passionately advocating women's interest in politics. She argued in a letter that women had every right to an interest in issues such as slavery otherwise they became slaves themselves (in Moers 1977: 40). By making the political domestic and the domestic political, and creating a properly feminine heroine who successfully displayed her intellect, Barrett Browning carved out a legitimate and authoritative female literary space in opposition to the stereotypes of the Poetess Tradition, while also recognising the validity and necessity of feminine forms of creative expression.

Along with feminising masculine subject matters and masculinising feminine ones, Barrett Browning struggled with feminising the role of the professional poet sufficiently so that it was appropriate to female forms of expression, but not so much that its authority was negated. The need to rewrite the role of the female poet came from the inherent conflict between the assertive poetic 'I' and the passivity of the properly feminine, which made the role of 'artist' uninhabitable for women (Mermin 1986). Barrett Browning can be seen to achieve this through her appropriation of the *Künstlerroman* tradition for *Aurora Leigh*, which is a rewriting of the self and is concerned with the process of construction. Gail Turley Houston focuses on the structure of Aurora's character because it facilitated Barrett Browning's rejection of the properly feminine demand that a woman be selfless; if the female self is the subject of her *Künstlerroman*, a woman can be a poet but remain feminine as she is both artist and inspiration. *Aurora Leigh* demonstrates that 'as long as poetry is imagined as a

predominantly male endeavour, a female poet enacts her liberation by transforming herself from being the object of male narrative to being the subject of her own story' (Cooper 1988: 145). By constructing Aurora, who in turn constructed her own poetry, Barrett Browning firmly placed the female at the centre of the poem by structuring it as a fictional autobiography written in first-person narrative. This enabled her to negotiate the binaries of traditional poetic metaphors which cast the feminine as 'other' and inferior, and consequently disproved a typical Victorian view of 'female writers as prolific and usually mediocre or bad copiers of male texts' (Houston 1993: 225), because it enabled women poets to demonstrate their originality. This experimentation was not appreciated by all: W.C. Roscoe, when writing for the *National Review* in April 1857, used *Aurora Leigh* to argue that women were incapable of producing anything other than autobiography. While this analysis of *Aurora Leigh* was inaccurate, it still undermined Barrett Browning's poetics. Here, we see a contemporary blindness to the lessons Barrett Browning was trying to communicate to her readers and, consequently, a lack of understanding and appreciation for *Aurora Leigh*. The complexities and sophistication of Barrett Browning's reconstruction of female identity and the Poetess Tradition can only be appreciated once the gendered opinions of women's intellectual capabilities are removed.

The conclusion to *Aurora Leigh* is immensely complex and appears to contradict the earlier philosophies of the poem. Aurora accepted Romney's proposal and concluded that 'Art is much, but Love is more!' (XI. 656), putting the traditional feminine role of wife above that of poet. This has been a source of much confusion for recent critics who had revelled in Barrett Browning's feminist poetics. It prompted Elaine Showalter to argue that Aurora's acceptance of Romney's proposal was a submission to Victorian gender ideologies (1979: 23), and Gilbert and Gubar to label it as Aurora's utter capitulation and retreat into

Victorian domesticity (2000: 575-80). However, the *Bildungsroman* element ensures that the engagement was not a regression to the gender imbalances of the beginning of the poem, because the reader sees a strikingly different Romney at the end: he is blinded, crippled and ruined, and is no longer patronising or dismissive of Aurora's poetic vocation (IX. 540-600). While Barrett Browning employed the conventions of female acquiescence, Aurora only submitted to Romney after he had submitted to her. Consequently, and these conventions are exposed as artificial and perfunctory. Barrett Browning herself 'recognized that the woman poet had to exploit certain aspects of her personal situation, however painful and paradoxical' (Shires 2002: 334), and that she had to give *Aurora Leigh* a conventional ending for it to be acceptable to her audience. Here Barrett Browning engaged with the conventions of the Poetess Tradition, but she revised the conventional feminine conclusion into one that advocated gender equality. This was achieved by asserting that conformity to the properly feminine was a choice; the woman will be properly feminine but only on the condition that she is treated with respect. While the marriage plot is a generic ending and conventionally properly feminine, Aurora negotiated the terms of it, and only capitulated when Romney had recognised her worth. Aurora and Romney's engagement lies in stark contrast to Romney and Marion's, where Marion positioned herself as a 'handmaid' who will 'serve tenderly, and love obediently' (IV. 227-8). As this un-negotiated marriage contract ended disastrously, Barrett Browning places Aurora's self-assertion and the marriage-of-equals with mutual respect in higher regard and with greater promise. Thus while Barrett Browning capitulated to gendered expectations by concluding her *Bildungsroman* journey with the expected marriage proposal, the narration, topics and structure of the poem were confirmed on the bride's terms. Accusations of unrealism regarding this equal partnership of a marriage fade in the light of how 'the Brownings' marriage was, for both of them, not only extremely

happy...but also artistically enabling' (Mermin 1989: 5), and so Barrett Browning successfully reconstructed the Poetess Tradition into a high-status, accomplished and authoritative feminine poetical space. Nevertheless, Coventry Patmore remarked in the *North British Review* that 'as Mrs Browning is herself almost the only modern example of such development, the story is uninteresting from its very singularity' (1857: 454), which undermined Barrett Browning's attempts to rework female poetics. While this may have been the case at the time of publication, the second half of the nineteenth-century yielded many proactive women poets who achieved popularity and literary accreditation. Barrett Browning was an inspiration, but she was not unique, and many later women poets also developed complex strategies of self assertion in poetry, and paid homage to her in poems, letters, or through imitation. Among these were Dora Greenwell, Christina Rossetti, Augusta Webster, George Eliot and Mathilde Blind. Furthermore, Barrett Browning's decision to examine the woman as artist belonged to a series of works, starting with Madame de Stael's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807) through L.E.L. and Felicia Hemans, Caroline Norton and George Sand. It is clear that Barrett Browning engaged with contemporary writers as well as theories of poetry and femininity, and this combined interrogation of the female poet yielded a new context where the terms of the Poetess Tradition were challenged and reconstructed. This newly recast female poet retained the authority of the Poetess Tradition while simultaneously refuting the stereotypes of the proper feminine, to re-invent the female poet as entitled to the same literary status as male poets.

Poetics of the Woman Poet

In conjunction with the narrative, Barrett Browning used the form of the poem to argue for female modes of expression other than those of sentimental persuasion. Barrett Browning can

be seen to argue that established, prestigious, conventional forms of poetical expression were suitable tools for female articulation. One such example of this is the prevalence of mammocentric features of nature in *Aurora Leigh*:

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. 213-9)

These 'abundant references to the maternal nurturing power' (McSweeney in Barrett Browning 1993: xxxi) provided Aurora with a source of female potency and so the woman poet is supplied with comfortable and appropriate imagery, symbolism and predecessors free from masculine ideas concerning female identity. Through an affiliation with nature and the natural world, the woman poet is suitably armed and does not have to force herself to use the inappropriate and cumbersome masculine tools of traditional poetry (Woolf 1929: 99-101). Nature acts as a substitute mother (Steinmetz 1983), providing the female poetic tradition Aurora required to construct her own identity. Barrett Browning developed the Romantic legacy of the established authority of nature (Homans 1980: 12) as a specifically female source of poetical power which strengthened her argument, ventriloquised through Aurora, that not only could women write 'good' poetry, but that poetry is complemented by traditionally feminine attributes. This connection of poetry, nature and femaleness created a space for legitimate, traditional, authoritative female poetry, and thus enabled Barrett Browning, and Aurora, to circumnavigate the anxiety of authorship identified by Gilbert and Gubar that impeded many other women writers who attempted to solely use masculine styles. Rather than reject the Poetess Tradition, Barrett Browning challenged masculine traditions to demonstrate women's inherent place within them. She did not have separate feminine and

masculine spaces, but rather allowed the feminine into the masculine, creating a harmonious combination. Barrett Browning's focus on asserting the 'power to be derived from traditionally feminine positions' (Avery and Stott 2003: 95) was shown to be necessary for the aspiring female poet after her reader witness Aurora covertly raiding her father's library, which was symbolic of the female poets who had to steal or clandestinely insinuate themselves into male poetic traditions. The harmonious melding of the traditionally feminine with established poetics through nature enabled Barrett Browning to create a legitimate and respected feminine poetics, and consequently rewrite both Romantic and Poetess Traditions to include the new identity of the authoritative female poet.

In addition to using nature as a source of poetics for both the established masculine Romantic tradition and female expression, Barrett Browning also argues that poetry was inherently harmonious with femininity, for both were assigned to the realms of the inner, spiritual, emotional and subjective. Here again we see how 'instead of switching gender roles she [Barrett Browning] switches the locus of power within them' (Mermin 1989: 215), as she elevated the properly feminine through demonstrating its compatibility with established and traditional poetry. The reader finds an implicit claim that poetry's true subjects belong to women's sphere, and so Barrett Browning can be seen here to have broken the barrier that kept the Poetess Tradition as a sub-genre, as she suggests that all poetry is inherently feminine. This claim is not as outrageous as it initially seems; G.H. Lewes argued in 'The Lady Novelists' in the *Westminster Review* (1852) that because the greatest literature tells universal truths about human emotions and women are more emotional than men, women were more able to depict those emotions. While Lewes maintained that this had not quite happened at the time of his writing because most women writers were busy trying to imitate men, there were a few who had tapped into the emotional truths of humanity, and specifically

mentions Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, George Sand, Currer Bell/Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell. Lewes also maintained that these women were the pioneers of a profoundly emotional literary voice, a voice that was at once universal and feminine, and it was this voice which Barrett Browning demonstrated through the text of *Aurora Leigh* itself. The heightened and highly charged language of feeling, the elaborate metaphors and ostentatious epic similes found within *Aurora Leigh*, are all overtly poetical, making the poem an essential part of its meaning. *Aurora Leigh* is not only writing about poetry, it is the kind of poem it describes. It created Aurora, a successful woman poet who effectively combined the traditional feminine with the traditional masculine and retained the best of both, and then in turn positively influenced Barrett Browning's status as well. It took the form of a successful hybrid of masculine and feminine, creating a style with the authority, legitimacy and prestige of both. Through discussing the problems of the Poetess Tradition within the poem, Barrett Browning successfully renegotiated it for herself, the success being demonstrable through the completion of the poem itself.

Despite her efforts, these attempts to create a harmonious balance between masculine and feminine were not appreciated by the majority of Barrett Browning's critics. The early-twentieth-century critic Hugh Walker complained that 'she is one of the most irregular writers' (1910: 368). Others found her attempts at blending the masculine with the feminine to be unsophisticated and clumsy, disturbed by 'a mingling of what is precious with what is mean – of the voice of clarion and the lyric cadence of harp with the cracked school-room spinet' (*Athenaeum* 22 November 1856: 1425). Here, again, we see the influence of a literary double standard, as innovations made by male poets were regarded as interesting with a tendency towards genius, but for women writers they were a sign of inferior intellect or skill, or an inability to write proper, traditional poetry. So ingrained was the belief that women

writers were only capable of imitation that when Victorian critics were presented with something original, such as *Aurora Leigh*, they could not recognise it as such and concluded that it must be an example of poor imitation rather than female genius. Barrett Browning went to great effort to communicate her intentions to her readers in order for her poetry to be recognised, understood and appreciated. She foresaw that it would be misread and asserted her intentions at every opportunity. The plot narrative and hybrid form contain clear indicators of the process of destabilising and renegotiating that Barrett Browning was undertaking. She even expressed it in her language and composition, such as when Romney catches Aurora crowning herself in her daydreams of poetical success. The metaphors used in the verbal sparring that followed ‘clearly show Aurora’s identification with the masculine [...but] because her womanhood can never be completely denied or forgotten, the metaphors also blend and blur masculinity and femininity’ (Gelpi 1981: 41). Even a single metaphor reflected the larger poetical process, and yet it was not noticed by many of Barrett Browning’s contemporaries. Furthermore, we can see Barrett Browning’s awareness of the critical backlash she foresaw *Aurora Leigh* receiving as, again, she tried to premeditatedly deflect it. Contemporary reviewers Patmore and Roscoe were indignant at *Aurora Leigh*’s outspokenness and its concern with inventing ‘woman’s figures’, those being ‘female forms of poetic expression’ (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: 273), although, as previously discussed, Barrett Browning went to great lengths to place these woman figures as discovered in existing and established traditions, as opposed to invention.

Multitude of Women Poets

In addition to making the domestic political and identifying the existing feminine elements in traditional poetical techniques, Barrett Browning can be seen to have gone to great lengths to

assert the individuality of the poet in order to break the Poetess Tradition down into multiple poetesses. This defeat of the gender as genre paradox was crucial for Barrett Browning in order to free herself from the conflating effects of the Poetess Tradition and the previous inferior, imitative, sentimental works associated with it. To achieve this, Barrett Browning employed multiple protagonists in the narrative of *Aurora Leigh*. In addition to using Marian for social commentary, representing the potential for all women to be destroyed by their society, the character of Lady Waldemar was placed in opposition to Aurora to enable Barrett Browning to explore further aspects of female identity. While Gelpi discusses Barrett Browning's placement of Lady Waldemar in a Jungian 'shadow-relationship' with Aurora, demonstrating how 'some of Lady Waldemar's attitudes and reactions are uncomfortably and unadmittably close to Aurora's own' (1981: 40), she neglects to address the issue of motive, which is the differentiating factor. Gelpi uses the example of Marian's farewell letter to show that while Aurora blamed Lady Waldemar for manipulating Marian into believing that she was not worthy of marriage to Romney, Aurora neglects to acknowledge that Marian placed equal weight on her own doubts. Thus Aurora and Lady Waldemar are initially shown to hold similar ideas concerning social standards, but, if the reader attends to the motives assigned to each character, they can see the complexity Barrett Browning created. Lady Waldemar poisoned Marian's mind out of jealousy, selfishness and lust, as she intended to marry Romney herself, while Aurora's question of 'He loves you, Marian?' (IV:168), positioned her in contrast to Lady Waldemar as her doubts arose from an idealised belief that a successful marriage was only possible in the context of true love. Thus Barrett Browning demonstrated through her characters that while outwardly Aurora and Lady Waldemar appear to be very similar, they can be considered total opposites.

This can be read as a warning from Barrett Browning to her critics against assimilating her into the Poetess Tradition on the basis of superficial and exterior factors, namely gender, without acknowledging her differences from other poetesses, or male poets. For Barrett Browning to create a new poetic space which was simultaneously feminine and prestigious, and the assertion of women poets' capabilities of originality was crucial. Barrett Browning built on this lesson with Aurora's reaction to meeting Marian in Paris, where Aurora dismissed Marian as 'damned' (VI. 366) on an initial assumption concerning motherhood without marriage. However, she catches herself: 'Stop there: I go too fast; / I'm cruel like the rest' (VI. 366-7), which allowed Barrett Browning to criticise the unquestioning, assumptive nature of her society concerning female behaviour. It was also during this encounter that Marian spoke for herself (VI. 752) rather than being ventriloquised by Aurora as in Book IV. In doing so, Marian refused to be defined by someone else's language and ideology, instead defining herself and creating her own identity. Aurora ceases to objectify Marian, and instead both women learn to articulate their subjective female experiences. Previously, the character of Marian had been constructed from a conversation between Romney, Lady Waldemar and Aurora, but after this turning point she has her own voice, she defined her own identity, and recalled her own experience. Previously, Aurora had found dissatisfaction with the masculine traditions and felt as equally alienated from her male peer poets in Book V as she had from the poetess in Book II. With Marian, Aurora finally found the inspiration to write her poetical masterpiece inspired by her own female experience, and so Barrett Browning had Aurora simultaneously conform to and deviate from the Poetess Tradition, and thus creates a new poetical space which is both feminine and prestigious.

This turning point can also be seen to mark the separation of the mature Aurora from her younger self. The younger Aurora was idealistic, unrealistic, selfish and stubborn, while the older Aurora's experience of life, love and work served to change her into a much more understanding, sympathetic and complicated personality. The young Aurora succeeded at writing to please her public and attained celebrity status, with which she was dissatisfied. The older Aurora, however, succeeded in her original poetic vocation, and in love. This could be reflective of the journey of the *Bildungsroman* as Aurora reached maturity after removing herself from the silly and superficial social circle which heralded Lady Waldemar as the epitome of proper femininity. This rejection of the younger self exposed the flaws of the properly feminine in the form of Lady Waldemar and her sycophants, and Aurora's dismissal of these behavioural expectations fortified Barrett Browning's premise that the criteria of the properly feminine was fundamentally flawed. When coupled with the lesson learnt through Marian, that first impressions are unsound, appearances are deceptive, and that the criteria of the proper feminine is inconsistent, Barrett Browning has both Aurora and her reader acknowledge the legitimacy and importance of her attempts to carve out a new female space that has rejected the properly feminine as its standard and is different from that which had gone before. Aurora's negotiation of the Victorian literary landscape within herself over the course of the poem can be read as a lesson from Barrett Browning to her reader to remember that the early writings of a poet should not influence their reception over their entire lifetime as poets grow, mature and improve. It could also be read as a symbolic breaking with the original poetess of the early nineteenth-century in favour of a more complex, mature, refined female poet who was not concerned with the sentimental, frivolous ideas of the girlish mind, but rather the serious, political, worldly issues of society as a whole.

This hybrid of traditionally masculine elements with the traditionally feminine gives rise to a more balanced, reflective and calm Aurora. This can be read as indicative of Barrett Browning's own admission that it is a combination of masculine and feminine which enables the female poet to liberate herself from the restrictions of the Poetess Tradition without losing its legitimacy or denying an essential part of herself. Within *Aurora Leigh*, 'art and love, vocation and marriage, ambition and womanliness are reconciled through a series of revisions of the power relations between men and women' (Mermin 1989: 202), and so we can see a new form of high-status female poetics being created.

Despite the prestigious position in literary society Elizabeth Barrett Browning achieved during her life, she swiftly fell out of favour, into obscurity and a century of neglect (Leighton 1986: 2). Kaplan asserted that Virginia Woolf's famous comment that 'fate has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place' was almost as true in 1978 as it was in 1932 (1978: 5). Explanations for this include the general Modernist reaction against the eminent Victorians in the 1920s and 1930s, the intellectual reaction against the seamy and sentimental interest in Barrett Browning's life, and the steep rise of Robert Browning's reputation as he outlived her, against which his wife was often disparagingly measured. We can also see the neglect of *Aurora Leigh* as due to what Barrett Browning had hoped to be its strength: its innovative form. Rather than the verse-novel being seen as innovative, it was criticised for its formlessness (McSweeney in Barrett Browning 1993: xxii) and W. C. Roscoe (1857) also took issue with the discordance between matter and manner where her similes were not harmonious with their subject. Barrett Browning's attempts at revealing the patriarchal constructions of female identities were dismissed by contemporary John Nichol as 'a perfect shoal of mangled and pompous similes' (October 1857: 401). The lack of understanding and

appreciation of this groundbreaking hybrid which, after centuries of struggle, promised to give women poets an authoritative, prestigious feminine form of poetical expression, was derided as a deformity.

Barrett Browning was a formidable figure during her lifetime and it is naive to think that she has not been influential. The next chapter of this thesis will investigate how Barrett Browning's poetry, in particular *Aurora Leigh*, inspired and encouraged the ensuing generations of Victorian women poets in their attempts to continue what she started: to deviate from but still embrace the Poetess Tradition. Although they did not follow in her radical footsteps, many subsequent Victorian women poets were inspired by Barrett Browning's confidence, achievements and initial attempts. They continued her endeavour to fracture the Poetess Tradition so it allowed for a new type of woman poet, whose authority, prestige and accomplishments were recognised and celebrated by her readers in a way that the poetess had never before achieved.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

The dissatisfaction many Victorian woman poets felt with the restrictions of the properly feminine, coupled with their awareness of their environment and performance expectations, led to attempts to revise the Poetess Tradition. The pseudonym had fallen out of favour as passive and too limited a method by which to assert feminine poetics. Barrett Browning, although admired, was perceived as too radical in her revisions, and subsequently was not understood or appreciated. Isobel Armstrong (1993) argues that the woman poet's self-consciousness meant that her poetry was constantly engaged in a process of self-assessment, constantly asking questions about its place in relation to literary traditions, cultural contexts and poetic forms. As such, each new woman poet would be aware of her literary lineage and the attempts by other women before her, as well as her immediate contemporaries. This chapter will explore many women poets' use of the dramatic monologue as an alternative method to those devised by their predecessors, to challenge, deviate from, and reconstruct the Poetess Tradition.

The critical unpopularity of *Aurora Leigh* can be ascribed to its experimental hybrid form. Many contemporary readers and critics did not understand and so did not appreciate it precisely because it was too radical and deviant from orthodox forms (Gill 2007: 187). Maggie O'Sullivan argues that 'many...poets with their non-referential, language-based poetic have been omitted from mainstream anthologies', which has caused the separation of women's work from the main body of literature, firmly solidifying women's position as 'other' (1996: 9). While Barrett Browning's innovative verse-novel allowed her such freedoms and flexibility as have been recognised by recent re-evaluative feminist criticism, it cost her contemporary recognition. Understandably, her contemporaries did not continue

with her version of experimental form. Rather, many chose to adapt existing, well-established poetic forms, such as the dramatic monologue, to work out their similar frustrations with the Poetess Tradition.

Although a fluid and flexible form, the dramatic monologue was well established in poetical traditions and had been appropriated, developed and manipulated by both male and female poets. Alan Sinfield finds elements of the dramatic monologue in the ‘prosopopeia’ of the Romans, the complaints of the Renaissance, the rise of eighteenth-century moral sensibility, and also notes that the dramatic epistle was born fully-grown in Ovid’s *Heroides* (1977: 42-6). He also argues that although the hybrid composition of the dramatic monologue was not established until the nineteenth-century, ‘there is no single aspect of it which was not anticipated’ (1977: 53), indicating that the dramatic monologue was firmly established in literary tradition and thus more authoritative and acceptable than Barrett Browning’s verse-novel. Robert Langbaum identifies the dramatic monologue’s roots in the work of the neoclassicists, who, ‘in trying to be lyrical...found it necessary to give their lyrical poems a dramatic setting’, before the form was more fully rendered in the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge (1974: 31-6). The nineteenth-century saw a steep rise in the popularity of the dramatic monologue, which standard critical argument ascribes to dissatisfaction with Romantic lyricism due to the shift from subjectivity to objectivity:

Critics have begun to identify the dramatic monologue as the product of a particular set of cultural conditions [...] emerg[ing] primarily in reaction to Romantic lyricism and Romantic theories of poetry [...] the challenge to Romantic lyricism, **however**, also needs to be placed in a broader context of social and cultural change. Victorian literature generally moves away from an emphasis on the autonomous individual and begins to represent the self in context, focusing upon the individual in relation to others and upon the individual's position in society.

(Byron 2003a: 3)

Elisabeth Howe identifies that it was after the publication in 1855 of Tennyson's *Maud* and Browning's *Men and Women* that dramatic monologues came to be written in great numbers (1996: 57), connecting the genre with male-authorship, with Browning and Tennyson hailed as masters. However, more recent criticism contends to the contrary, arguing that this rise in popularity was regardless of the gender of the poet, because both men and women explored the possibilities and potentials of this form. Glennis Byron argues for the unrecognised influence of the women poets writing at the beginning of the century (2003a: 4). Christina Rossetti's 'My Secret' (1862) is an example of the dramatic monologue convincingly put forward by Byron as superior to those by Browning and Tennyson. Furthermore, Cynthia Scheinberg (1997) notes the 'general neglect' of women poets who wrote dramatic monologues, such as Felicia Hemans, Charlotte Brontë, Mary A. Robinson, Adelaide Ann Proctor, Augusta Webster and Mathilde Blind. The dramatic monologue was an established form used by both men and women throughout the nineteenth-century for a variety of reasons and purposes.

When exploring the popularity of the dramatic monologue with women poets, it is the ease with which the drama and characterisation of the domestic was assimilated that features highly. This is the same drama which motivated the plot in a novel, and so was already associated with feminine styles of writing. The significance of this is that the dramatic monologue was a form well-suited to the exploration of traditional gendered power dynamics inherent in the Victorian domestic sphere, although it was not always used as such. Jane Dowson identifies how the dramatic monologue allowed for 'disruptions of traditional meters and displacements of conventional symbols, [so] women can subvert and appropriate the tradition through entry' (2002: 16), which makes the dramatic monologue an ideal balance between feminine and masculine. The use of a dramatised speaker was a way for the poet to

avoid authorial self-absorption (Slinn 1988: 81). By employing such a device, women poets were able to conform to the properly feminine by shunning narcissism or public-display of self. This assisted them in eluding or overcoming constricting gendered expectations in a similar way to creating a separate writing persona with a pseudonym.

M. H. Abrams notes in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* that the dramatic monologue consists of a single person, who is patently *not* the poet, who utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem (2005: 45). This speaker is the poetic persona, a separate identity which a poet could adopt to discuss a variety of topics and opinions without fear of their private self being called into question. Angela Leighton argues that for women poets in particular, and Augusta Webster especially, the distance the dramatic monologue creates between speaker and poet creates space for an alternative female writing style. The woman can act as a poet, independent of her gender and the crossover of the properly feminine from poet's body to text. By doing so, she can use a 'voice more concerned with opinions, facts and ideologies', a challenging alternative to 'the singing sincerity expected of women poets' (Leighton 1992: 173). Furthermore, for the woman poet, the dramatised speaker could operate in a similar manner to the pseudonym, as both devices allow the woman poet to retain the proper femininity without being restricted by it. However, the dramatic monologue allows for greater and more complex reconstructions of gendered expectations than the pseudonym, as both poet and reader inhabit the identity of the poetic speaker. The dramatic monologue acts as a shield for the poet as it is structured to force the reader to inhabit the identity of the speaker. In doing so, the reader is exposed to an alternative perspective, and persuaded of a different ideology. The poet does not argue with the reader, but relocates the reader into the text, so the reader has to agree and accept if they are to continue reading. This serves a crucial role for the woman poet using her texts to expose the gendered power

dynamics of her society. The dramatic monologue is a highly flexible form of poetry for social critique as it gives gender politics a chance to be included into poetry. The construction of the dramatic monologue automatically gives the woman poet the poetic mask which had been denied to her by other forms, as it maintains a strong distance between poet and speaker. This means that the woman poet is protected from the male gaze, and able to dramatise subjects and issues outside of the properly feminine (Langbaum 1974: 99) as it did not require explicit experience.

Furthermore, an affinity between the dramatic monologue and the Poetess Tradition can be identified. The few critics who have focused upon the dramatic monologue have encountered great difficulties with establishing its boundaries of composition. Langbaum states that ‘writers of the dramatic monologue never fail to remark how little has been written on the subject’ and infers that:

The reason for the neglect is...that no one has quite known what to do with the dramatic monologue except to classify it, to distinguish kinds of dramatic monologues and to distinguish the dramatic monologue from both the lyrical and the dramatic or narrative genres.

(Langbaum 1974: 69)

While it simultaneously draws upon and reacts against the lyric, dramatic and narrative traditions, the dramatic monologue has resisted from the start all attempts at definitive classification, and so is a genre which embraces a diverse variety of forms (Byron 2003a: 2). This diversity is mirrored in the Poetess Tradition, which includes all works by women, regardless of their technical generic categories. This similar uncertainty of genre between the Poetess Tradition and the dramatic monologue can go some way to explain the proficiency of women poets’ manipulation of the dramatic monologue to interrogate conventional assumptions and constructions of female identity (Byron 2003a: 4).

The fluidity and flexibility of the dramatic monologue also means that it could easily be blended with other traditions to form a many layered hybrid with the authorities of multiple sources. This creates a constantly unstable and questioning space where nuance, subversion and suggestion are welcomed, thus enabling women poets to question and explore issues of gender indirectly. In her work *Dramatic Monologue* (2003), Glennis Byron identified three main aspects of feminine appropriation of the dramatic monologue: inhabiting the conventional in order to expose it; exploring the fragmented self; and ventriloquising the marginalised figure. This chapter will explore these aspects to a greater extent and complexity, building upon Byron's initial identifications and using them to progress onto an understanding of the female dramatic monologue poet's relationship with and against the Poetess Tradition and her attempts to construct her own identity.

Inhabiting the Conventional

Due to the gendered ideologies that constructed Victorian literary culture, women poets tended to favour a subtle and passive approach to challenging the social restrictions placed upon them. Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is a persuasive challenge to social norms and an argument for their change as it laid its plot out in a manner difficult for the reader to dispute. Barrett Browning's text did not tell the reader what to think, but made it unavoidable for the reader to conclude differently to that which Barrett Browning had decided. The fall of Marion is a narrative of the abuses many women suffered. Barrett Browning constructed a believable and realistic narrative to show the fault to be with a society which victimised women for its own failings. Byron identifies that 'one of the main ways in which [women poets] suggest the truths behind the myths is through inhabiting the conventional in order to expose it' (2003a: 61). Conformity to the properly feminine and Poetess Tradition in the

form and narrative of a poem can be used to show the reader the restrictive and artificial nature of such constructions. Many poets who used dramatic monologues exploited their speakers to expose the double standards which victimise the speaker, but for women poets in particular, this element of the dramatic monologue enabled them to demonstrate that those double standards operated outside of the speaker (Leighton 1992: 178). In doing so, criticisms levelled at women for being imperfect manifestations of the properly feminine identities constructed for them are repositioned towards those who had constructed the contradictory, confusing and impossible identities. Exemplary proficiency in such a technique can be found in women poets' manipulation of the dramatic monologue. Thus, the dramatic monologue complements Armstrong's theory of the doubleness of women's poetry (1993: 324) because it challenges the construction of the feminine by being feminine. As such, it can be seen to have become an ideal vessel for female social critique.

Augusta Webster's 'The Happiest Girl in the World' (1870) follows the interior monologue of a young girl just married. Webster's language and phraseology imitates that of a young girl accurately, with its sentimentality, repetition and breathlessness created by a sophisticated application of grammar and enjambment:

A week ago; only a little week:
 It seems so much much longer, though that day
 Is every morning still my yesterday;
 As all my life 'twill be my yesterday,
 For all my life is morrow to my love
 (L.1-5)

However, while Webster's language and style portray a frivolous and properly feminine girl, serious, challenging questions are raised that concern women's place and socially constructed identity. While the speaker doubts her marriage, questioning 'When did I love him? How did

it begin?’ (L. 35), the reader realises that the ‘underlying question [...] one she could never express, or consciously formulate, is whether she loves him at all’ (Byron 2003a: 59). The speaker also identifies that now she is married she is expected to ‘think nothing, only hear him think’ (L. 18), regurgitating the Victorian domestic ideology she has been taught where the wife is intellectually submissive to the husband. This speaker’s monologue allows the reader to observe the process by which she persuades herself she does love her husband. The speaker dismisses her concerns as the products of a ‘vain and idle poor girl’s heart’ (L. 75) and she offers the possibility that ‘love’ itself may be nothing more than a learned emotion. The conventionality of such dismissal of female thought served to highlight its disturbing nature. The monologue follows the speaker’s attempts to become the identity constructed for and placed upon her. Webster creates the conventional young bride, uneducated, unambitious and properly feminine, and in doing so, reveals the restrictions, contradictions and falsities of such a position in a gender-imbalanced society, and, by implication, the Poetess Tradition.

The explicit decision made by the female poet to inhabit the conventional is political. It reflects the extent of her conformity to the Poetess Tradition, and, by association, the properly feminine and gender politics. The domestic is made political as the very decision to inhabit the domestic raises questions as to what the domestic consisted of and why women were assumed to be content with it. Virginia Blain’s exploration of L.E.L.’s overly feminine poetry has identified a powerfully self-aware mind engaged in a performance that manipulated the properly feminine and the Poetess Tradition for her own ends (2001: 4). By doing so, L.E.L. can be seen to have made a political criticism about such demands for superficial appearances over truth and substance. In *Different Thoughts; Suggested by a Picture by G. S. Newton, No. 16 in the British Gallery, and representing a Girl Looking at Her Lover’s Miniature* (1823), L.E.L. gave the girl from Newton’s painting a voice. The girl

demonstrates socially expected, conventionally feminine behaviour as she gazes at her lover's image and recounts how 'I've sat and watched' (L.23) for years, being passive, stationary and firmly placed within the domestic. Even as her narrative reveals how she has been waiting for years and the reader realises she has been abandoned by her lover, she does not reject the properly feminine, to the point of irrationality as she pointlessly wastes her life. Here the conventional is exposed as a destructive and extravagant performance, with an almost self-indulgent, narcissistic element. The story of the abandoned woman was a popular and conventional trope, and the forsaken girl was the epitome of the properly feminine; she was uneducated, unworldly, passive, easily deluded. Thus the forsaken girl was the ideal victim for the stereotypical rake and the perfect heroine for the conventional romance. She was prone to sentimental excess and L.E.L.'s quickening pace during the final thirty lines goes so far as to suggest hysteria, that most feminine of diseases (see Showalter 1987, Pykett 1992 and Gilbert and Gubar 2000). Indeed, so conventional is the framework for this poem that L.E.L. incorporates a narrative summary of the abandoned girl's so familiar fate:

He will soothe, flatter, vow, till he has won,
 And then repay her confidence with ruin,
 Leaving her trusting heart a desolate place,
 Herself an outcast with an unwept grave,
 Perhaps unhallowed too'

(L. 100-5)

The conventionality and perfectly proper femininity of the speaker is enhanced by L.E.L.'s contraction of her own properly feminine image. By performing the conventional role which her poetry subtly mocks, L.E.L.'s artifice is exposed, and thus so is that of the properly feminine.

Byron argues that ‘such poems ask the reader to pause for a moment, to rethink their lazy assumptions’ (2003a: 61), for while they appear superficially conventional poems written by a properly feminine adherent to the Poetess Tradition, they are actually engaged in a process of defamiliarisation. The original painting that inspired L.E.L.’s characterisation of its subject was the work of a male artist, and so L.E.L.’s narrative is a performance inspired by a male depiction of proper femininity. However, it is L.E.L.’s decision to construct it as a dramatic monologue that forces the reader to inhabit the position of the heartbroken, betrayed girl, and consequently the reader is caught in the contradictions and failings of the conventional, feminine role. The reader feels the speaker’s pain, but comes to question her excessive emotion (‘I’ve more than loved, - oh I have worshipped you’ (L.106)) and other constructed aspects of the properly feminine which conspired to initially make her so vulnerable to this false lover, and then unable to repair his damage. The final lines of the poem are distinct in their difference from the rest, as they show action, resolution and autonomy: the girl declares ‘farewell, farewell! I give thy portrait / To the red flames, - it is a sacrifice / On which I swear forgetfulness’ (L.127-30). She breaks with the conventional fate of a girl in her position as she calls a halt to her passivity and unchecked emotions by taking charge of her life and destroying the lover’s portrait. In doing so, L.E.L. asserts a new female identity of maturity, strength and experience in the conventional figure of the forsaken girl. Readers of the poem find themselves happy for this change in the speaker and hopeful for her future, and thus L.E.L. implicates her readers in the break from the properly feminine.

By forcing the reader to inhabit the demands of the conventionally feminine and the poetess, the woman poet forces her reader to acknowledge not only the restrictions, but their superficiality and contradictory nature. Webster made her readers trivialise and dismiss their own thoughts, and L.E.L. forced her readers to experience ‘man’s cruelty to woman’ (L. 99)

and so support her rebellion against the properly feminine. Helen Dufferin's critique of the properly feminine in *The Charming Woman* (1835) went further in its exposure of the superficiality, artifice and distinctly unfeminine truth behind the construct of the properly feminine. Dufferin's speaker judges Miss Myrtle negatively for her traditionally masculine education at the cost of the more suitable feminine skills of how 'to hem and sew' (L.11). This can be read as a challenge to an ideology which would place hemming as more worthy than the ability to read 'both Latin and Greek' and mathematical skills (L. 7-9). While subtly putting forward this case for the wasted intelligence of women, Dufferin complicated the conventional attitude vocalised by the speaker by having her contradict herself with the exclamation "'Tis a pity when charming women / Talk of things which they don't understand!' (L. 46-7). Here, Miss Myrtle is simultaneously criticised for both knowing too much and too little. Dufferin succeeded in revealing the failing of the properly feminine to provide a safe place for female expression, and the only solution appears to be silence. The speaker's hypocrisy is furthered by her spiteful gossip concerning Miss Myrtle's unfeminine attributes, as it is an act in conflict with the properly feminine attributes of angelic sympathy and kindness. Dufferin had her speaker vocalise the instability, confusion and self-contradiction of the properly feminine and social constructs of female behaviour. The speaker concludes her appraisal with a criticism of Miss Myrtle's extravagant gowns, as well as her lack of personal income, ('she hasn't a penny' (L. 48)) and subsequent financial dependence on a future husband. This is despite her earlier dismissal of Miss Myrtle's only opportunity of financial independence through the derision of her education. Thus the conventional voice of Victorian society exposes its own contradictions by denying women education, and then blaming them for their lack of knowledge and inability to find employment. Dufferin herself adhered to the conventions of the Poetess Tradition as she

created a conventionally feminine speaker who vocalised properly feminine preoccupations such as fashions, the mother/daughter relationship and prospects for a future husband, and she situated her in a properly feminine environment of a party. By doing so, Dufferin also achieved social criticism as her speaker is revealed to be unsympathetic. Her repeated insincere niceties of 'she's a charming woman' closely followed by a 'but' expose the superficial nature of the properly feminine, a facet which Barrett Browning explored through her character of Lady Waldemar. Thus the properly feminine is revealed to be an act, and a worthless, contradictory one at that, and thus by implication, so is the Poetess Tradition. By undermining the Poetess Tradition from the inside, Dufferin opened a space for a new form of female poetics to take its place.

Many women poets who came after L.E.L. and Dufferin built upon this complexity, acknowledging that gender constructions in their society were far more intricate than simple dominator/subversive relationships. Adelaide Anne Proctor's 'A Woman's Question' anticipated Webster's 'The Happiest Girl in the World' as in both the speaker is used to subversively question marriage and, by implication, domestic ideology. Proctor's speaker is aware of what the identity of 'wife' will comprise and that as a proper wife she must 'trust my Fate to thee' (L. 1) and become totally dependent upon her husband. Rather than meekly accept this, the speaker breaks with convention and makes a demand of her future husband. She requests that he 'Look deeper' (L. 16) into himself for any trace of 'A possible future .../ Untouched, unshared by mine' (L.12-4). The speaker demands that her groom be as committed and dependent on her as she is forced to be on him, acknowledging the inequality of a society which would allow him to have 'kept a portion back, /While I have staked the whole' (L. 18-9). This speaker is aware of the gendered power imbalances which will make her subservient and dependent upon this man, and so she investigates the strength of his

feelings for her. Procter conformed to conventional feminine poetics by having her speaker express honesty and desire to fulfil the duties of a wife, combined with love-driven, excessive emotions, assisted by the sentimental vocabulary consisting of ‘thee’, ‘thy’ and ‘thou’ addresses. Yet she also challenged the traditional marriage contract. This speaker is more than willing to perform the role of the traditionally feminine wife, but only on certain conditions, namely his utter devotion to her. This renegotiation evokes the controversial ending of *Aurora Leigh*, where Aurora’s capitulation to Romney caused so much grief to feminist critics unless read in the light of a mutual contract and respect. Aurora is finally able to marry Romney because he respects her, and so there was no problem with her taking on the traditionally subservient role of wife due to its reconstruction as an equal partnership. Similarly, Procter’s speaker will perform her wifely duties, but only in the knowledge that she is utterly adored and that her husband’s love for her will never change. By demanding this, Procter’s speaker rewrites the marriage contract to empower the woman. She reconstructs the identity of ‘wife’ by negotiating her own terms, rather than mindlessly capitulating to social expectations. Procter achieves this through a conventionally feminine monologue written in conventionally feminine language, but with the acknowledgment by the speaker of the real situation of women in society. The emphasis that it is the speaker’s choice to adhere to gendered ideology subtly shifts the power balance and makes obvious the performances and roles adopted by women as they negotiate their society.

The Fragmented Self

By inhabiting the conventional these poets who manipulated the dramatic monologue could not only subvert such constructions, but the representations of such constructions. For women poets in particular, constructing a speaker who internalised the domestic ideology

that defined them, enabled the communication of a ‘more complex, fragmented and contextualised representation’ (Byron 2003b: 81) of female identity. Byron argues that a ‘common tactic in dramatic monologues is for the speaker to enact a moment of self-analysis and self-awareness through the positing of a self-image’ (2003a: 63). This was enabled by a split and sense of disconnection resulting from the difference between the speaker’s sense of self and the sense of self constructed by society which was then mirrored back to her (Byron 2003a: 63). The use of a distanced speaker in the poem could communicate the poet’s awareness of the distance between her own identity and the identity that had been constructed for her. This fractured sense of self, or fragmented subjectivity, could be communicated through the dramatic monologue due to the form’s ability to trouble the relationship between poet, speaker and reader. It built upon the tactic of inhabiting the conventional in order to expose it by revealing how manifest the conventional had become within women’s sense of themselves.

By employing speakers with a fractured sense of self, women poets implicitly challenged the gendered ideologies which failed to produce a coherent, realistic and appealing form of female identity. Furthermore, a fractured sense of self could also imply that female identity was constructed and imposed independent of the individual woman. Augusta Webster’s ‘Circe’ suggests that for a woman there is no identity apart from that provided by others (Byron 2003a: 63). The speaker’s placement in the conventionally passive role of the abandoned woman is confirmed by Webster’s construction of the second half of her poem as a sentimental feminine narrative where Circe laments her fate. The challenge to this conventionality is found when Circe interrogates why she is complying with it. Circe asks, ‘Why am I who I am?’ (L. 109) as she realises she has been deceived, betrayed and abandoned, and this question confronts the reader with its alarming self-awareness and

realisation. However, it is not acted upon; Circe must weep, mourn and fade away, because that is her role as decided by her society. Judith Kegan Gardiner (1995) asserts that throughout women's lives, the self is defined through social relationships, and once Circe is alone and abandoned she has no identity. Circe is no one's wife, mother or daughter because she was neglected, and so she dies. Here we see a Victorian woman poet who confronted her society's construction of the female identity as only being legitimate if the woman is defined in terms of someone else. It was this aspect which denied women access to the autonomous identity of being a writer. In a further complication, Circe only fulfils a conventional feminine identity, that of the abandoned woman, in the second half of the poem. During the first half, Webster characterised her with active female desire. Angela Leighton maintains that, like many of her dramatic monologues, Webster explored the failings of the properly feminine to give women's lives a purpose independent of their relationships to others (Leighton 1992: 194-5). Before Ulysses arrived on her island, Circe was bored and frustrated, complaining that 'I am too weary' of a life 'always the same' (L. 33-4), always 'stagnant' and 'sluggish' (L. 51-3). Circe embraced the thunderstorm that broke the monotony of her days (L. 9-11) and begged 'give me some change' (L. 49). Enticing Ulysses onto her island shows her 'begging for that most elusive of rights: the right of experience' (Leighton 1992: 195). Thus Webster's speaker is betrayed twice by the properly feminine: firstly as adherence to it caused her to waste her life in a passive, stagnant limbo, and secondly, when her properly feminine reward of a potential husband abandoned her. Circe's conventional narrative becomes a social critique as she fractures her self by questioning her identity and what conspired to construct it, and Webster emphasises this fracturing by leaving Circe's question unanswered. By not providing a solution for her speaker, Webster's criticism of social constructions of female identity is left open and implicit for readers to then ask the

same question of themselves, and so the fragmented self is manifested in the reader as well.

Although Webster chose to not reconstruct her speaker's fragmented self, a few decades earlier Christina Rossetti had tried to negotiate a response to this self-awareness in 'My Secret'. Rossetti experimented with fragmenting her speaker's self, and then characterised the problematic self, the improperly feminine aspects, as secret. While Rossetti's speaker does not reveal her secret self to the reader, the incompatibility of the fragmented selves fuels the tension of the poem. It is this tension which becomes the subject of the poem and the preoccupation of the speaker. Rossetti attempted to resolve this struggle between the constructed properly feminine identity and the problematic, improper, self as her speaker hides behind a mask before venturing out into the world.

The speaker of 'My Secret' describes how she tries to protect herself from the 'nipping day, a biting day' (L. 10) of winter with 'a shawl / A veil, a cloak, and other wraps' (11-2) but the 'draughts come whistling.../ Nipping and clipping thro' my wraps and all' (14-7). She reassures the reader that she decided to 'wear my mask for warmth' (18). This mask succeeds where the veils do not, and so the speaker is protected from the wind. This wind comes 'bounding and surrounding [...] buffeting' (L.15-6) and otherwise manipulating, constricting and forcing her movements and behaviour. She describes herself as 'pecked at by every wind that blows' (L. 19), anthropomorphising the wind to symbolise the public glare, opinion and judgement the speaker suffers when she leaves the domestic. The speaker directly asks the reader 'You would not peck?' (L. 20), aligning the reader's predilection to judge with the wind. Shawls and veils are not enough and she has to hide herself behind the mask of proper femininity. Thus Rossetti vocalises that proper femininity and conformity to the Poetess Tradition is a mask that must be adopted if the woman is to survive the cold, hostile public world. Armstrong argues that the use of a mask allows the woman writer to be

‘in control of her objectification and at the same time anticipates the strategy of objectifying women by being beforehand with it and circumventing masculine representations’ (1993: 326). The speaker already has her mask in place as she anticipates the nipping and pecking of the winter wind, and also the failure of the veils. Thus, the speaker is able to venture into the public world and participate in other activities. This represents the appearance of conventional femininity many Victorian women poets adopted in order to mask the deviant and transgressive undercurrents in their poetry. The split in this poem occurs as the speaker anticipates both the wind and the reader. Rossetti’s first-person narrative addresses the reader directly in the knowledge that the reader’s function within the poem is to judge the speaker as well as identify with her. The speaker hides a fragment of herself away from the reader, even while the reader inhabits her, and the direct address of speaker to reader keeps them separated from each other. Thus, in a twist on the conventions of the dramatic monologue, Rossetti’s speaker retains the control of the poem. While she must mask herself against the wind, she manages to retain authority over this identity by challenging the reader’s predilection to judge it.

Christina Rossetti continued this exploration of the fragmented self due to female identity being defined by others in ‘In Artist’s Studio’ (1890). She commented rather sardonically on how the male artist, Dante Rossetti, reflected his own image of Elizabeth Siddal, not her true self. Here Rossetti criticised the masculine imposition of meaning onto female subjects as the male speaker ventriloquises his female subject, as Dante did in his own poems ‘Jenny’ and ‘The Blessed Damozel’. These depictions of femininity reduced ‘woman’ to a fixed meaning, rather than a full representation of self. Similarly, Webster challenged the idea of female identity as a masculine construction in ‘Tired’ (1870). In this dramatic monologue, a husband realises that his young wife has been corrupted by society and turned

into a properly feminine, but vapid and sentimental, society wife: his prized 'wood violet' has become a 'formal rose-box at a show' (L. 82). However, the speaker does not realise his own complicity. He blames his society which puts emphasis on the frivolity of women, yet uses increasingly loaded masculinity in his pronouns: 'we make', 'we declare', 'us men', 'our women' (Leighton 1992: 191). This culminates in his infantilising patronage when he addresses his wife as 'silly one' and ignores what she has to say. Leighton argues for Webster's awareness of and challenge to masculine constructions of feminine identity, as neither husband nor wife in 'Tired' found satisfaction with them. Webster also challenges the construction of female identity as her poem compels its readers to examine themselves in the same way that they examine the speaker. The form of the dramatic monologue forces the reader to inhabit the speaker, and so Webster's readers are forced to confront their complicity as they realise the husband-speaker's self-delusion over his complicity in maintaining the gender and domestic ideologies he criticises.

Byron argues that the idea of self-objectification and reflection features highly in women's poetry (2003a: 63), and can be seen as a complicated reversal of the traditional projection of the male gaze. Many Victorian women poets developed the long tradition of gaze narratives, stemming from courtly love, which consisted of a male speaker gazing upon his beloved, into poetry of self reflection and analysis. By doing so, the woman poet defeats the problems of the male gaze upon herself, and also makes herself the subject of her poem, and so overcomes the problematic traditional gendering of the artist and muse. This act of self-gazing occurred most frequently through mirror imagery, particularly by late-Victorian women. The mirror allows the woman to be subjected to by her own gaze, rather than the conventional male gaze. This can cause a division of self as the woman tries to recognise something of what she feels in what she sees. The mirror also allows for a complicated

distancing between ‘the woman’s desires and the world’s opinions’ (Leighton 1992: 186) as the reflected identity does not match the original face. This passively highlights the discrepancy between constructed female identities and the speaker’s sense of herself.

Mary Coleridge’s conscious struggle with issues of identity can be seen in her collection *Fancy’s Following* (1896), which includes her notable piece on the subject of self-estrangement, ‘The Other Side of the Mirror’. In this poem, the speaker confronts her own banished identity in a society that fears and silences the non-idealised version of female identity, the improper feminine. The woman speaker of the poem is alienated from the idealised ‘angel in the house’ identity her society imposed on her. The conclusion troubles this fragmented subjectivity further as she neither accepts nor rejects this truth about herself, placing herself in a predicament as she cannot progress so cannot find peace and heal her fractured self. As well as in ‘The Other Side of the Mirror’, the mirrors in Webster’s ‘By the Looking-Glass’ (1866) and ‘Faded’ (1870), and Caroline Lindsay’s ‘To My Own Face’ (1889), ‘function to bring the divided subject and object together [...] focus on the difference between self and face, as each woman searches for some inner explanation of her socially determined identity’ (Flint 1996: 162). Leighton concludes that Webster’s mirror monologues in particular commented on how ‘identity is viewed...as an image of the world’s approval and disapproval’ (1992: 188). The speaker of ‘By the Looking-Glass’ sinks into despair and self-hatred as her reflection is not that of the beautiful young woman her society instructs her to be: she is too plain. Leighton traces how the speaker ignores the talents she does possess, such as her intelligence which is evident through her language, and ‘is imprisoned in the conventional-cruel reading of her face’ (Leighton 1992: 187). Webster shows how a woman’s appearance was the sum of her identity in the world’s eyes. Similarly, the speaker of ‘Faded’ finds no value in the identity she sees in the mirror, because she is old.

In this poem, the speaker tries to reunite her current self with her past self, the young, fair, happy girl who she once saw in the mirror's surface. In these poems, the woman speaker is literally faced with her own self-division. That its cause is a mirror, the central tool for creating the artificial feminine image and focal-point of feminine domain, the boudoir, is symbolic. The artificial feminine face created is what causes the fragmentation of the woman's sense of self. The image demanded by society is not an accurate representation of female identity; it is an act, a performance, and the woman is trapped, forever fragmented and hiding behind facial powder, veil or mask. Thus the properly feminine must be rejected and the Poetess Tradition expanded to encompass aspects other than artificial, feminine sentimentality.

Marginalised Voices

Despite the dramatic monologue forcing readers to identify with the speaking persona, the reader remains aware that the speaker is a dramatic construction. This enables the poet to exploit the speaker-poet relationship to act as a social critique of such constructions. By forcing readers to inhabit an uncomfortable identity, that of a marginalised figure of society, poets are able to interrogate the construction of that identity, the ideologies behind it and the power imbalances that caused it to be marginalised. Many women poets found this method more appealing than passively inhabiting the conventional in the hope that the subtle ironies will be recognised, or identifying problems with constructions of female identity but then being unable to resolve them. Women poets who expressed marginalised voices in their dramatic monologues actively interrogated the constructions of those identities. Of all the marginalised voices, it is the prostitute which has the closest connections with the woman poet due to issues of public participation, the male gaze and accusations of immorality. Since

the literary identity of the prostitute was created by gendered ideologies that reduced women to a fixed meaning based on simplistic dualities, she become symbolic. The prostitute was talked about, not talked to, which simplified her into stereotypes and resulted in the denial of her complexity. By creating the prostitute-speaker, the woman poet was able to voice protest at being objectified, silenced and having her identity constructed independently of herself.

Kate Flint argues that the dramatic monologue can:

Allow for the woman poet to express her sense of being objectified, letting her speak out from a position traditionally associated with silence [... because the] capacity to inhabit another person's imaginative space frequently becomes a form of exploration on the part of the poet.

(Flint 1996: 160-1)

The positions traditionally silenced were those often associated with immorality and the improper feminine. Assumptions concerning women's creative abilities led to women's writing being assumed to come directly from experience, and so prostitution was not generally accepted as an appropriate woman's subject (Sutphin 2000: 511). Thus the woman writer who took up the voice of the prostitute was instantly challenging gendered restrictions and limitations. While discourse concerning prostitutes existed in Victorian literature, it was predominantly created by male writers, and so the prostitute was not vocal. Most poetry featuring prostitutes is similar to that of 'Jenny' (1870) by Dante Rossetti, where the speaker is the male client and the prostitute is no more than, in the speaker's words, a 'cipher' (Byron 2003a: 65), so much so that she can fall asleep and the monologue can continue. Christine Sutphin argues that prostitutes are 'often marginal characters constructed in the third person by male authors and do not themselves speak extensively about prostitution' (2000: 511). Thus when the woman poet takes control of the prostitute, she simultaneously challenges and disrupts masculine constructions of female identity. This technique can 'call into question the stability of the markers of identity' (Flint 1996: 165) because the dramatic

monologue allows slippage between gender positions and identity, and thus destabilises these constructs of identity. By ventriloquising the prostitute, the woman poet can vocalise concerns over the construction of her own identity due to the male gaze, the reduction of femaleness into fixed, symbolic categories, and conventional gender ideologies.

Dora Greenwell's construction of 'Christina' (1867) as a dramatic monologue turns it into more than the simple didactic tale of 'Jenny'. The speaker's words offer a subjective account while also making her the object of analysis, thus demonstrating how she is caught up in the discourses which produced her (Byron 2003a: 67). The prostitute contextualises herself and so is trapped within a conventional narrative, revealing the total internalisation of the gendered categories of 'pure' and 'fallen', and how central they are to her self-representation. This means that Greenwell's dramatic monologue consequently targets not only the social and economic conditions that produce prostitution but also the underlying ideology (Byron 2003a: 67). Here the prostitute has internalised the ideology that defined her (Bristow 1987: 5), shown through her self-condemnation. She is not properly feminine, so she is the undesirable 'other'. Greenwell can be seen to challenge the society which does not allow for nuance when defining women. This lack of complexity is intrinsically linked to the Poetess Tradition, where the variety of women's voices was ignored in favour of a group identity, imposed on them from an external ideology.

However, Sutphin argues that 'Christina' remains a conventional poem as it centres on the idea that the prostitute is redeemable and that women are the passive victims of male exploitation (2000: 521). The story of Christina is the traditional tale of the young, naive girl who is abused by men, and while this serves as social criticism for the education of girls, the poem itself does not go further than this. The poem is aware of its own limitations as the speaker admits 'Mine is a common tale' (L.67). The prostitute is the conventional passive

female to whom bad things happen and who has to be rescued, and Greenwell saves hers through the redeeming power of Christianity and sisterhood. Similarly conventional is Mathilde Blind's 'The Message' (1891) which concludes with sentimental outpourings on the subjects of love and reconciliation, before having the most conventional ending for a prostitute, death (Senaha 1996). Although Greenwell and Blind's poetry challenged gender ideologies as they 'restore speech to the kind of woman typically demonized or sentimentalized by [their] contemporaries' (Diedrick 2002: 374), their conformity to poetic conventions does more to highlight their own complicity than challenge traditional constructs of female identity.

It is Augusta Webster who can be identified as the Victorian woman poet who wrote the unconventional but also realistic prostitute-narrative, 'A Castaway' (1870). Webster's decision to form it as a dramatic monologue was crucial to its success, both technically and in terms of public and critical reception. Webster's prostitute, Eulalie, does not fit any conventional female identities constructed by society, such as the pure, angelic woman of Patmore, the fallen-but-repentant woman of Greenwell, or the evil, irretrievably-fallen woman, and so she has no identity corresponding to poetic conventions. Webster's monologue allows Eulalie to construct her own, original and unprecedented, identity. By allowing her speaker to construct her own identity, Webster opens the possibilities for other women to do the same, according to their own objectives and desires.

Criticism from Angela Leighton (1986) and Susan Brown (1991) has identified 'A Castaway' as a scathing comment on the gendered economic inequities that supported prostitution. Webster's speaker took up elements of contemporary social and moral debate as she was aligned arranged marriage with prostitution (Flint 1996: 163), and challenged the convenient simplification of female identity based on the properly feminine. Eulalie blurred

the distinctions between prostitutes and their angelic sisters, the daughters and wives of the properly feminine, and so Webster challenged the simplistic identities constructed for and assigned to women. Eulalie went beyond the simplistic resolutions of conventional ideas about victimisation, sin and redemptive death or motherhood because Webster's realism made Eulalie more than a two-dimensional character created and controlled for narrative purposes. Instead, she is a convincing portrayal of the many late-nineteenth-century women who did not fit neatly into set identities predetermined by gendered ideologies. Webster here did not inhabit the conventional in order to expose the artifice of the properly feminine; she instead portrayed a truthful female identity and so refuted the properly feminine as an accurate or useful ideology. Webster gave Eulalie narrative authority, psychological complexity, and knowledge of social forces, and so created a marginalised voice which was not merely a narrative device. Eulalie does not follow the trope of the naive young girl who was seduced and abandoned as featured in Greenwell's 'Christina', Caroline Bowles's 'Ellen Fitzarthur: A Metrical Tale' (1820), Caroline Norton's 'The Sorrows of Rosalie' (1830) or Sarah Stickney Ellis's 'Janet: One of Many' (1862). Webster can be seen to have emulated Barrett Browning's initial experiments with her characters Rose and Marian to show the complexity of female identity, experiences and consequences, and the subsequent challenge to gendered constructs. That Eulalie came from a respectable background and retained the appearance of modesty was 'threatening to a society that needed to categorise women by class and morality' (Sutphin 2000: 520) because it destabilised the compartmentalising effect of identity construction by exposing its diversity and fluidity. However, contemporary reviews of 'A Castaway' praised it for being painful, touching, sentimental and realistic (Watts 15 September 1894: 503, Bell in Miles 1892-97: 509), despite its non-feminine

subject matter and approach. This indicates that Webster's deviations succeeded where Elizabeth Barrett Browning's did not.

Although Webster did deviate considerably from the properly feminine in her characterisation of Eulalie as complex, realistic and consequently problematic to traditional gendered constructions of identity, she did not reject the conventions of the Poetess Tradition completely. Webster erased any trace of sexual desire from Eulalie because, 'while her readers might be sympathetic toward a prostitute who does not enjoy sex, they would not be sympathetic to one who does' (Sutphin 2000: 526). We know that Webster was capable of writing female passion from 'Circe' and 'Medea in Athens', but she located these representations of sexual desire in mythological, not contemporary, speakers. Although Webster could write of deviant and improper feminine sexuality, it is apparent that she was aware she had to distance it from reality. The social criticism provided by Eulalie depended on her being accepted by a Victorian readership as a complex, multifaceted, and, consequently, problematic identity. If Webster had assigned sexual pleasure to Eulalie, she risked her being categorized as the archetypal sexually-depraved woman, the improperly feminine, and thus conventionalising her in literary constructions of female identity. Webster's apparent conformity to the properly feminine by refraining from ascribing sexuality to Eulalie allowed her to challenge such constructs of conformity. By appearing to support the conventional, Webster was able to prevent her speaker's identity from becoming conventionalised. In challenging the social constructions of the prostitute and female identity, Webster frustrated the gender as genre paradox and challenged the constructions of the female writer.

Appropriation of the dramatic monologue enabled women poets to retain the feminine while also claiming masculine elements of poetry, in order to create a distinctive branch of

the Poetess Tradition. This division of female poetics was prestigious, authoritative and in contrast to the conventional stereotypes of female-authorship. However, these women still failed to be included in the canon and to be acknowledged in literary history alongside their male peers. As with the innovations of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, there appears to be a lack of critical flexibility in attempting to understand the female appropriation and reworking of the dramatic monologue. Instead of appreciating the reconstructions of these women, contemporary critics and their successors over the following century saw it as wild, untutored, undisciplined and separate from mainstream traditions. It is this critical blindness, a 'symptom of a larger historical misconception of Victorian women's poetry as sentimental and lacking in formal complexity' (Diedrick 2002: 360), which has led to the continual misrepresentation and neglect of women poets.

CONCLUSION

Many Victorian women poets were engaged in a process of challenging, interrogating and troubling the literary contexts within which they worked. This consisted predominantly of negotiating the Poetess Tradition and reconstructing it into a new female poetic space which was authoritative, prestigious and versatile. Studying how women resisted and occupied the Poetess Tradition, simultaneously conforming to and deviating from its boundaries, reveals their attempts to overcome the reductive stereotype of the 'poetess'. By taking control over the construction of their identities as writers, many Victorian women poets challenged ideas concerning gender, and demonstrated the great complexity and diversity which had previously been denied to them.

Over the course of this thesis, three different methods of reconstructing the Poetess Tradition and female identity have been explored: adopting a pseudonym, creating a new female poetics and manipulating the speaker of the dramatic monologue. While these methods by no means reflect a straightforward linear progression through Victorian literary or feminist theory, there is an element of evolution as each generation of women poets looked back on their predecessors and learnt from their attempts. Although 'Michael Field' was being used by Bradley and Cooper from 1875 through to the following century, the majority of pseudonymous women writers are to be found before the backlash against anonymous writing in 1860 (Easley 2004: 5). Barrett Browning's revolutionary and controversial poetic experiments from the 1850s onwards can be read as one woman's frustration with the passive, careful and almost timid attempts at reform, such as those practised through a pseudonym. However, Barrett Browning was too radical for her contemporaries as she broke the 'gentleman's agreement...that allowed women to write if

only they shut up about it' (Kaplan in Barrett Browning 1978: 10). As a result, the dramatic monologue, although being a feature of the poetic landscape since the Romantics, was appropriated and manipulated to a greater extent from *Aurora Leigh* onwards. The dramatic monologue appealed as a compromise between the safety offered by the separate writing identity of a pseudonym, but with the greater opportunities and authorities that Barrett Browning pioneered.

Furthermore, over the course of this thesis three applications of each of these methods have consistently emerged. Despite their differences, each method has been applied through these three main approaches: undermining the properly feminine, asserting female authority and resolving the problems gender caused poetry. The choice as to which approach to take, the hybrid melding of different applications, and to what extent, was dependent on the individual poet. The compositions of these decisions reflect a great diversity of female poetics. They also indicate the careful and precise nature of the individual poet's relationship to her environment, her conscious construction of her relationship with her reader, and the effects behind her compositions. These complex compromises and arrangements show how many Victorian women poets took control over the construction of their own identity, and so challenged social constructions concerning gendered expectations and traditions of writing.

The first of these approaches to have emerged was that of demonstrating the artificial and performative nature of the properly feminine, which was usually achieved by inhabiting the conventional in order to expose it. By revealing properly feminine constructions or expectations as ridiculous, unnecessary or unreliable, the authority of the conventions was undermined. This approach was usually accompanied by asserting multiple different types of feminine identity, which instantly troubled the simple, conventional, dichotomous models of the proper and improper feminine. This variety of female identities was also not compatible

with the gender as genre paradox, which operated on the assimilation of all female-authored texts as the same, and so was an indirect challenge to the Poetess Tradition.

The adoption of a pseudonym instantly distanced the writer from the text, which in turn meant that the properly feminine was not necessarily expected of a female-authored text. Pseudonyms showed that while a text is gendered, it did not have to be the same gender as the poet who wrote it. While simplistically a pseudonym could operate as a gender-veil, it also, more **complexly**, revealed that gender could be forged, imitated and otherwise performed. As such, insistence on the adherence to the properly feminine was undermined. Additionally, one writer could develop multiple different pseudonyms to perform different roles for different audiences. This, especially, troubled the gender as genre paradox, as the same poet could produce a variety of texts which associated with multiple genres. This enabled many women to affiliate with multiple poetic traditions and so take advantage of the rich diversity for both financial and aesthetic ends. By doing so, they were no longer trapped by the Poetess Tradition, but could exploit it as they felt necessary.

In contrast to distancing herself from her poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning used her triptych of female protagonists to undermine the authority of the properly feminine. Rather than attempting to find a space within traditional masculine constructs of identity, such as through the adoption of a pseudonym, Barrett Browning asserted a new type of female identity. By working the conventions of the properly feminine through her characters, she revealed the artificiality of the properly feminine, and was also able to offer an alternative model of female identity. Lady Waldemar performed the properly feminine but was revealed to be a calculating, manipulative bully with questionable morals. This character consequently embodied the superficiality of such behavioural criteria and artificiality of their performance. Marian exemplified the dangers of female passivity and ignorance, and the hypocrisy of a

society which demanded such frailty and vulnerability in women and then failed to protect them. Aurora was positioned as the alternative to these two types of female identity, and through her, Barrett Browning created a new female identity that was empathetic, morally sound and caring, while also active and authoritative. In doing so, Barrett Browning established a female identity separate from the conventional properly feminine, and she validated this reform by exposing the properly feminine to be artificial, empty and redundant. Furthermore, she revealed female identity to be far more complex than the conventional properly feminine constructed it to be. Neither Lady Waldemar nor Marian were basic animations of proper and improper feminine, but complicated compositions of a variety of different elements. Aurora complicated the simple binary further as her character was not only complex in itself, but was a third alternative to Marian and Lady Waldemar, and Barrett Browning also included a myriad of supporting female characters. To justify the creation of a new female identity, Barrett Browning had to demonstrate the failings of the established convention, and she did so by exposing the artificiality of the properly feminine.

However, many women did not choose to specifically create and try to establish a new female identity although they remained dissatisfied with the narrow, passive alternative offered by the pseudonym. As such, many women poets found the dramatic monologue to be a useful tool through which to explore the construction of the properly feminine. The dramatised speaker created a similar distance between the writer and text as the pseudonym, and it also implicated the reader in the content of the poem, as with Aurora's first-person narrative. Unlike pseudonyms, which failed to offer an alternative to the properly feminine, the dramatic monologue enabled the woman poet to distance herself from the stereotyped, ridiculed poetess figure and reclaim the construction of female identity from male poets and artists, but without taking the extreme route of Barrett Browning. Through conformity, the

dramatised speaker exposed the restrictions, contradictions and performance of the properly feminine. Furthermore, many women poets' use of marginalised figures as dramatised speakers acknowledged a spectrum of female identity, and so frustrated the gender as genre paradox. The dramatic monologue could be used to communicate a far more diverse, complicated, multifaceted picture of female identity in direct challenge to the simplistic gendered binaries that the properly feminine was formed upon.

While undermining the properly feminine liberated many women poets from the restrictions of conventional female identity and expectations, it failed to provide an alternative identity or writing tradition. Although Barrett Browning exploited the approach of undermining the properly feminine to justify her construction of an alternative female identity, most other women poets did not choose to do the same, as deviating from the properly feminine would negate the irony created by inhabiting it. **However**, many women who adopted pseudonyms or appropriated the dramatic monologue also sought to elevate female experience, concerns and thought to a more authoritative and prestigious status than had been conventionally granted to the Poetess Tradition.

The use of a masculine pseudonym automatically granted the woman poet access to male experience, education and authority. The complication with this method lay with the woman poet being able to perform the associated masculine expectations and conventions in her writing so that the gender of the text matched the gender of the author. While this has been criticised as denying the worth of feminine voice and experience and seen as a failing of pseudonymous writing, the ease through which a simple name change could alter reader expectations and elevate a text to a higher literary status acts in itself as a challenge to constructs of gender. Yet again, gendered identities and expectations were shown as

constructed and performable, and so pseudonyms demonstrated the flexibility and fluidity with which many women poets created their own identities.

The application of a pseudonym to a specific text changed reader expectations and prospects of that text. As such, several women poets exploited their masculine pseudonyms to renegotiate the Poetess Tradition, as well as their own identities as writers. By approaching conventionally feminine subjects through a masculine name, the conventionally feminine was no longer confined to the Poetess Tradition. Women's concerns and experiences were reinvented as serious social concerns because they appeared to have been addressed through masculine cultural authority. This method of making the domestic political was also utilised by Barrett Browning, whose composite weaving between the domestic and political reworked them as mutually compatible. By doing so, the Poetess Tradition was granted the authority of masculine education and experience, but not at the expense of suffering under the public glare of impropriety or undermining female experience or expression. This innovation formed a new, female cultural authority which was associated with both masculine and feminine aspects of traditional poetics, and so retained the strengths of both. It was authoritative, intellectual and political as well as domestic. Most importantly, it was highly flexible and malleable, so association with other poetical genres or interrogation of a variety of socio-political topics was made more accessible to the woman poet.

Barrett Browning's first-person narrative locates the authority of the poem into the female character of Aurora. By combining this with conventionally masculine traditions, Aurora was granted an established and prestigious authority in the poem. This new female authority was strengthened by Aurora's orphaning and ability to forge her own identity as she could not passively imitate her mother. Furthermore, by allowing Marian to vocalise her own narrative and correct Aurora's assumptions as to her condition, Barrett Browning granted a

second female character authority over the construction of her own identity. Therefore, this new authoritative female identity was not specific to only Aurora, but was shown to be available to all women. Barrett Browning removed the need for pseudonymous women poets to inhabit a masculine identity in order to gain authority and prestige, as instead she created an equally prestigious female authority. However, her innovations were either not understood or not appreciated by her readers, and her invention of a prestigious female poetic tradition, heralded by a new set of ‘women figures’, was strongly disapproved of by her contemporaries (Armstrong, Bristow and Sharrock 2008: 273). The creation of a new female authority was too radical and unprecedented, so many other women poets looked for alternatives. Rather than trying to appropriate masculine authority, or create female authority, the dramatic monologue enabled the transferral of conventionally masculine authority and prestige to the female voice and experience.

The dramatic monologue was not only a pre-established poetic form, but its recognised malleable and flexible nature allowed for a more harmonious combining of the conventionally masculine with the conventionally feminine. Many women poets were, therefore, able to compose dramatic monologues that were simultaneously feminine and prestigious, domestic and political, female-authored and authoritative. This hybridity challenged and reformed assumptions concerning female capabilities, expectations of female identity, and the conventions of the Poetess Tradition.

While undermining the properly feminine and devising methods by which to access the benefits automatically granted to male-authored poetry could assist a woman poet in her attempts to negotiate gendered restrictions, the problems gender caused poetry remained unresolved. Dorothy Mermin commenced her influential paper ‘The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet’ by recounting how Barrett Browning saw herself as ‘hovering

between two mutually exclusive and equally unsuitable literary roles – one precluded by the need for activity and self-assertion, the other precluded by gender’ (1986: 64). As a woman Barrett Browning could not be an active, self-assertive writer, and as a writer she could not inhabit the conventional inspirational role designated for women. Thus the ‘woman writer’ is an oxymoronic term as each element conflicted with the other. Barrett Browning discussed her awareness of her need to occupy two opposing roles, those of writer and inspiration, subject and object, in her poems ‘The Deserted Garden’ (1838) and ‘The Lost Bower’ (1844). However, it is in *Aurora Leigh* that we can see her closest attempts at resolving this inherent problematic tension in women’s poetry. By manipulating the *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* traditions of narrative, and including elements of autobiography, all expressed through first-person address, Barrett Browning made her character Aurora the subject of her poem. This firmly positioned ‘female’ at the centre of her composition. Also, Barrett Browning’s utilisation of nature imagery relocated the source of symbolic power as feminine. This adoption of imagery and symbolism was thoroughly grounded in Romantic legacy, and when combined with the placement of an active female central subject, Barrett Browning’s poetry was suddenly repositioned as a naturally feminine enterprise. In a further complication, not only was Aurora’s life the subject of her own poem, enabling her to perform as both subject and object within her own narrative, but it was also the subject of Barrett Browning’s poem. Thus the roles of both muse and artist were inhabited by women in both the narrative and the framing poem. Within the world created in *Aurora Leigh*, the Poetess Tradition was no longer marginalised and no longer an obstacle, as femininity became a source of poetic power. **However**, these innovations, new female identities and the world of *Aurora Leigh*, were not appreciated by Barrett Browning’s contemporaries, so other women poets found other methods to resolve these gendered tensions.

In correlation with Aurora's act of using herself as her subject, the distance between poet and speaker that the adoption of a pseudonym and that the use of a dramatised speaker created, was exploited to allow the woman poet to perform as both subject and object of her poetry. While the pseudonym created the illusion that a separate writing identity had been inspired by a separate, objectified identity, the dramatic monologue was less divisionary. Instead, the dramatic monologue could place female identity and experience as the subject of poetry, in a similar way to Barrett Browning's application of the *Künstlerroman* tradition. By doing so, a specifically feminine poetics that was also mainstream and traditional was empowered. The majority of Victorian women chose to work with the poetic landscape as it was, subtly and gently reworking it into a more female-friendly space, rather than strike out independently from their predecessors and separate themselves from established genres (Blain 2001: 10). Thus the dramatic monologue was a far more popular tool than Barrett Browning's creation of a new tradition, or the pseudonym's relocation of women into masculine traditions, by which gender was resolved in women's poetry.

Through evidence of various women poets taking apart the ideology of the properly feminine, asserting authority and value in female thought and experience, and attempting to resolve the problems gender caused poetry, this thesis has argued that many Victorian women poets were neither conforming to nor rejecting the Poetess Tradition. Rather, they were challenging its limitations and so creating a space for the construction of an alternative but still authoritative female writing tradition. This is in contrast to many views of feminist critics of the twentieth-century, who used Victorian women poets as evidence of the oppression and suppression they were searching for. The repeated use of the same approaches to repositioning women's place in poetic traditions, through different methods, proves the evident self-consciousness of Victorian women poets. Not only were they aware

of their public identity, expectations of performance and the gendered ideologies which restricted and defined them, they were also aware of previous attempts by other women to reform and reconstruct them. Thus female resistance to gender ideologies was far more complex and intentional than has been previously acknowledged. By responding to both the expectations of the poetess and female-authored writing, and the experiments of previous generations of women writers, many women negotiated their own identities and positions in literary culture in immensely complex and nuanced ways, learning from previous attempts and adapting traditions and conventions to suit themselves.

This thesis has highlighted the diverse, flexible and multifaceted nature of women's poetry, which has hitherto been neglected, by focusing on the complexities of the Poetess Tradition and the multitude of different reactions towards and against it. As such, the diversity of poetical techniques and methods employed can now be appreciated to a greater extent. This active participation shows a clear self-consciousness in women poets concerning their identity and public perception. Victorian women poets both resisted and occupied the Poetess Tradition, simultaneously conforming to and deviating from its boundaries, in order to trouble, challenge and reconstruct their identities as writers and the ideologies within which they wrote.

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