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ESSAYS ON BRITISH WOMEN POETS

STUDI DI LETTERATURE MODERNE E COMPARATE
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15

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ESSAYS ON BRITISH WOMEN POETS

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CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . pag. 7

Renaissance Women Poets and the Sonnet Tradition in England and Italy: Mary Wroth, Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Franco. . . . . » 11

The Poet and the Muse: Isabella Lickbarrow and Lakeland Romantic Poetry . . . . » 35

“Stone Walls do not a Prison Make”: Two Poems by Alfred Tennyson and Emily Brontë . . . . » 59

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Search for a Poetic Identity . . . . » 77

“Love or Rhyme”: Wendy Cope and the Lightness of Thoughtfulness . . . . » 99

Bibliography. . . . . » 121

Index . . . . » 127

INTRODUCTION

1. These five essays are the result of a series of coincidences rather than a carefully thought out plan of action, but, as is the case with many apparently haphazard choices, they reflect an ongoing interest which has lasted for the past ten years. Those on Mary Wroth, Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Wendy Cope, here completely revised, developed and in the last three cases translated, began within group research projects or as contributions to conferences and thus the choice of author/subject was conditioned by the need for relevance within a larger theme. The other, on Isabella Lickbarrow, is previously unpublished, in any form.

The development and rewriting of the essays into a presentation in book form has, however, been fascinating, as by bringing together artists so widely separated by time but with a common passion and a common vocation has of course emphasized their differences – in style, subject matter and context – but has also thrown into relief some expected and some unexpected similarities. My intent here is to discuss these differences and similarities and to show how many of the same problems are found to obtain throughout the history of women's poetry.

2. The first, and major, issue to be addressed is that of the relationship of the woman poet to what unfortunately and inevitably is considered the other side of her universe. All of the writers here discussed have problems with the en-*gender*ing of their discourse, with the fact that the pen, or at least, as history develops, the poet's pen, is seen as being wielded more successfully, or more appropriately, or both by a man. However hard they try they are placed firmly in a "gendered" reality, sometimes from choice but more often not.

Crisafulli and Pietropoli, writing about Romantic Women Poets have this to say:

> Non sorprenderà quindi se anche le donne che godevano al loro tempo di grande popolarità come Charlotte Smith, Joanna Baillie, Felicia Hemans o Letitia Elizabeth Landon restano, almeno apparentemente ingabbiate nei confine previsti per loro: del *gender* (la loro condizione di donne prive di uno stato giuridico), dei generi (la romanza, il sonetto, forme paraboliche o pedagogiche quali la ballata e il poemetto narrativo) e degli argomenti (gli affetti e la sfera domestica, le arti figurative e la musica e, soprattutto, l'educazione e la morale [1].

Can this reality be beneficial to art? Usually it is not: the art of poetry - the translation of vision into language (rather than paint, for example) – should be free to rise above such detail, or at least the vision itself may be different because of it but the skill of the pen must be equal. Nonetheless it still seems that there is no escaping the point from which a woman poet must begin, though fortunately in the case of the woman novelist things have changed for the better.

3. One of the most interesting aspects of the poets presented and discussed here is that almost all of them, while acknowledging their sister artists with esteem, work within or against the male tradition and define themselves with reference to it, something that male poets do not do. This means that critics and commentators find themselves nudged into doing the same thing whether or not they intended to do so at the outset.

Another feature that the works here treated have in common is that they are all outside or marginal to what have been considered the canonical poetic works of their age. I have tried in each essay to provide a context, either biographical or historical or contextual, or all three, in order to aid the definition/comprehension of the meaning to which they were trying to give voice.

Voice – another term which becomes problematic in similar ways for the writers examined in these essays. Lady Mary Wroth is a case in point. By the time she comes to write her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, probably during the second decade of

the seventeenth century, and even more so when it is eventually published (1621), Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism in England have more or less exhausted their potential [2]. But the fact that she is writing to a male muse using a woman's voice opens the doors of Petrarchism to new possibilities. Both her Italian predecessors, and fellow poets, Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Franco, each in their different ways, also use the fact of speaking through a female mask with a similar innovatory skill.

The three representatives of Romanticism and Post-romanticism, Isabella Lickbarrow and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are similar in their engagement with their male predecessors and contemporaries and their disregard of their sister poets. Any use of stylistic debt is always, without exception, incurred with regard to male poets although recent research has uncovered a crowd of romantic women poets who were publishing at the end of the eighteenth century and all through the first half of the nineteenth. This phenomenon is very clear in certain of their works and is probably due to a reaction against the fear of being "downgraded" to the status which they were in any case doomed to experience. Emily Brontë, of course, eliminates this problem to a certain extent, at least at the dawn of her reputation, by assuming a male pseudonym. On the other hand, Lickbarrow and Barrett Browning have few problems manifesting their gender and seem sure enough of their vocation to challenge the male poetic universe on common ground, despite the occasional use of the trope of deprecation and modesty as a shield. Brontë's use of a pseudonym, it should also be remembered, was not so much to hide her femininity but to protect her privacy.

What is perhaps more surprising is that both Wendy Cope and her – and our – more "serious" contemporaries engage with the past, and the present, in the same way, considering poetry by male poets as their cultural and artistic humus. It is to be hoped that by making these artists and their poetry more a part of the canon, by which I mean, among other things, the object of study and the material of teaching, that this state of affairs will become rarer, and that poetry (now written and published by both men and women, and allowed to survive, regardless of questions of gender, on its own merits) will be poetry *tout court*.

[1] L.M. Crisafulli and C. Pietropoli (eds.), *Le poetesse romantiche inglesi. Tra identità e genere*, Roma, Carocci, 2002, pp. 13-15.

[2] On the fortunes of Petrarchism in England see Mario Domenichelli's erudite essay "La lingua affinata e la percezione di sé", *In forma di parole. Petrarca in Europa I/2*, 3-4 (2004), pp. 447-458.

RENAISSANCE WOMEN POETS AND THE SONNET TRADITION IN ENGLAND AND ITALY: MARY WROTH, VITTORIA COLONNA AND VERONICA FRANCO

1. Lady Mary Wroth (1586/7-1661) is often first defined by her belonging to the Sidney family and her life's work by its relationship to their work. Although it is usual to abandon such definitions especially when discussing the work of a woman writer, in the case of Wroth it is essential to bear this aspect of her identity in mind, particularly in the case of her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, which is the subject of the first part of this essay. Her originality will be examined later on. But her works – the just-mentioned sonnet sequence and the pastoral romance in two parts *The Countess of Montgomerie's Urania* (the first part of which was published in 1621), together with her play *Love's Victorie*, all definitely germinated in the rich cultural humus which constituted her birthright. For Lady Mary Wroth was indeed in the mainstream of Renaissance poetry in that she was not only a "court lady", with all the cultural and political connections that this made possible but also, even more significantly, a "coterie poet".

The terms "court lady" and "courtesan" will be analysed more closely later when the position and, more importantly, the work, of Mary Wroth in England will be compared with that of Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547) and Veronica Franco (1546-1591) in Italy. These two figures seem to epitomise the ideal Renaissance woman as described by Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), in his celebrated work *Il cortegiano*, depicting life at the court of Urbino. According to Castiglione the qualities desirable in a court lady were the "virtù dell'animo [...] la nobiltà, il fuggire l'affettazione, l'esser aggraziata da natura in tutte l'operazion sue, l'esser di boni costu-

mi, ingeniosa, prudente, non superba, non invidiosa, non malèdica, non vana, non contenziosa, non inetta […] Parmi ben che sia poi più necessaria la bellezza che nel cortegiano" and then again "la prudenzia, la magnanimità [translated by Hoby into English as "noblenes of courage" [1]], la continenzia, […] una pronta vivacità d'ingegno" and, last but not least, "notizie di lettere, di musica, di pittura e [il saper] danzar e festeggiar" [2]. These qualities were shared by the court lady and the courtesan – indeed the latter often had the advantage and Colonna and Franco have been chosen as representing, among the galaxy of Italian Renaissance women poets, possible comparative "links" with Wroth. Though it is impossible to say whether Wroth knew of their existence, the first would seem comparable from the point of view of cultural and social status and the second from that of social mores [3]. Both Colonna and Franco wrote coterie verse and both, like Wroth herself, were Petrarchan poets.

2. Mary Wroth *née* Sidney was a member one of the most important literary groups in the whole of the history of English literature. Her uncle was Philip Sidney, the creator of the first sonnet sequence in English literary history. His sister, Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, Sidney's literary executor and the person to whom he dedicated his pastoral *Arcadia*, was the translator of the 107 Psalms that Philip had left untranslated (when he died he had only completed 43). She also translated, among other things, Petrarch's *The Triumph of Death* with considerable expertise and originality. Robert Sidney, Philip's brother and Wroth's father, was also a competent poet, and was only not recognized as such because his elder brother was so much greater an artist [4]. Wroth's mother Barbara Gamage was first cousin to Sir Walter Raleigh, poet and courtier at Elizabeth's court and to Lord Charles Howard of Effingham, Lord High Admiral when the defeat of the Spanish Armada took place. She was also related to Sir George Carey, second Lord Hunsdon and his wife, patrons of William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser [5]. Roberts writes:

> … the lady [Barbara Gamage] had personal qualities and interests that enabled the union to prosper. She served as the patron of several literary works, for example, and took

> an active role in the education of her children. The steward Roland Whyte commented on her diligence: "she sees them well taught and brought up in learning and qualities fitt for their birth and condition" [6].

This was surely behaviour to which Robert Sidney would have been accustomed. His own parents, Sir Henry Sidney and Lady Mary Dudley, were conscientious and caring, overseeing every detail of their children's education and upbringing, as is witnessed to by a letter still extant in printed form from Sir Henry to the eleven-year old Philip, his elder son, with a post-script added by Lady Mary [7]. Sir Robert himself, though for many years separated from his family as he took over Sir Philip's post as governor of Flushing, in the Netherlands, on the latter's death, was as careful and attentive a father as he had been a brother, carrying on the Sidney family's clan-like traditions [8]. His eldest daughter Mary often accompanied her mother to visit him in Flushing and on travels in Europe, where she was able to become proficient in French. He too was a patron of the arts; from his correspondence we learn of his encouragement of Sir John Harington, Ben Jonson, Henry Wriothsley, Earl of Southampton and the musician Robert Dowland (son to the more celebrated John and Sir Henry's godson) [9]. But it was not only at Penshurst Place, the Sidney's country house in Kent, at which Lady Mary was immersed in the culture of her time but also at Wilton House, the mansion of the Herberts, Earls of Pembroke, where her aunt, and with all probability, her godmother [10], Mary Sidney held sway. The Countess, Roberts tells us, "gave encouragement to such writers as Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton and Abraham Fraunce […] [she] assembled at her country estate at Wilton a veritable academy" [11].

When Mary reached the age of twelve marriage negotiations began: in 1599 the eldest son of Sir Thomas Manxfeeld, a fifteen-year-old, was proposed as the husband for Mary or for her sister Katherine, then aged about ten. Mary was eventually betrothed to Robert Wroth, eldest son of a wealthy landowning family from Essex, who was knighted by James I in 1603. In 1604 the marriage took place at Penshurst. Sir Robert's father had entertained the King at Loughton Hall, his Essex estate and when he died in 1606 and his son came into the property this practice continued and

James was a frequent visitor at Loughton for the hunting season. Ben Jonson, in his poem "To Sir Robert Wroth" tells us that James "makes thy house his court". Sir Robert's penchant for the great outdoors is confirmed by his appointment as riding forester in the royal forest of Essex and Lady Mary's letter to Queen Anne documenting the financial losses he incurred by letting the deer feed in his grounds so as not to spoil the kings (or his) sport [12]. Sir Robert Wroth died in 1614 leaving his wife with a month-old son, James (1614-1616) and £ 23,000 of debts, so perhaps she was right to complain.

Probably because of the difference in their upbringing – one very easily imagines, from Josephine Roberts' account at least, the relationship between an intellectual and a sportsman – it would appear that the two young people soon began to disagree [13]. But however difficult their private relationship may have been, the marriage meant that Lady Mary was one of the leading figures in James I's court. She became friend to Queen Anne (she secured the honour of a place in the Queen's first court masque in 1605 [14]), and was able to continue the Sidney tradition of patron of the arts and letters. She also became very closely acquainted with Ben Jonson, who dedicated *The Alchemist* to her in 1612, and some critics have even accredited her with being Jonson's mistress and also his muse, the "real" Celia.

3. Mary Wroth was probably already becoming active in the field of letters on her own account. The first part of *The Countess of Montgomerie's Urania*, which constitutes the first prose romance published by a woman in England, came out in 1621 (although, as it contained thinly-veiled portraits of well-known figures at James I's court, it had to be withdrawn from circulation after six months). Appended to this was *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus,* a Petrarchan sonnet sequence from one to another of two of the main characters in the *Urania*, and thus another Guinness contender, the first sonnet sequence published by an Englishwoman. But the existence of an earlier version of these poems, a fair copy in the author's hand [15], proves that they pre-date the publishing of *Urania* by about eight years [16] and were already circulating in manuscript form among Lady Mary's friends in *circa* 1613. One of these friends was William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke (1580-1630), Mary's first cousin, her

lover and the father of her two illegitimate children, William and Catherine, and very probably the real life figure behind Amphilanthus.

On a careful reading of the sonnet sequence it would seem very probable that Lady Mary's "muse" (if we may call him so) is indeed her lover William Herbert. If it is true – as the careful scholarship on the part of Roberts would appear to bear out – that the poems which make up the sequence were being composed in 1613, the dates are the same as those of the beginning of her attachment to the Earl [17]. The punning on "will" all through the sequence is a clear signal and a conventional one – the very same as that used by the Bard himself. Besides being Mary's "muse" William Herbert was a poet in his own right [18], and after the death of his mother, Mary Sidney Herbert, in 1621, also a powerful, prestigious and wealthy patron, having inherited her literary coterie [19].

Even though, as Roberts tells us, the sonnet sequence was revised and corrected before being appended to the *Urania* and published the two characters, Pamphilia (whose name means *all-loving*) and Amphilanthus (*lover of two*) pre-existed the romance [20], of which they were later to find themselves the protagonists. It has often been critical practice to speak of these two poetical *personae* as having been created to "match", as it were, their adventures in the romance, according to a sort of textual *post hoc ergo propter hoc* logic. Jesús Cora Alonso's otherwise interesting and stimulating paper falls into this error when we read "To realize Wroth's strategy, we must read the collection of poems as part of the fictional world of *Urania*" [21]. Even Josephine Roberts makes the same mistakes when she justifies her opinion that for the sonnet *persona* Pamphilia "constancy is a cardinal virtue" by quoting from the definition given in the *Urania*: "she is in fact renowned as the 'true paterne of excellent affection and affections truth' (I. iii. p. 315)" [22]. It is in fact in the prose romance that the question of the "double standard" is confronted far more clearly than in the sonnet sequence, which, I suggest, is concerned with other questions first.

4. Since the publication of Roberts's 1983 edition, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* has been examined by a fair number of scholars, most of whom, working within the feminist tradition, have concentrated on the important issues of gender and genre [23]. The most

interesting aspect of Wroth's sonnet sequence for the first scholars to analyse it was of course the fact that the gender of the poetic voice, indeed of the mask assumed by the poet, Pamphilia, is female, and the love object, Amphilanthus, is male. This is made clear from the title of the sequence, which is also both a parodic compliment to the author's uncle Sir Philip Sidney, and his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* and a statement on her part that she is part of the literary power structure to which he belonged [24]. The repetition on Wroth's part of the Greek morpheme *phil*-is both an emphatic reference to her uncle's name and a signal that hers is indeed love poetry. The opening sonnet makes the themes and concerns of the sequence blatantly clear:

> When nights black mantle could most darknes prove,
> And sleepe deaths Image did my senceses hiere
> From knowledg of my self, then thoughts did move
> Swifter than those most swiftness need require:
>
> In sleepe, a Chariot drawne by wing'd desire
> I sawe: wher sate bright Venus Queene of love,
> And att her feete her sonne, still adding fire
> To burning hearts which she did hold above,
>
> Butt one heart flaming more then all the rest
> The goddess held, and putt itt to my brest,
> Deare sonne, now shutt sayd she: thus must wee winn;
>
> Hee her obay'd, and martir'd my poore hart,
> I, waking hop'd as dreames itt would depart
> Yett since: O mee: a lover I have binn. (P1)

At first this sonnet seems totally conventional – the echo of the opening of Petrarch's *Trionfi d'amore* in which the narrator has a vision of love's victory indicates the genre and is underlined by the familiar tropes of night, sleep and burning and the traditional conceit of the murder of the heart. But other things are happening here which are not so usual. In the oneiric atmosphere generated by the hyperbolic darkness of the first quatrain, where sleep is a death-like trance in which the poetic "I" is alienated from herself and psychic activity is unnaturally speeded up, the vision of Venus and Cupid is furnished with a sort of surreal glare. The first synonym of love to

be enunciated is "desire": and in the tableau between the Queen of love and her son he sits at her feet and obeys her. The power structures of gender are first overturned here and then almost immediately this overturning is reiterated when the female poetic "I" refers to herself as a "lover" and not a "mistress". The tableau engenders a desiring lover (whose senses, not her reason, give her "knowledge" of herself) and it will be the first concern of the sonnet sequence to represent the ontological adventure that this lover will embark on from this point forward. Thus the first verb with which the "I" is conjugated, a verb of perception "sawe" is of prime importance – and it is certainly not fortuitous. As we know if we consult the conduct books of the Early Modern era, a woman still had to cast down her eyes in front of a male interlocutor, but the female eyes which are "seen" by Petrarch and all his male descendants are, in Wroth's sonnets, active instead of passive, subjects not objects. As Lobanov-Rostovsky puts it:

> In the Petrarchan conceit of the eroticised eye, the visible world is embodied as an aggressive beauty, a female eye that does not *see* but solicits the male gaze. The woman's gaze threatens to objectify the male lover, only to retreat before the power of his desire. Like the eye probing its own nature in the anatomy theatre, this gesture of taming the female gaze averts the threat of a passive, effeminised eye subject to the world it views. As metaphor, the eye reclaims the sovereignty lost to the anatomist's objectifying gaze. It *becomes* the gaze, affirming its power by effacing its own status as flesh [25].

The first eyes mentioned in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* are those of the (male) beloved and they are objects of that same female gaze verbally empowered as subject, the subject who signs herself "Pamphilia" twice during the course of the sequence. Indeed the second sonnet opens apostrophising the beloved's eyes:

> Deare eyes howe well (indeed) you doe adorne
> That blessed sphaere, which gazing soules hold deere:
> […]
> Two starres of Heaven […] (P2, 1-9)

Once again the initial similarity between Wroth's work and *Astrophil and Stella* is evident, as is their common use of Petrarchan conceits [26]. Duncan-Jones, in the Introduction to her edition of Sidney's poems makes the comment: "… for modern readers, if *Astrophil and Stella* is a drama, it is a psychodrama. The central relationship is not so much that between Astrophil and Stella as between Astrophil and himself" [27], and this will be seen to be true of Pamphilia too. But as Wroth continues in her use of Petrarchan imagery the initial overturning of all that has gone before in English Petrarchism becomes still more complex and more interesting. By the time we reach sonnet 34 in the first section, as Gary Waller points out, Wroth is subverting and appropriating the dominant male subject position "by making claim not only to the gaze, but to its pleasure" [28]:

> Take heede mine eyes, how you your lookes doe cast
> Least they beetray my hearts most secret thought;
> Bee true unto your selves for nothings bought
> More deere then doubt which brings a lovers fast.
>
> Catch you all waching eyes, ere they bee past,
> Or take yours fixt wher your best love hath sought
> The pride of your desires; lett them bee taught
> Theyr faults for shame, they could not truer last;
>
> Then looke, and looke with joye for conquest wunn
> Of those that search'd your hurt in double kinde;
> Soe you kept safe, lett them themselves looke blinde
> Watch, gaze, and mark till they to madness runn,
>
> While you, mine eyes injoye full sight of love
> Contented that such hapinesses move. (P39)

The Petrarchan philosophy of love starts with the assumption that sexual excitement is founded on hostility, domination and absence, not in indulgence or *jouissance* – most certainly not for the woman. As Waller points out:

> Beneath the language of sexual dependence, idealized admiration, even of sexual reciprocity that Petrarchanism lays claim to, there is a one-sided emphasis on domination and submission, underlaid by the destructive dynamics of hostility, revenge and destruction [29].

Clearly many of the contradictions we find in Pamphilia's position are explained by the ambiguity of the stance she has appropriated, that of a "female gaze" which is active instead of passive, and the fact that her male "object" by his very name "lover of two" is paradoxically also granted agency: indeed the situation adumbrated by the end of the first few sonnets is far more complex and also far less symbolic and more psychologically realistic than much contemporary Petrarchan verse. As, indeed, is the perceptible note of paranoia which is often clearly detectable in the above sonnet and elsewhere in the sequence, conveyed by such terms as "betray", "secret", "doubt", "waching eyes", "shame", and finally "madness", and the repetition of the often enigmatic "they".

5. As far as style is concerned, the rhyme scheme of the first sonnet is immediately interesting as it adheres to a variant of the Italian/Petrarchan mode [30], therefore seeming to "date" Wroth's work and render it "old-fashioned". But as the sequence continues it becomes clear that the poet is using metre and rhyme as an arena for virtuosity: in the first section alone she switches from Italian to English style and back again every six sonnets or so.

The sequence, in its published form, consists of eighty-three sonnets and twenty songs. It is divided as follows:

Section 1
Sonnets 1-6 / Song 1 /Sonnets 7-12 / Song 2 / Sonnets 13-18 / Song 3 / Sonnets 19-24 / Song 4 / Sonnets 25-30 / Song 5 / Sonnets 31- 36 / Song 6 / Sonnets 37-42 / Song 7 / Sonnets 43-48
Signature " Pamphilia "
Sonnet*
6 Unnumbered Songs

Section 2
Sonnets 1-10 (second series)
3 Unnumbered Songs
Sonnet**

Section 3
A Crown of Sonnets Dedicated to Love

Section 4
Sonnets 1-14 (third series)
Songs 1-4 (second series)
Sonnets 1-9 (fourth series)
Signature "Pamphilia"

In the first section the contest is between Pamphilia's surrender to Venus and Cupid (who, in the first sonnet, as we have seen, "martyr [her] poor hart") and her desire for self affirmation. The section represents the expression of mental conflict during which she attempts to discover her own feelings. After an interlude of songs the second section takes up the theme of sexual and erotic jealousy, during which the persona rebels against her thraldom to the god of love who is depicted as a mischievous and capricious boy. This is seen directly in sonnet 2 of this section which envisages him as a blind juggler. Blindness is of course another Petrarchan image, connected both to Cupid, to the eyes of the lover and to those of the beloved, and this image is adopted and reworked in the sequence:

> […] in the end such jugling hee doth make
> As hee our harts in stead of eyes doth take
> For men can only by theyr slieghts abuse
>
> The sight with nimble, and delightfull skill;
> But if hee play, his gaine is oure lost will […] (P64, 9-13)

In the final phrase of this quotation we may notice one of the many puns on the name "Will", here seen as Cupid's victim rather than intentionally unfaithful.

Another particularly interesting sonnet in this brief second section is number 6:

> My paine, stille smothered in my grieved brest,
> Seekes for some ease, yett cannott passage finde
> To bee discharg'd of this unwelcome ghest;
> When most I strive, more fast his burdens bind,
>
> Like to a ship, on Goodwines cast by wind
> The more she strives, more deepe in sand is prest
> Till she bee lost; so am I in this kind
> Sunk, and devour'd, and swallow'd by unrest,

Lost, shipwrackt, spoyl'd, debar'd of smallest hope
  Nothing of pleasure left; save thoughts have scope,
  Which wander may. Goe then, my thoughts, and cry

Hope's perish'd; Love tempest-beaten; Joy lost
  Killing dispaire hath all thes blessings crost
  Yett faith still cries, Love will nott falsefy. (P68)

Roberts's note to this sonnet tells us "The metaphor of the shipwrecked lover goes back to Petrarch (*Rime*189)" [31]. In fact this is not quite correct as both Petrarch and Wroth begin their poems at least in likening themselves (or their souls) to the ship itself. Petrarch's sonnet opens:

Passa la nave mia colma d'oblio
per aspro mare, a mezza notte il verno,
en fra Scilla et Caribdi; et al governo
siede 'l Signore, anzi 'l nimico mio. (314) [32]

What is interesting here is first that the change of gender makes the figure of the ship even more fitting, in that in English a ship exceptionally is attributed with the feminine gender it has in Romance (and other) languages and is thus a far more suitable metaphor for a female poetic "I". Then again the "cause" of the shipwreck, instead of being the well-known classical myth of the sea-monsters/rock and whirlpool Scylla and Charybdis is a totally English one of the notorious Goodwin sands which Mary Wroth must have learnt of for the first time when she was a child and actually crossing the Channel – not such an easy voyage in those days.

6. In the third section, Pamphilia literally "crowns" Cupid as King of love with a "corona" of fourteen interwoven sonnets (each sonnet begins with the last line of the one preceding it and the last line of the last sonnet repeats the first line of the first – an extremely complex art form and one which requires enormous technical skill [33]). The final section of the sequence returns to a darker, more melancholy and pessimistic mood as Pamphilia admits the inevitability of pain as the other side of joy in love.

Although Wroth's poetic expertise is apparent right from the start of the sequence it is in the *corona* that her technical ability is

most apparent. And it is also here that the slender thread leading from Petrarch right through Tudor and Jacobean poetry is manifested most clearly. The section devoted to the "Crowne of Sonnets" opens thus:

> In this strange labourinth how shall I turne?
> Wayes are on all sids while the way I miss:
> If to the right hand, ther, in love I burne;
> Lett mee goe forward, therein danger is;
>
> If to the left, suspition hinders bliss,
> Lett mee turne back, shame cries I ought returne
> Nor fainte though crosses with my fortunes kiss;
> Stand still is harder, although sure to mourne;
>
> Thus lett mee take the right, or left hand way;
> Goe forward, or stand still, or back retire;
> I must thes doubts indure with out allay
> Or help, but traveile find for my best hire;
>
> Yett that which most my troubled sence doth move
> Is to leave all and take the thread of love. (P77)

The Classical and Neoclassical image of the labyrinth, whose building by Daedalus was recounted by Ovid in Book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, was adopted by Petrarch to symbolize the ambiguity of the choices apparently offered by love and the errors generated by self-deception. In Poem 211 of the *Canzoniere* he complains:

> Voglia mi sprona, Amor mi guida et scorge,
> Piacer mi tira, Usanza mi trasporta;
> Speranza mi lusinga et riconforta
> et la man destra al corgia stanco porge […]
>
> Mille trecento ventisette, a punto su l'ora prima,
> il di sesto d'aprile, nel laberinto entrai, ne veggio
> ond'esca. (341)

Here again we have a total reversal of the Petrarchan imagery in Wroth's sonnet. Whereas the Petrarchan poetic "I" is blandished by a series of positive albeit deceptive personifications of emotions and desires, Wroth has no illusions about Pamphilia's mental state.

Indeed this labyrinth may be seen as a forerunner of that of the Gothic heroines who will be created almost 200 years later – those castle dungeons and attic corridors, those winding passages in deserted convents with which Anne Radcliffe and her sisters will depict the female mindscape. There is no doubt that much of the mental anguish that comes through more and more strongly as the sequence proceeds is caused not so much by the oft-mentioned jealousy of the "constant" female lover (Pamphilia) for the unfaithful beloved (Amphilanthus) but rather by the sense that the love Pamphilia offers is somehow dangerous and shameful. The more the poetic "I" searches for self knowledge in the labyrinth of love the more we seem to sense that this search will prove painful and bewildering rather than strengthening and clarifying. Indeed the tone of the whole sequence – but especially the first poem of the corona – recalls the poems of Wroth's kinsman George Herbert (he was Philip Sidney's fourth cousin), in their inwardness and the complexity of their linguistic surface. The figure of the labyrinth is often pointed out as symbolizing, among other things, Protestant inwardness and is often to be found in contemporary sermons and emblems [34].

7. The similarity to Herbert continues inasmuch as the sonnets themselves appear to have first been composed as "coterie" poems: and what Cristina Malcolmson says of George Herbert and the English literary tradition could easily have been referring to Mary Wroth:

> His imitations of Sir Philip Sidney's poems and of the sonnet sequence itself were responses not only to a legendary literary figure but to a relative, the most famous member of the Sidney-Herbert clan. This family was known for its writers and patrons of the arts, but also recognized as a significant political and Protestant faction [35].

Malcolmson adds:

> Lawrence Stone characterizes a landed family as "a dense network of lineage and kin relationships", whose members were involved in "a reciprocal exchange of patronage, support and hospitality in return for attendance, deference, respect, advice and loyalty "[36]

Mary Wroth was in a different position from that of George Herbert as she was a member of the "main" family and a patron in her own right. Indeed far from being that "version of Virginia Woolf's self-supporting woman novelist before her time" or even "a kind of heroically exemplary writing Amazon who committed the rare act for an early modern woman of publishing her work, in defiance of well-known strictures toward chastity, silence and obedience" so (rightly) deprecated by Joyce Green Macdonald [37], Lady Mary was indeed a prominent figure in English Renaissance literary circles, being nearer, as a noblewoman, to the great Italian court ladies than to some of her artistic counterparts in her own country – Isabella Whitney, for example, or even Aemilia Lanyer. As Marion Wynne-Davies points out, they, and several other English Renaissance women poets

> must be allocated to two lower rank or class groups: the gentry and the bourgeoisie. Those in the first group [which includes Aemilia Lanyer] were all in some way attached to the court, but remained distinctly on the margins, more in need of patronage than in a position to offer it. The remaining women [including Isabella Whitney] seem to have had more or less adequate financial resources, but from what little we know of them – and this in itself is an indicator of status they belonged to the bourgeoisie and were mostly involved in some sort of domestic employment [38].

8. When comparing Mary Wroth with her sister poets, especially those working in the Petrarchan tradition, it is enlightening to make a leap away both from the spatial and from the temporal point of view and examine the work of two of the greatest Italian Renaissance poets, Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Franco. The Sidney-Herbert coterie at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I could perhaps be compared to the literary and artistic salons at the Italian Renaissance courts of Ercole II d'Este and Renée of France at Ferrara and Federico Gonzaga and Isabella d'Este at Mantua a hundred years or so before, or Vittoria Colonna's court at the Castello d'Aragone at Ischia (1501-1536), where the scholar and poetess entertained and helped such artists as Ariosto, Bembo and Michelangelo and, among many other literary works, wrote coterie

verse in the form of replies to poems by these artists as well as to Pope Paul III, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, Cardinal Pole, Sannazzaro, and Veronica Gambara.. Vittoria Colonna, marchesa di Pescara (1492-1547), was a distinguished noblewoman who was of course an extremely accomplished sonnet writer in the Petrarchan tradition, (her *Rime* were published for the first time in 1538 and again in 1546, significantly without her permission [39]) and some of her greatest secular sonnets are those to the memory of her husband ("il mio bel sole") who was killed in battle in 1525. Let us examine one of the best known of these sonnets:

> Qui fece il mio bel Sole a noi ritorno,
> Di regie spoglie carco e ricche prede:
> Ahi con quanto dolor l'occhio rivede
> Quei lochi ov'ei mi fea già chiaro il giorno!
>
> Di palme e lauro cinto era d'intorno
> D'onor, di gloria, sua sola mercede
> Ben potean far del grido sparso fede
> L'ardito volto, il parlar saggio, adorno.
>
> Vinto da' prieghi miei, poi mi mostrava
> Le sue belle ferite, e 'l tempo e 'l modo
> Delle vittorie sue tante e sì chiare.
>
> Quanta pena or mi dà, gioia mi dava;
> E in questo e in quel pensier piangendo godo
> Tra poche dolci e assai lagrime amare [40].

Here we are naturally however in the realm of "legitimate" and "sanctified" love – the love of a widow [41] for her dead companion and as such the Petrarchan conceit is not having to carry out any other function than that of embellishment. The female gaze is assumed, it is true, but in the totally "legitimate" activity of admiring and weeping for the lost hero/muse. The interesting aspect of these poems from the point of view of our argument is that the poetic "I" is that of a cultured female voice, so the sun imagery is much less complex than that used by Petrarch himself - the metaphor is simply that which belongs in the medieval and early renaissance "great chain of being" with the lord (king) being compared to the sun. The image seems to belong to the order of allego-

ry rather than that of symbolism. Then again the sonnet cited is an elegy whose function is that of celebrating and indeed embellishing the subject's life in the order of *de mortuis nihil nisi bonum.* Indeed, though in many ways Vittoria Colonna, as a rich, intelligent, cultured and powerful widow did challenge and compete with men on their own ground, it was never, apparently on that thorny terrain of sexuality and the erotic. Colonna seems indeed to exemplify Castiglione's perfect noblewoman.

9. If we pass from the conventional to the unconventional (or the apparently unconventional) in the pantheon of Italian Renaissance women writers, an examination of Veronica Franco's work gives a far more complex picture. Franco (1546-1591) was one of the most brilliant and beautiful of the Venetian *cortegiane honeste* or upper class courtesans. These women held a recognized position in the society of their time and received a comprehensive classical education which often rivalled that of the courtly ladies as that of the *hetairai* rivalled that of the noble ladies of ancient Athens. They, like the noble widows Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Gambara, had the freedom and the financial means to correspond and talk with men of letters, noblemen and prelates [42], but, as courtesans, they were expected to enter the lists in the sexual arena – indeed this was their ultimate social function. Franco was openly visited by Henri III of France on his triumphal journey through Northern Italy towards his coronation and wrote two sonnets to commemorate the night they spent together. I quote the first [43]:

Come talor dal ciel sotto umil tetto
Giove tra noi qua giù benigno scende
e perché occhio terren dall'alt'oggetto
non resti vint, umana forma prende;
così venne al mio povero ricetto,
senza pompa real ch'abbaglia e splende,
dal fato Enrico a tal dominio eletto,
ch'un sol mondo nol cape e nol comprende.
Benché sì sconosciuto, anch'al mio core
Tal raggio impresse del divin suo merto,
che 'n me s'estinse il natural vigore.
Di ch'ei, di tant'affetto non incerto,
l'imagin mia di smalt'e di colore
prese al partir con grat'animo aperto [44].

In this particular case it is generally recognised that the historical interest of the poem is superior to its literary merit. The comparison of Henri III to Jove and the uncomplicated account of the meeting and the gift that Veronica makes to the King of her portrait is significant in our discussion however as it is Franco who is the donor of a gift and not the King whom one would have expected. This reversal of gender roles is indeed the hallmark of her *Rime* (probably published for the first time in 1575). By this time in Renaissance Italy Petrarchanism was being subverted and as Margaret Rosenthal points out,

> By choosing the low level courtesan as the subject of their verses and the objects of their attacks, Pietro Aretino, Lorenzo and Maffio Venier, and others broke out of the generic bounds of the fashionable Petrarchan poetic idiom, which posited an adulating poetic lover at one extreme and an idealized immaculate female muse at the other. They adhered instead to the stylistic levels and formal guidelines that Francesco Sansovino had advocated, in imitation of Cicero, for prose or verse satire [...] In doing so they were conscious of transgressing Bembo's rigid separation of stylistic levels according to subject matter and poetic decorum[..] Bembo's treatise *Prose della vulgar lingua* [1512, published 1525] advocated a modern vernacular classicism, circumscribed by the canons of Ciceronian rhetoric and created from the complex discursive poetic style of Petrarch [45].

Franco's *Rime* are not in sonnet form but are *capitoli* of a *tenzone* between her and an *incerto autore* elsewhere identified as Marco Venier, in the form of *terze rime*. Franco participated in the literary activity of the Venier family – one of the most powerful patrician families of *cinquecento* Venice. Her connection with Ca' Venier was not without difficulties however. In winning the patronage and help of the patriarch, Domenico (1517-1582) and the love of his favoured nephew Marco (1537-1602), who represents the adulatory Petrarchan male interlocutor in her *Rime*, she attracted the hostility of his younger cousin, Maffio (1550-1586) who attacked Veronica in a series of totally anti-Petrarchan series of satirical poems in Venetian dialect, whose content is indeed scurrilous, and the most notorious of which openly plays on her name "Veronica, ver unica puttana".

This however was all grist to the mill of a professional writer, brought up to survive and succeed in the terrifyingly competitive world of a European court. The central *capitoli* "denounce the kind of man who delights in exalting women to the stature of a virginal queen when it serves his legitimating purposes, but who, when faced with social adversities, transforms women into vulgar whores whom he charges with the social and moral dissolution rampant in Venetian society" [46].

Franco, in *capitolo* XIII, "literally" descends into battle and, "rispondendo per le rime" (unfortunately at first she believed that her anonymous attacker was Marco, the "incerto autor"). In this chapter she draws not so much upon Petrarch as upon Ariosto as she describes an explicitly erotic encounter in which she takes the upper hand from the beginning, drawing upon the elevated language of the chivalric epic: I shall deliberately quote a series of excerpts from the poem so as not to lose the masterful (mistressful?) tone in which Franco conducts her battle from start to finish [47]:

Non più parole: ai fatti, in campo, a l'armi,
ch'io voglio, risoluta di morire,
da sì grave molestia liberarmi.
Non so se 'l mio "cartel" si debba dire,
in quanto do risposta provocata:
ma perché in rissa de' nomi venire?
Se vuoi, da te mi chiamo disfidata;
e se non, ti disfido; o in ogni via
la prendo, ed ogni occasïon mi è grata.
Il campo o l'armi elegger a te stia,
ch'io prenderò quel che tu lascerai;
anzi pur ambo nel tuo arbitrio sia [...].

qui vieni, e pien di pessimo talento,
accomodato al tristo officio porta
ferro acuto e da man ch'abbia ardimento.
Quell'arme, che da te mi sarà pòrta,
prenderò volontier, ma più, se molto
tagli, e da offender sia ben salda e corta..
Dal petto ignudo ogni arnese sia tolto,
al fin ch'ei, disarmato a le ferite,
possa 'l valor mostrar dentro a sé accolto.
Altri non s'impedisca in questa lite,
ma noi soli due, ad uscio chiuso,
rimosso ogni padrin, sia diffinita [...].

per soverchiar la tua sì indegna offesa
ti verrei sopra, e nel contrasto ardita,
scaldandoti ancor tu ne la difesa,
teco morrei d'egual colpo ferita.
  O mie vane speranze, onde la sorte
crudel a pianger più sempre mi invita!
  Ma pur sostienti, cor sicuro e forte,
e con l'ultimo strazio di quell'empio
vendica mille tue con la sua morte;
poi con quel ferro ancor tronca il tuo scempio

10. Let us now return to Lady Mary Wroth. She too is using a similar technique: that of a female poetic "I" addressing a male love object, and is also within the same tradition and using many of the same stylistic conceits. However the first thing that is obvious is that she is a century behind the Italian tradition, as far as Petrarchanism is concerned. What is also clearly evinced is that her approach to Petrarch is mediated by her family "coterie" and its traditional use of Petrarchan conceits which she carries on without difficulty. There are indeed interpretative snags when comparing Wroth with her Italian precursors. The examination of Colonna's and also Franco's verse is aided by the fact that there is total recuperation of the male interlocutors' replies so that when Colonna's coterie verse (which we have not had time to quote) is analysed the replies of, say, Michelangelo, are extant so that the terms of the dispute are all available. The same is true for Franco whereas with Wroth we can only hypothesize. However the importance of Wroth's contribution to the development of the sonnet sequence lies mainly in the fact of her reversal of the gender roles of poetic voice and object of desire, and the subsequent way in which this (male) object is treated. The female poetic voice is not, indeed celebrating either an irreproachably heroic male figure (Colonna) or fighting on reasonably level ground for supremacy in love and debate (Franco), but expressing an often cynical realisation of her lover's inconstancy, and the theme of betrayal is often uppermost.

Again, in Wroth's poems, as Roberts underlines, the rhetoric of wooing or courtship is absent, as is the emblazoning of the physical attributes of the beloved one of the most important features of Petrarchanism, as Nancy Vickers so ably demonstrates [48]. The role of the love object is indeed subordinated to the psychology of

unsuccessful love from the poetic voice's stance and the dispute is indeed not so much that between two poets as is the *terzone* of Franco but within the (female) mind of the poet. The imagery used is rich in a female eroticism – not that openly used by Franco however – but, within an increasingly Puritan England (notwithstanding the licence of the Jacobean court), an imagery covered with a Neoplatonic veil. Early seventeenth century England did not promise the freedom, however curtailed, of the courtly lady or courtesan of Renaissance Italy. The fascination of the sonnet sequence reaches its culmination in the corona when we turn and turn again in the "labyrinth" of the attempt at self-knowledge and the constant postponing of the final awareness that Amphilanthus's love is fickle and that Pamphilia should hope no more.

[1] Sir Thomas Hoby, *The Third Book of the Courtier* (1561), http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/courtier/courtier3.html

[2] Baldassare Castiglione, *Il cortegiano*, (1518) Libro 3, [1], http:// www.fauser.it/biblio/castigli/casti3_1.htm

[3] Although her strong family tie with Susan de Vere Countess of Montgomery and insignatory of Wroth's *Urania* could be important in this context. Susan de Vere's father was Edward 17th Earl of Oxford (one of the contender for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays) and in his youth a sort of playboy of the Western world *ante litteram*. There is proof that in 1575 on his tour of the Continent he had a house in Venice where Veronica Franco was at the zenith of her career. He was also an honoured guest of Henri III's court at Navarre. He was celebrated for his dissolute life.

[4] See K. Duncan-Jones, "The Poems of Sir Robert Sidney", *English*, 30.136 (1981) pp. 3-71. Robert and Mary Sidney's subordinate relationship to their brother is examined in Elizabeth Mazzola, "Brother's Keepers and Philip's Siblings: The Poetics of the Sidney Family", Wayne State University Press, 1999 at http:/www.findarticles. com. Gale Group, 2000. Mazzola quotes Henry Sidney's celebrated letter to his younger son in which he tells him to imitate his elder brother – rather than his father – in all things:"What do I blunder at thyes thyngys, follo the dyrectyon of your most loving brother, who in loving you, is comparable with me, or exceldyth me. Imitate hys virtues, exercyses Studyes, & accyons ; he ys a rare ornament of thys age, the very formular, that all well dysposed young Gentlymen of ouer Court, do form allsoe thear maners & lyfe by. In troth I speake yt without flattery of hym, or of my self, he hathe the most rare virtues that ever I found in any man […] Ons again I say Imytate hym."

[5] See Introduction to J.A. Roberts (ed.), *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press, 1983, p. 5. Page numbers given hereafter to quotations from Wroth will refer to this edition.

[6] *Loc. cit*.

[7] See *Sidneiana*, web site edited by Gavin Alexander under the heading *A Very Godly Letter* (1591), copyright Ceres, www.english.cam.ac.uk.

[8] Unfortunately of his eleven children only six survived to adulthood.

[9] See J.A. Roberts (ed.), *The Poems*… cit., p. 14

[10] Roberts quotes a letter from the Countess of Pembroke to Wroth's mother, Barbara Gamage, which closes "my blessing to my pretty Daughter" (*Ibid.*, p. 15).

[11] *Ibid*., pp. 14-15.

[12] See Appendix: The Correspondence of Lady Mary Wroth, I. Lady Mary Wroth to Queen Anne, in *Ibid.,* pp. 233-234.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 13.

[14] This was *The Masque of Blackness* by Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones: Lady Mary impersonated the Ethiopian nymph Baryte ("heaviness") and her face and arms were painted black. In 1608 she appeared in the *Masque of Beauty*.

[15] Now in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C. (Folger MS V.a. 104)

[16] Wroth began composing the *Urania* in about 1618-1620.

[17] One wonders indeed if the baby James, born after ten years of childlessness, and only a month before the death of Sir Robert Wroth may not have been Herbert's – he was in fact the child's deputy godfather instead of the King for whom the baby was named. From the slight evidence which attests to the existence of the other two children it appears that William at least was already at Penshurst in 1615, so born very quickly after James.

[18] His poems, originally written as "answer-poems" and circulated in manuscript form within the Sidney circle, were collected and published posthumously by John Donne's son in 1660 under the title *Poems Written by the Right Honorable William Earl of Pembroke Lord Steward of his Majesties Houshold. Whereof Many of which are answered by way of Repartee, by Sir Benjamin Ruddier, Knight*.

[19] See C. Malcolmson, "George Herbert and Coterie Verse" in *Renaissance Poetry* (ed. Ead.), London, Longman, 1998, p. 205.

[20] I should add here that *Urania* possesses *roman-à-clef* elements, and may occasionally be seen to satirize the court of James I. These elements were recognized as such by Wroth's contemporaries, some of whom attacked her openly.

[21] See Jesús Cora Alonso, "Counterbalancing the Canon in Renaissance Studies: (Mis)reading Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621)", University of Alcalà (Spain), jesus.cora@uah.es

[22] J.A. Roberts (ed.), *The Poems*… cit., p. 48.

[23] See J. Laws, "Gender and Genre in the Sonnet Sequences of Philip Sidney and Mary Wroth" University of Otago Department of English, *Deep South*, II n. 1 (1996) deep.south@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

[24] Roberts points out the expertise with which Wroth follows in her uncle's footsteps. Besides the fact that she wrote no less than 105 sonnets, 83 in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, 19 in the published *Urania*, and three in the Newberry manuscript, she uses 28 different rhyme schemes (see J.A. Roberts (ed.), *The Poems*… cit., p. 47, note 16).

[25] S. Lobanov-Rostovsky, "Taming the Basilisk", in *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (eds. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio), London, Routledge, 1997, p. 197.

[26] For Wroth's position in the pantheon of English Petrarchist poetry see the section devoted to her poetry (translation and commentary S. Payne) in M. Domenichelli (ed.), *Petrarca in Europa*, pp. 436-445 and 519-523.

[27] K. Duncan-Jones (ed.), *Sir Philip Sidney: A Selection of his Finest Poems*, Oxford, OUP, 1994, p. x.

[28] See G. Waller, "The Sidney Family Romance: Gender Construction in Early Modern England", in *Reading Mary Wroth: Representing Alternatives in Early Modern England* (ed. N.J. Miller and G. Waller), Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991, p. 55.

[29] *Loc. cit.*

[30] These two basic types are thus definable: i) the Italian type is divided into an octave + a sestet (abbaabba + cdecde, cdcdcd or cdedce). The octave presents a narrative, raises a question or states a proposition to which the sestet then responds; ii) the English type uses four divisions: three quatrains + a rhymed couplet for a conclusion. The quatrains can have different rhyme schemes, but the typical pattern is abab cdcd efef gg. There is, rarely, a third type, called the Spenserian, which complicates the English/Shakespearian form by linking rhymes in the quatrains: abab bcbc cdcd ee.

[31] See J.A. Roberts (ed.), *The Poems…* cit., p. 122, n. 9.

[32] Page numbers after quotations from Petrarch come from the edition of the *Canzoniere* edited by Alberto Chiari (Milano, Mondadori, 1985).

[33] Katherine Duncan-Jones insists in her critical work upon Wroth's dependence upon her father's fairly exiguous poetical production and both she and Roberts point to Robert Sidney's incomplete *corona* as a source for Wroth's. In fact Robert Sidney's work consists of only four sonnets and a quatrain of the fifth – could it be that he could not complete this work because it was simply too difficult?

[34] See Mary Moore's informative essay "The Labyrinth as Style in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, (XXXVIII), no. 1, 1998, pp. 109-126.

[35] See C. Malcolmson, "George Herbert…", cit., p. 205.

[36] *Loc. cit.*, and quoted Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977, pp. 85, 89.

[37] See Macdonald's review of R.E. Pritchard (ed.), *Lady Mary Wroth: Poems. A Modernized Edition.* Staffordshire, Keele U.P., 1996, in *Early Modern Literary Studies*, XII (1997), pp. 1-5.

[38] See the Introduction to M. Wynne-Davies (ed.), *Women Poets of the Renaissance*, London, Dent, 1998, pp. xix-xxi.

[39] The modern edition of her *Rime* contains 390 poems: 140 love poems, mostly written between 1526 and the early 1530's; 270 spiritual poems, the greater part from the 1530'sand 1540's and 32 epistolary poems.

[40] "Here my shining sun came back to me/Laden with booty worth a king's ransom/Ah! How painful when my glance falls/On the places his presence made bright./His crown was of palm and bays/He was recompensed with honour and glory alone/In his eager face, his wise and noble speech one could understand/Why people believed in his reputation./Conquered by my pleas he here showed me/ His proud wounds and when and how/ He won his many famous victories./The Joy I experienced then now gives me as much pain./And as the memories follow one another, I rejoice while weeping/Some sweet and many bitter tears" (My literal translation).

[41] S. Cavallo, L. Warner, *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, New York, Longman, 1999.

[42] See L. Stortoni-Hager,"Women Writers of the Italian Renaissance", in *Italia and Italy*, II, 5, (2000): "The 'honorable' courtesans, trained as they were

in singing, metrics, dancing, Latin and Greek, could paint, write poetry, converse wittily and hold philosophical debates". (p. 1)

[43] V. Franco, *Rime* (ed. S. Bianchi), Milano, Mursia, 1995, p. 171.

[44] "As sometimes from heaven to a humble home/Benign Jupiter descends to us here below/And, so that earthly eyes are not blinded/ By such a heavenly sight, takes on a human form/In such a way, to my poor dwelling-place/ Without that royal pomp that dazzles and shines/Came Henri, elected to such a vast dominion/ That a single world cannot contain it./Although he came in disguise he impressed upon my heart/ His divine value/So that my natural strength deserted me. /And since he was sure of my great affection,/He took my portrait, worked in coloured enamel, away with him, with gracious open spirit." (My literal translation)

[45] M. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, London, Chicago University Press, 1992, pp. 42-43.

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[47] "No more words! To deeds, to the field, to arms!/For as I am resolved on dying, I want to free myself/From such merciless mistreatment./Should I call this a challenge? I do not know/Since I am responding to a provocation;/But why should we fight over words?/ If you like I will say you challenged me;/ If not, I challenge you; or any way/I'll pick it up, I'll take any opportunity/You may choose the place and the weapons./And I will make any choice that is left/ Rather, you can be the arbiter of everything.[…] Come here, and, full of the most wicked skill,/braced stiff for your sinister work,/bring with daring hand a piercing blade./Whatever weapon you bring to me/I shall willingly take, especially if it is sharp/And sturdy and also swift to wound./From your naked breast all armour must be stripped,/So that unshielded from any wounding blows,/it may display the valour hid within./Let no-one else intervene in this contest,/only we two alone, behind closed doors/With all seconds sent away […] To avenge myself for your unfair attack/I'd climb upon you and in daring combat/as you too caught fire in your own defence,/I'd die with you felled by the same blow./Oh vain hopes, over which cruel fate/Makes me weep for as long as I live! But hold up, my strong, undaunted heart,/And with the final agony of that villain/ Avenge your thousand deaths with his one:/Then end your own suffering with the same blade." (My literal translation).

[48] N.J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Women and Scattered Rhyme", in C. Malcolmson, in *Renaissance Verse*, cit., pp.107-121.

THE POET AND THE MUSE. ISABELLA LICKBARROW AND LAKELAND ROMANTIC POETRY

Where is she?
Nature/Art
Activity/Passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night
Father/Mother
Head/Heart Intelligible
Palpable Logos/Pathos
[…]
Nature/History
Nature/Mind
Passion/Action

(Hélène Cixous, “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays” in *The Newly Born Woman*, 1975/1986.)

1. Who is Isabella? Where is she? The Quaker Lake Poet of Kendal, Lancashire, Isabella Lickbarrow, still hides herself within the folds of history, although her poetry, in particular the volume *Poetical Effusions 1814*, has been the subject of scholarly articles by Stuart Curran and Duncan Wu [1] after its publication in the Woodstock Facsimile Series with a preface by Jonathan Wordsworth [2]. Various interesting details as to her life and relationship with the subscribers to her work are also emerging from Constance Parrish, a Lickbarrow expert from Ambleside, in *Notes and Queries*. These have already contradicted the first suppositions as to her status in life and her education – she is very definitely not

the "labouring class poet" she was first supposed to be [3]. Indeed Parrish's first major contribution to the research on Lickbarrow [4] apart from giving us the dates of her birth and death (Kendal, 1784-1847), gives proof of the continuation of her work, thought to be limited to the abovementioned *Poetical Effusions* and the successive publication, *A Lament for Princess Charlotte and Alfred: A Vision,* of 1818. Parrish has found works published in the *Westmorland Advertiser*, *The Monthly Repository* and *The Lonsdale Magazine* up until 1840.

Parrish also emphasizes the fact that as Lickbarrow was the daughter of Quakers she was almost certain to have had a good education "probably at the Quaker boarding school in Kendal where John Dalton taught before going to Manchester" [5]. Dalton (1766-1844), himself a Quaker, was related to the Lickbarrow family [6] by marriage; and in his will he left "£ 900 divided in three equal parts to my relations Isabella, Rachel and Margaret Lickbarrow", also making ongoing provision for the sisters in case of the death of any one of them. Isabella's father is described as "schoolmaster" in the Westmorland Register of Births, so perhaps he was also a colleague of Dalton's. The sisters kept a school in Kendal for a short period until the two younger ones were admitted to the Lancaster Lunatic Asylum suffering from what was termed hereditary melancholia, Rachel twice attempting suicide. As they had been deprived of their mother in infancy (Isabella, the eldest was only five when her mother died), this could have been a contributing factor. It transpires from the only nineteenth century reference to Lickbarrow, in the issue of *Notes and Queries* of 17 February 1866, nearly twenty years after her death, that she too had been a patient of the Asylum, but this has not yet been documented.

2. An interesting feature of Isabella Lickbarrow's first volume of poetry is the prefatory list of the subscribers who made its publication possible. The list is a long one, counting 366 names and accounting for the sale of 449 copies of the volume. Many of these names are well known ones in the locality and four are famous: John Dalton (who ordered four copies), Thomas De Quincey, Robert Southey and William Wordsworth.

The researchers into her existence all cite the forewords to her two published works to define her, though this "fashioning", it is

probably fair to say, should not be looked on as part of her own "self-fashioning", as both are far too conventionally male-eye views of a "poor orphan child", and a female one to boot. The first one prefaces the collection *Poetical Effusions*:

> The benevolence of kind friends suggested the present publication to the Authoress, who after the domestic employments of the day, had secretly indulged herself in "wooing the Muse" at intervals stolen from repose. And the intention of those kind friends, was, to assist the humble labours of herself and her orphan sisters, by raising from the generosity of the public a little fund, which would increase their family comforts and better their condition in life. Such being the 'End and Aim' of this intrusion upon the public, the Authoress intreats their indulgence and that of her friends, and presents her most grateful acknowledgements for the generous patronage she has received. To the friends of herself and her family, the Authoress would not have intruded one word more, as they are fully acquainted with the means by which she obtained the assistance of the books she has read. Yet as her reading has been limited, even after the kindness of her friends, she has not had the opportunity of consulting the Authors, whose lines she may have adopted, or of remarking similar thoughts, that may have appeared in the works of her predecessors. She wishes to disclaim every idea of plagiarism, but as the enlightened reader into whose hands these 'Poetical Effusions' may fall, will soon discover where she may unwittingly have borrowed the expressions of others, or made use of similar language naturally arising from the contemplation of similar subjects, she hopes under these circumstances every candid allowance will be made." (Preface to Isabella Lickbarrow, *Poetical Effusions*, Kendal, M. Branthwaite and Co., 1814).

The second is placed at the beginning of her next, much shorter, published work, which consists of two long poems, one on the occasion of the death of Princess Charlotte, the heir to the English throne, the daughter of the Prince Regent, soon to be George IV and whose dissipated character was disapproved of by the great majority of his subjects. Perhaps because of this, his daughter was the more loved, and her death in childbed occasioned, as we shall see later, a large number of poems mourning her:

> The following pieces were written by a young Female in humble life, a native of Kendal, to beguile her leisure moments. She is an orphan, unlettered, and of exemplary character Her friends have recommended the present publication, and they would hope that it will not be found unworthy of the notice and kindness of the liberal public. Self-instructed, she is indebted to herself only, for what little knowledge she may possess; and this circumstance, it is hoped, will disarm, as candour must deprecate, the severity of criticism. (Preface to Isabella Lickbarrow, *A Lament upon the Death of Her Royal Highness Princess Charlotte, And Alfred. A Vision*, Liverpool, printed by G.F. Harris's widow and brothers, 1818)

What transpires from these prefaces? Who is Isabella here? How may we classify her? In the first Preface she is suitably *grateful*. Secondly she is not, it would seem, the person who is taking the initiative in this venture of publicly "raising her voice" – the "suggestion", the "intention", in a word, the action towards publication is all on the part of her social "superiors", her part is still appropriately passive rather than active, and the voice she would apparently have preferred is the whispered one of secrecy. All this not so much to earn a well-deserved fee, to give value for money as it were, but to help her benefactors feel even more benevolent, to eke out her "humble labours" and help her "orphan sisters" with work which becomes implicitly more humble to match as the "Apology" continues, and the cost of the volume increasingly an act of charity. A word of thanks for books to read seems obligatory, and yet here again Lickbarrow, although she does not apologise for being able to make use of them, underlines the fact that she has not read too much (for her station in life?): her reading has been "limited".

The final part of the preface is perhaps the most interesting. She feels the need to preclude any charge of plagiarism, but says candidly that if this charge should be brought it is not deliberate but simply because similar language is used by different people on the contemplation of similar subjects. In the second Preface, of 1818, she is again obliged to underline her ignorance – but as she has already dared to publish she feels it necessary to emphasize her virtue. And once again the initiative to publish is taken from her. The second Preface is even more amusing in that here Lickbarrow apologises not only for reading but for learning from what she has

read – it seems almost that she is saying that she only is culpable for having taught herself. And here, at last, we stumble upon our old friend "unletter'd". Fortunately Portia taught us to beware of that one.

So far however, if we have recourse to the categorizing opposites cited by Cixous in the epigraph to this essay, Isabella falls neatly on the side of *passivity* (she lets others speak for her unless she cannot do otherwise), *mother* (she is taking over the maternal role by caring for her sisters), *heart* (she is grateful, affectionate, feeling) – which leads of course to *pathos* and not *logos* and thus to *nature* (she is "unletter'd" – that is, uncultured). She is thus gendered "female" before we have had the chance to read one word of her work.

Much has now been discovered about the way in which early nineteenth-century women poets were considered and also about the way(s) in which they considered themselves. Enough indeed for us to fully understand the linguistic strategies at work behind these two forewords. Isabella Lickbarrow is right to compose her preface according to the tactics of an over-modest *captatio benevolentiae* addressed to her potential readers, whether she is doing so autonomously or whether she is following the advice of her publisher. Lickbarrow and her contemporary women poets were writing far more extensively than would be acknowledged until recently – there was even a terminology to describe them – but as soon as it was invented it was transformed into the pejorative mode and "literary lady" and "bluestocking" were not used eulogistically [7]. And as for the final section of the Preface, concerning literary debt, if we accept what Lickbarrow is saying as true then she is more or less conforming to the age-old task of literary amanuensis or at least of pupil rather than that of artist or teacher.

3. However this may be, the Forewords are extremely interesting documents when they are contrasted to the poetry they introduce. Since Duncan Wu's meticulous research on the literary history behind Lickbarrow's poetry, the first sentence of the preface to *Poetical Effusions* gives a clue to the fact that Lickbarrow is not being completely sincere. It would seem from the affirmation she makes there that she is a neophyte, or at least an amateur, both to poetry writing and to publishing. In fact, as Wu demonstrates,

many of her poems had been published singly on the poetry page of the weekly broadsheet, *The Westmorland Advertiser, or Kendal Chronicle* from its founding in 1811, under the aegis of Isaac Steele. In the "small space on the back page" reserved for poetry, Steele had habitually published the works of other local contributors, in addition to that of other more famous poets, Byron among them [8]. Lickbarrow upholds her status as literary *ingénue* in her opening poem:

TO THE MUSE

Belov'd companion of my early years!
My friend in solitude, my secret joy!
Dear were the soothing whispers of thy voice,
Dear were thy visits in my lonely hours,
When like a smiling angel, sent to bless,
Thy presence could beguile a sense of grief.
With thee, through many a devious wood's deep shade
And various featur'd vale, along the banks
Of rock-imprison'd rivers have I roam'd;
Oft when the welcome day of ease arriv'd,
Free from confinement, and depressive toil,
With heart elated, as the exulting stag
When ranging o'er his mountain pastures free,
I've stray'd to meet thee in thy fav'rite haunts,
The heights which rise o'er Kendal's lovely vale.
There, far from observation's curious eye,
Lightly I bounded o'er th'elastic turf,
Ascending ev'ry rocky hillock's brow,
My heart expanding as I look'd around.
Thus sweetly pass'd the summer's eve away,
Tlii sunk beneath dark Langdale's distant pikes,
The setting sun threw his diverging rays
In bending arches o'er the azure plain.
In secret shades alone I woo'd thee then
By stealth, nor to the world durst tell my love;
But now, when in the face of day I've own'd
Our secret friendship, say wilt thou repay
With kindness my long faithful love to thee?
(pp.1-2, ll. 1-28)

She also continues with the evident fiction that she is only writing as a pastime to fill in the hours she can steal from household duties, as a hobby or better as a supplementary source of income

rather than a profession or a vocation, not even a gendered vocation. This is not to say that in effect Lickbarrow did not spend more hours looking after her "orphan sisters", busying herself with her "domestic employments", and her "humble labours". And the money she may have raised from the sale of her poetry would definitely have been of great use to her and her family. But the quality of this poetry belies the alibis she has to concoct to be allowed to indulge in it, let alone publish it and, perhaps, even, (oh, horror!) sell it [9].

Both the form and the content of Lickbarrow's poetry betray a professional mind at work, if we agree with the Chambers Dictionary definitions of *profession*, whether "undertaken as a means of subsistence, as opposed to *amateur*", or "a non-manual occupation requiring some degree of learning or training; a calling, habitual employment" and *professional* as "showing the skill, artistry, demeanour or standard of conduct appropriate in a member of a profession". The poetry Lickbarrow writes is noteworthy for its formal variety and skill as much as for its rich and erudite lexis: Curran notes the "strength, resilience and idiomatic ease" and the "rare inventiveness" of her blank verse and the "myth-making power" present in her use of imagery and metaphor [10]. And Jonathan Wordsworth emphasises the breadth of her imagination:

> Though anchored in a particular landscape, Lickbarrow's poetry is not, in a limiting sense, regional. She lives and writes in Cumbria, but it does not bound her imagination or restrict her awareness. Austen may ignore the Napoleonic War; Lickbarrow in far-away Cumbria has humanitarian poetry on the news of a battle, prophetic poetry on post-Napoleonic Europe [11].

He also points out the fact that when, in "The Naiad's Complaint" Lickbarrow's lyric "I" wanders through the sublime beauties of nineteenth-century Cumbria and exclaims:

> Nor greater pleasure could Columbus feel,
> When first beyond the Trans-Atlantic deep
> His wandering eye beheld another world,
> Than I, when in my wand'rings I have found
> Some sweet sequester'd spot unknown before [...]
> (p. 10, ll. 11-15)

she is doing so in poetry which predates Keats's "stout Cortez" by three years and the publication of Wordsworth's *Michael* drafts by more than a century [12].

Indeed, if we leaf through Lickbarrow's poetry, especially through *Poetical Effusions* we may discern much of what is typical of "Lakeland" poetry (and prose) at its best. There is for example, an eye for natural detail and a love for the small flowers of the countryside which places her (as it does Wordsworth) squarely in the tradition of much domestic English poetry, whose engagement with botany was such that John Clare (himself one of the rarer spirits of this tradition) said of the descriptions of flowers in Elizabeth Kent's *Flora Domestica* when it came out in 1823: "The account of them is poetry" [13]. In Lickbarrow's poem "Written in Early Spring" the effect is particularly happy:

> […]
> The lowly daisy first its bud unfolds,
> The shining king-cup spreads its golden leaves,
> 'Mid secret shades the purple violet blows,
> And with its fragrant breath perfumes the air –
> Half hid beneath a tuft of shelt'ring leaves,
> The primrose opes its mild imploring eye –
> And still as lovely with retiring charms,
> The cowslip bends its modest head to earth.
> Even on the wild uncultivated waste
> Her smile rekindles vegetable life,
> And bids some inobtrusive flow'rets grow –
> The fragrant wild-thyme, and the mountain gem,
> The gay tormentil, bloom unheeded there;
> The rugged rock with moss of every form,
> And every varying colour she adorns […] (p. 7, ll. 53-67)

This poem constitutes a particularly interesting piece of precision work as it opens with the change of season from winter to spring, and the colours used are varying shades of blue from dark to azure, white and yellow which brighten the "rugged spots of earth". When the details of the landscape are described towards the end of the poem, the wildflowers chosen as microcosm of the whole are those within the same range of colour – even the thyme (mauve or blue) and the tormentil (yellow) conforming to this.

4. The idiom of the Romantic sublime is also made her own as Lickbarrow meditates on solitude in the poem of that title: and here again her pleasure in outdoor freedom and adventure is made apparent, together with her love of her native countryside, that corner of southeast Cumbria where Kendal is situated:

> […]
> Thy most conceal'd recesses, would I trace,
> Thy loneliest haunts, thy rudest scenes explore; […]
> Where Ken or Mint's pellucid waters roll
> With thund'ring sound, steep rugged banks beneath,
> Struggling and foaming with th'impeding rocks,
> Or where yon wall of limestone cliffs extends,
> The native boundary of the stony waste,
> Forming a vast and rugged precipice,
> From whose rough heights th'enraptur'd eye surveys,
> At one wide view, three sister counties round;
> Or whether lodg'd in some deep cavity,
> Of those high mountains, whose stupendous brows
> Frown awful o'er the sweet sequester'd vale […]
> 'Mid scenes like these, where every charm unites,
> The wild, the beautiful, and the sublime,
> With thee blest power I'd gladly pass my days,
> Drink inspiration thy lov'd haunts among […] (pp. 5-6, ll. 35-65)

In these poems we have a series of examples of Lickbarrow's extreme confidence with and mastery of the blank verse form. Curran quite rightly notes this as one of the ways in which Lickbarrow is indeed a Wordsworthian poet:

> Although a number of Lickbarrow's natural effusions […] recall such Wordsworthian thematics as the regenerative persistence of childhood memories in one's adult life and the symbiosis of human and natural life among the lakes of Cumbria, Lickbarrow does not come over as being a derivative poet. Wordsworth's influence appears most to be felt where a later observer would most wish to see his imprint, in fostering independent poetic skills. The first eleven poems of Lickbarrow's *Poetical Effusions* are not by any means what such a title would lead the reader to expect: they are written in a blank verse of strength, resilience and idiomatic ease. The reclaiming of blank verse for English poetry is a chief legacy of Wordsworth

> to his contemporaries […] Moreover, there is a rare inventiveness in these blank-verse effusions of Lickbarrow's [14].

5. But Lickbarrow's technical expertise does not end here. Throughout the volume she shows herself to be extremely proficient in many different verse forms: and her subject matter is also highly diversified (here I differ from Curran, who observes: "Lickbarrow is faced with the endemic problem of all unlettered and sequestered poets, the limitation of subject matter [15]"). As Anne Mellor points out, there was already a strong tradition among Quaker women that public speaking and writing were authorized by a divine Inner Light: since the seventeenth century they had been preaching in public and even writing poetry. Mellor adds:

> Identifying themselves as the voice of Christian virtue, answerable to no merely mortal male, such female evangelical preachers as Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, Sarah Crosby, Susanna Wesley, Sarah Cox, Francis Pawson, Hester Ann Rogers, Mary Tooth and scores of others, many of whom published autobiographies, memoirs and polemical tracts, had by 1780 established both a social practice and a literary precedent for a woman to speak publicly on both religious and political issues [16].

Lickbarrow's poetry engages with many topical matters, in particular the terrible war that had been continuing ever since she could remember. Her condemnation of this is forthright and makes no concession to glory. In the poem "Written at the Commencement of the Year 1813" she first commiserates with the people of Europe:

> […]
> E'er since my heart could feel for human kind
> I've heard of naught but wars and desolation,
> Of cities given to the devouring flames;
> Of once fair countries ravag'd and laid waste;
> Their fertile vallies turn'd to fields of death;
> Where, sad to tell, brothers, and sons, and sires,
> Together fell, and shar'd one common grave:
> Those who surviv'd, when the dread work was done,
> Compell'd to leave their much-lov'd native fields,
> Their wives and children unprotected all –
> To fight and perish in a distant land. (pp. 17-18, ll. 10-20)

When she goes on to apostrophise her own native land, thanking "the rugged rocks and ocean's troubl'd waves" even before "the guardian arm of heav'n" for England's safety from invasion, she still counts the cost that makes "…many a beauteous maid and widow mourn/For the dear objects of their tend'rest love/And many a mother for her gallant sons". In the following poem, "An Invocation to Peace" we hear the voice of the inhabitant of an industrial town reminding us of the practical meaning of peace, and the real meaning of glory – that of "social harmony" rather than "victory":

> Then arts and manufactures would revive,
> And happy Industry rejoice again;
> Then friendly Commerce would unfurl her sails,
> No hostile natives, armed with bolts of death,
> Would meet in dreadful conflict on the deep,
> But freighted vessels laden with the fruits
> Of ev'ry varied clime would crowd our ports,
> And flags of ev'ry land wave round our shores
> In social harmony, a glorious sight –
> To generous minds, yielding more genuine joy,
> Than dearly purchas'd trophies won by war
> From ev'ry different region of the globe. (p. 20, ll. 33-44)

This more Radical viewpoint, present in many of her poems, in which there is an implicit criticism of war, and besides sympathy for the young men who are losing their lives empathy for the suffering of the women who lost them, is carried out in the only manuscript extant (so far) in Lickbarrow's own hand. Constance Parrish's invaluable research has unearthed a letter from Lickbarrow to Lord Lonsdale, the powerful Cumbrian landowner, on whose estate Wordsworth's father had been steward. In this letter, dated 25th November 1818, Lickbarrow, in no uncertain terms, albeit courteously, refuses a "donation" of ten guineas from Lonsdale:

> […] could I have persuaded myself that it would be as honourable in me to accept, as in you to bestow it, I should have recieved (*sic*) it with gratitude. But I feel that to accept it would be acting disingenuously towards your Lordship, and fear that I either incur the imputation of ingratitude or inconsistency.
> [I] beg permission from your Lordship to decline it it (*sic*)

> was not without much anxiety that I adopted this resolution, but felt it necessary for the peace of my mind [17].

As Parrish points out, the refusal of such a sum in 1818 on the part of an impoverished gentlewoman "shows great strength of character and an independent spirit". Parrish continues:

> No evidence has yet been found to indicate Isabella Lickbarrow's reasons for returning such a handsome gift, but 1818 was a sensitive time in the history of Kendal, where she lived. During the Elections for Members of Parliament in that year the worst riots the town had ever known took place. The Tory candidates, the two sons of Lord Lonsdale, Lord Lowther (1787-1872) and Colonel Henry Lowther (1790-1867), entered Kendal with yeomanry and there was a running battle with the rioters on Nether bridge, about 300 yards away from Lickbarrow's home in Greenhow Yard. Wordsworth's support for the Lonsdale cause in this Election is well known. Most Quakers supported the Whig Radical Henry Brougham, therefore Lickbarrow may have regarded it as an act of disloyalty to receive a gift from Lord Lonsdale [18].

One imagines she may also have been an eyewitness to acts of violence wreaked upon the rioters, and in "A Soliloquy" she muse upon the fact that

> […] even wealth can cancel nature's ties;
> And make the heart insensible and cold;
> Int'rest the firmest friends can disunite,
> Ev'n ardent love may be subdued by gold. (p. 107, ll. 9-12)

However this may be, Lickbarrow here not only seems to have a strong personality, but also a desire to participate in social and political issues in no uncertain manner. Indeed one of the previously unpublished poems, quoted in full in Duncan Wu's article, gives Lickbarrow's views on the slave trade: "[…] that barb'rous trade/The curse of Afric, Europe's foul disgrace." She also pronounces, in the poem "On Hope" against the condition of the miners:

Ask him condemn'd in dreary mines,
To toil through slow revolving years,
On whom the light of heav'n ne'er shines,
Nor sounds of joy salute his ears, —

Ask him what arms his manly mind
Against the horrors of despair;
What makes him with a soul resign'd,
His heavy load of misery bear. (p. 48, ll. 17-24)

6. In her second volume, as has already been briefly mentioned, she engages with a topic which had captured the imagination of many of her fellow poets, the tragic death in childbed on the 6th November 1817, of Princess Charlotte Augusta, twenty-one year old daughter of the Prince Regent (later King George IV) and wife of Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg [19]. Stephen Behrendt observes that many of these poems "were almost invariably formulaic and artificial, perhaps because the general insincerity of the sentiments they expressed was often matched only by the affectation reflected in their ornate and elaborately allusive inkhorn style [20]". As a cultural phenomenon however they constitute a fascinating corpus of texts and it is interesting to find Lickbarrow, supposedly so limited and sequestered, joining her voice to those of Barbauld, Byron, Southey, Hemans and Landon, among many others. Behrendt does not mention Lickbarrow's contribution to the literature on Princess Charlotte, and although this is comprehensible – quite obviously choices had to be made in the vast quantity of material available on this subject – it would have been interesting had Lickbarrow's poem been included in the analysis Behrendt carries out in Chapter 4 of his book, the chapter entitled "Women's Responses".

Here Behrendt, following the theory mooted by Anne Mellor of a "male" and a "female" romanticism, analyses the poems of five of better known women poets of the day, Mary Cockle, Margaret Sarah Croker, Susanna Watts, Anna Letitia Barbauld and Felicia Hemans and a sixth, examined first, as she was the first woman poet to address the issue of Charlotte's death, who is anonymous (she signs herself "A Lady"), and who starts her poem, *Lines addressed to Prince Leopold*:

> Afflicted Stranger! Let a heart sincere
> Shed o'er thy woes the sympathetic tear.
> At thought of that accumulated woe
> I vainly strive to check the tears which flow.
> At one sad stroke, thy Son, thy Consort, lost,
> Thy prospects vanish'd and thy comforts crost. (ll. 1-6) [21]

Behrendt finds that one of the most interesting aspects of this poem is that of its being addressed to the husband. He continues:

> Both the intensity and the sure measure of how 'sincere' is the heart that bends towards the prince are indicated by the fact that the poet addresses him as a 'stranger'. For to share so intensely the loss felt by one who is not of one's own immediate acquaintance is a mark of one's own capacity for 'sympathy' in […] Hume's and Shelley's use of the word […] The ready and apparently unstaunchable tears are a convention of mourning rituals, of course, but one that is traditionally associated more often with women than with men, especially when the tears cannot be stopped but go on, as here, in a display of unchecked emotionality.

Lickbarrow's poem opens in a way similar to that of the anonymous "Lady":

> Exalted Stranger, may a muse unknown,
> Who claims one title for the task alone,
> A Briton's heart, unite her grief with thine
> For the lost hope of England's royal line?
> One earnest wish lives ever in her breast,
> One ardent hope is its perpetual guest,
> One warm emotion, strong above controul,
> One master-feeling fills, and fires her soul: (ll. 1-8)

Apart from the interest the whole work invites, with its complex structure and wealth of poetic styles [22], it is a linguistic detail which is of particular interest here: that of her adoption and application of the term "muse". The opening poem of *Effusions* is addressed to this entity and it/she is apostrophised frequently throughout the volume. What is significant however is that the term is used in two different acceptations, both as "poet" and as "muse" in the more customary sense [23]. When it is used in this last sense, the muse is,

as is appropriate, female – to quote just one instance, at the end of the long poem "The Pictures of Memory":

> The varied scenes which on her canvas rise,
> The gay descriptive muse to memory owes,
> Her pencil paints them, and her magic light
> O'er the bright views a vivid lustre throws.
>
> Each lovely groupe of images she forms,
> Receives its beauty from that pow'rful light,
> Whose mild reflected radiance sweetly plays
> O'er recollected scenes of past delight. (pp. 28-29 ll. 117-124)

But the term "muse" is often used as a synonym of "poet" – and here the issue of gender is far more ambiguous. The opening poem of *Poetical Effusions*, quoted above, describes the poet wooing the female muse like a (male) lover, and in the work entitled "On the Difficulty of Obtaining Poetic Excellence", the poet, or "bard", is invariably referred to in the masculine gender:

> But few the Delian god inspires
> With genuine true poetic fires;
> But few who bear the poet's name,
> Shall share the lasting wreath of fame:
> Of those who woo the wayward nine,
> Young suppliants at Apollo's shrine,
> Few live in the historic page,
> Beyond the limits of an age.
> […]
> He who would ask of future days
> Their dearest meed, the wreath of praise,
> Must boast a vig'rous active mind
> By culture aided and refin'd,
> Where genius, judgment, taste, conspire
> To form the bard "a soul of fire" –
> A heart whose feelings overflow
> With quickest sense of joy or woe;
> Within his breast, the muse's cell,
> No ruder passions e'er should dwell,
> Nor should anxiety, nor fear,
> Nor heart-consuming grief be there;
> […]
> And chief o'er ev'ry power beside,

Imagination should preside,
Who with one keen commanding glance
Makes æras, distant far, advance;
And from oblivion's dusky gloom,
Bids time's remotest ages come;
Or peoples regions of her own,
With her ideal forms alone,
Still to complete the poet's name,
To give him everlasting fame:
And to immortalize his song,
Harmonious language, rich and strong,
Should in spontaneous numbers flow,
And ev'ry thought with beauty glow. (p. 22, ll. 1-50)

Besides the evident influence of Wordsworthian poetics upon this meditation, and the skill with which Lickbarrow employs yet another verse form, her ambivalent attitude towards the gender of the poet is immediately apparent. The poet is masculine – yet his breast is "the muse's cell". He is also in thrall to "Imagination" – who is of course personified as feminine. From this first overlapping of genders Lickbarrow will progress to using "muse" in its acceptation as "poet" and in this way she obviates any necessity to use the masculine gender – and also that of using the derogatory form of "poetess". In "Verses Addressed to a Young Lady" she begins:

Will you, my absent friend, accept
The tribute of a Muse sincere?
This simple chaplet she has wove
To grace for you the new-born year.

My lov'd Eliza, never Muse
That sung of friendship's sacred flame,
Inspired a warmer breast than mine,
Nor honour'd e'er a dearer name.(p. 80, ll. 1-8)

And, when addressing her native countryside, she uses the same term it is qualified with the adjective "rural", as in "Lines Written on the Banks of the Eden, Near Kirkby Stephen":

From distant moor-land heights descending,
How swiftly rolls this stream away!

> Say, whither, Eden, art thou hasting?
> Stay, impetuous river, stay,
>
> And hear a rural muse address thee,
> Who thy steep woody banks along,
> By these rude scenes once more awaken'd,
> Pours again th'unstudied song. (p. 83, ll. 1-8)

She also deliberately undermines, here as elsewhere, an element of her poetry which is self-evident, and which each one of her recent critics have noticed and emphasised, that is to say her craftsmanship.

Again, when, in "Occasioned by Reading T. Wilkinson's *Elegy on Life*", she addresses one of those whom she considers a master in her craft, she adopts the same trope of modesty:

> Sweet Cumbrian bard, esteem'd and honour'd long,
> In youth belov'd, respected in thy age,
> Thine is each title to mankind endear'd,
> The social friend, the Christian and the sage.
>
> And many a young and inexperienc'd Muse,
> To thee a stranger, to the world unknown,
> Who courts the partial favours of the Nine,
> To charm her solitary hours alone,
>
> Oh may she thus, with rash, presumptuous pen,
> Address sweet Yanwath's much admired bard,
> And how will he, crowned with Parnassian wreaths,
> A maneless rhymer's uncouth lines regard,
>
> Whose song no sprightly wit nor talents grace,
> Nor hers the poet's energetic fire,
> Hers only are the feelings of the heart,
> And hers the artless strains which they inspire [...]
> (p. 91, ll. 1-16)

However this may be, it is clear from this excerpt that the game Lickbarrow is playing behind the smokescreen of the masculine gendered "poet" and the feminine gendered "muse" is allowing her, Quaker school-teacher and unmarried woman living in a small provincial town, to maintain her femininity and publish poetry at the same time.

7. This progression is also to be seen in her publishing *noms de plume*. The first poems she published in the *Advertiser* were signed *anon.,* but within a few months she had progressed from "L'Inconnu" (masculine gender) to "L'Amie" (feminine gender), and then gradually from "Interrogator" (neuter) to "Clio" (one of the muses) to "I.L." Nearly two years were to pass before she finally signed herself first Isabella L----W and then the following week (Saturday, March 12 1814) Isabella Lickbarrow.

Why, then, this contradiction between Lickbarrow as she presents herself to her public in her forewords and what transpires from her art. Why this opposition between the staid, hardworking, unlettered "young Female" (by 1818 she was actually 34 and already the author of one book – certainly not young by the standards of the nineteenth century and at this point demonstrably not unlettered), and the exultant figure bounding over the spring grass and up the Cumbrian mountain sides, with "heart expanding" in delight and endowed with the poetic skill in which to express this exultation, presented to us in the opening poem of *Poetical Effusions*. Let us return to the quotation from Cixous with which this essay opens.

One of the basic tenets of Cixous' work was that of the heterogeneity of feminine language and of the need to refuse the fixed meanings generated by the sets of binary oppositions cited above which rely for their meaning on the primary binary opposition male/female (where female always corresponds to the more negative term of the opposition). In this way the feminine is always subordinated to (or negated/eliminated by) the masculine. Cixous, with her refusal of the "old single-grooved mother-tongue" [24], envisaged the possibility of (women) writing away from these suffocating oppositions and thus liberating a space which permits multiplicity, variability and change and the *jouissance* which such freedom permits.

Although much of Lickbarrow's poetry betrays the anguish and frustration of living "between genders" as it were, and also, given her obvious culture and her even more obvious lack of means, between classes, there are some poems in which the simple joy of creation shines through and also the freedom to laugh at stultifying male conventions. The first of these, "To Eliza, On the First of January" is noteworthy as much for the skill with which Lickbarrow handles the rollicking metrical form she has chosen as

for the lightness and gaiety with which she talks of her beloved craft, and of the pleasure it gives her to exercise it as much as of the enjoyment she is certain it gives her readers:

> Once more the swift wheels of old Time's rapid chariot
> Have hastily roll'd months and seasons away;
> Once more we take leave of the gloom of December,
> And hail brighter prospects returning to day.
>
> Farewell to the year which is closed, for ever,
> Like a dream, or a vision of fancy 'tis o'er:
> Adieu to its toils, to its cares, and its pleasures;
> They'll return to perplex and delight us no more.
>
> But the year which is gone had one favourite pleasure,
> A charm of its own that endear'd it to me;
> A source of amusement the world may call folly –
> To me it was pleasure, since valued by thee.
>
> And shall I, my dearest Eliza, relinquish,
> A source of enjoyment so pure and refin'd;
> If I bid a reluctant adieu to the Muses,
> Where shall I such pleasing society find?
>
> [...]
>
> Thus Prudence her grave, sober lectures rehearses,
> But in vain – those enjoyments I cannot resign,
> While the ardour of fancy still glows in my bosom,
> While the feelings of joy, love and pity are mine.
>
> [...]
>
> When the wonders of nature no longer delight me;
> When its beauties no longer my lays can inspire;
> Then will I forsake the lov'd haunts of the Muses,
> And bid an eternal farewell to the lyre. (p. 65, ll. 1-44)

Her poem entitled "On the Fate of Newspapers" is another example of the versatility and humour which has been hidden so long from our enjoyment:

> What changes time's swift motion brings!
> What sad reverse of human things!

> What once was valu'd, highly priz'd,
> Is in a few short hours despis'd,
> I'll but solicit your attention,
> While I a single instance mention,
> The "*Advertiser*" you must know,
> Fresh from the Mint, not long ago,
> We welcom'd with abundant pleasure,
> Impatient for the mighty treasure,
> In what an alter'd state forlorn,
> 'Tis now in scatter'd fragments torn,
> Part wrapp'd around the kettle's handle,
> Part twisted up to light the candle,
> Part given to the devouring fire:
> Ah! see line after line expire;
> […]
> To think that what such wits have penn'd,
> Should come to this disgraceful end. (p. 73, ll. 1-30)

This is the caustic point of view of the housewife – who is also a poet (or, better, a muse). However, perhaps the most appropriate poem with which to end this essay is "The Disappointment", in which Lickbarrow identifies herself with a (provincial English) bard and once again, as is her wont, writes across gender and indeed across class:

> A bard, unlike the bards of yore,
> Who drew from Aganippe's well,
> Inspiring draughts of poesy,
> As their harmonious numbers tell;
> Unlike the Roman bard who lov'd
> The produce of Falernian vines,
> Which made (for elegance and wit)
> His songs unrivall'd as his vines:
> A hapless bard of modern days,
> Once tried some sonnets to produce,
> Unaided by the muse's spring,
> Or by the grape's enliv'ning juice;
> Nor copious draughts of ale he tried,
> When his invention prov'd too slow;
> Small beer was all he could afford,
> To make his tardy numbers flow,
> Two good stone bottles he had got,
> Anf with his fav'rite bev'rage fill'd,
> And cork'd the frisky liquor close,

In frugal houswif'ry well skill'd;
And thought when on a distant day
(A day he never was to see)
He drew his simple bev'rage forth,
How brisk and pleasant it would be,
The sequel how shall I relate?
The poet's beer was beer of spirit,
The bottles, near each other plac'd,
Quarrell'd about superior merit
[…]
The morn disclos'd a woeful scene,
The beer was swimming on the floor
The bottles scatter'd here and there,
Broke in a hundred bits or more. (p. 75, 1-36)

8. When we read poetry that has been mute because unread for centuries we cannot help feeling compassion for the poet who expended so much mental energy on her creations and hoped so much hope for them. But what is comforting in Isabella Lickbarrow's case is that we have written proof that not only did she create, but that she enjoyed creating. And, what is more, she knew that she did, and did so in a space that neutralised gender – either through etymology and philology, by the right use of the terms at her disposal, or by simply laughing at it. Perhaps, somewhere within the folds of time, Isabella is still "bounding o'er the elastic turf", her "heart expanding as [she] looks around".

[1] See S. Curran, "Isabella Lickbarrow and Mary Bryan: Wordsworthian Poets", and D. Wu, "Isabella Lickbarrow and the Westmorland Advertiser: A Literary Partnership", *The Wordsworth Circle*, XXVII, 2, (1996), pp. 113-118 and pp. 118-126 respectively.

[2] I. Lickbarrow, *Poetical Effusions 1814*, Poole, Woodstock Books, 1994. The page and line numbers of the poems here quoted are taken from this volume.

[3] Lickbarrow is anthologised in J. Goodridge's *English Labouring-Class Poets, Set II: Nineteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets, 1801-1900*, Pickering and Chatto, 2002. She is also to be found in Vol. II. of the excellent two volume parallel text anthology edited by L.M. Crisafulli, *Antologia delle poetesse romantiche inglesi*, Roma, Carocci, 2003, pp. 739-752, (translation and commentary by Susan Payne).

[4] C. Parrish, "Isabella Lickbarrow, Lakeland Quaker Poet: More Facts", *Notes and Queries*, 45, 2 (1998), pp. 200-202.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 200. Dalton was of course the eminent "chemical philosopher" who formulated the theory of atomic weights and was one of the first researchers

into colour blindness (with which he was afflicted and which is still sometimes termed Daltonism).

[6] See C. Parrish, "Isabella Lickbarrow's Relationship to John Dalton"... cit., p. 34.

[7] For Wordsworth's opinion on women writers see D. Kennedy, "Hemans, Wordsworth and the 'Literary Lady'", *Victorian Poetry*, XXXV, 3, (1999), p. 97.

[8] D. Wu, "Isabella Lickbarrow and..." cit., pp. 118-119. At first, as Wu points out, Lickbarrow had published anonymously but had progressed little by little first to initialling her work and then to signing it in full.

[9] For the often paradoxical and contradictory opinions on (Romantic women's) poetry as commodity see L. Mandell, "Felicia Hemans and the Gift-Book Aesthetic", *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text*, VI (2001). Online: Internet accessed 01/05/02. *<http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc06n01.-html>*

[10] S. Curran, "Isabella Lickbarrow and Mary Bryan..." cit., p. 114.

[11] J. Wordsworth, *The Bright Work Grows. Women Writers of the Romantic Age*, Poole. Washington D.C., Woodstock Books, 1997, p. 192.

[12] Wordsworth's 1800 drafts of *Michael* remained unpublished until the 1940s).

[13] See D. Chambers, "'A love for every simple weed': Clare, botany and the poetic language of lost Eden", in *John Clare in Context*, (eds. H. Haughton, A. Phillips and G.Summerfield) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 248.

[14] S. Curran, "Isabella Lickbarrow and Mary Bryan..." cit., p. 114.

[15] *Loc. cit.*

[16] A.K. Mellor, "The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1830", in *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730-1820* (eds. I. Armstrong and V. Blain), London, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 82-83.

[17] Cumbria Record Office, Carlisle Ref.D/Lons/L1/3/121. Cited in C. Parrish, "Isabella Lickbarrow to Lord Lonsdale: A Newly Discovered Letter", *Notes and Queries*, 46, 4 (1999), pp.448-449.

[18] *Loc. cit*.

[19] The Princess, who was the only child of the extremely unhappy marriage between the Prince Regent and Princess Caroline of Brunswick, had herself eventually made a successful marriage with Prince Leopold in 1816. This domestic and scandal-free match won the Royal couple great popularity, and when, after two miscarriages, the Princess managed to reach the full term in her third pregnancy, public interest and participation was great. Unfortunately the fashion in obstetrics at the time was for bleeding and severely limiting the diet, so when the Princess began her labour her weakness and the fact that the transverse position of the baby was mismanaged by her physicians told against her. After a labour of more than fifty hours the Princess was delivered of a stillborn son, and then, as the medical treatment after the birth was just as incompetent, she died of postpartum haemorrhage and shock the next day.

[20] S. Behrendt, *Royal Mourning and Regency Culture: Elegies and Memorials of Princess Charlotte*, London, Macmillan, 1997, p. 89.

[21] *Ibid*., p. 126.

[22] The work, as yet unpublished, is to be found among the texts made available on-line by the invaluable Brown University Women Writers Project http://textbase.wwp.brown.edu. It consists of an Address to Prince Leopold,

Charlotte's widower, followed by a lament delegated to a "Cambrian minstrel [...] an aged bard" reminiscent of Gray. This is the prelude to "Elegiac Scenes" in dramatic form: first two shepherdesses and a shepherd enter and after lamenting the Princess in their turn, lead the way to the spot where she is buried and listen first to the Dirge of the Sea Nymphs and then to that of the Wood Nymphs. These are followed by the shades of the Anglo-Saxon kings who are led by the shade of King Alfred in a "Welcome to the Invisible World".

[23] The S.O.E.D. gives *muse* in its main acceptation as "One of nine sister-goddesses, the offspring of Zeus and Mnemosyne regarded as the inspirers of learning and the arts, es p. of poetry and music [...] in classical poetry the Muse is often evoked as if there were only one". The last acceptation given is that by transference as "one under the guidance of the Muse, a poet".

[24] H. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (eds. E. Marks and I. de Courtivron), Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, p. 256.

"STONE WALLS DO NOT A PRISON MAKE": TWO POEMS BY ALFRED TENNYSON AND EMILY BRONTË

1. The prison motif is, not unexpectedly, a common one in Victorian poetry and it is presented and developed with particular effect by Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) in "Mariana" (1830) and by Emily Brontë (1818-1848) in "The Prisoner. A Fragment" (1846). The comparison of these two poems permits the examination of the differences in treatment of this motif by a male and a female poet, and the analysis of those problems of gender which inevitably transpire. One could almost say that during the Victorian era gender and entrapment are almost synonyms - even more so in the case of a female "prisoner" – and both Tennyson and Brontë were very much aware of this. The fact that both poets were in their twenties when they wrote these poems may also be significant, as they were equally of an age to be especially aware of what manipulation of the masculine and the feminine codes of behaviour meant to the artist and the poet.

I am sure it is not necessary to explain who these two poets were: both are well-known names. But I have deliberately chosen areas of their work which are not those for which they are principally considered. Alfred Tennyson was the Poet Laureate whose *In Memoriam* (1850) was Queen Victoria's main source of comfort during the mourning of her husband, the Prince Consort. Emily Brontë is of course first remembered for her novel *Wuthering Heights* and also for being the sister of Charlotte, author of *Jane Eyre* – and of Anne and Branwell. However she also produced a sizeable body of lyric and dramatic poetry which powerfully enacts the conflicts of a Victorian woman poet inheriting the genre of male Romantic verse. It is now becoming more and more obvious that

one of the most regrettable features of Brontë criticism has been to permit the strength of *Wuthering Heights* to overshadow that of the poetry, which is used simply to illustrate and strengthen points made about the novel. It is only quite recently that Emily's poems have been considered as something more than minor Victorian religious works, odd when one thinks of the terms contemporary critics used to describe *Wuthering Heights*: "coarse", ""brutal", "rough", "strange", "savage", "incult", "violent" and "rude" as well as "powerful" and "interesting". Not the sort of book to be written by the author of "minor Victorian religious verse".

Twenty-one of these were indeed the first things that Emily published, at the instigation of her sisters and in collaboration with them, as part of the volume *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* which was published in 1846 and which immediately went out of print. It is important to note that it was Emily who had been adamant upon the need for the pseudonym and who had insisted ferociously upon total anonymity of authorship [1].

Emily, who had probably been writing poetry since she was fourteen, began dating it in1836, four years later, and by 1844 had started transcribing it into two exercise books. One, which contains 31 poems, is untitled and the other, containing 44, bears the title "Gondal Poems" after the imaginary empire that Emily had invented together with her younger sister Anne and whose history they recounted in prose and verse.

The poem I wish to analyse in this essay would have belonged in this category – but Emily herself had already extracted and shortened it for inclusion in the 1846 anthology, removing at the same time all references to Gondal and adding the four final verses. In this way she turns a love story with a relatively happy ending into a symbolic work on vision which includes and elaborates all the main themes in her work and which possesses an intensity and sense of mystery far greater than that of the longer manuscript version. This was quite obviously how she wished to present her work to the public and in doing so she inevitably made it into the definitive version. (My analysis is completely the reverse of that of Margaret Homans who finds the first version to be the more authoritative one [2]). I should add that I first came across ll. 53-54 forty years ago in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* and thought they were by Emily Dickinson.

Tennyson's "Mariana", the poem I shall examine and compare with Brontë's, is also a little-known work if compared with "Ulysses" (1842), "In Memoriam" (1850) or "The Idylls of the King" (1859). Perhaps it has remained in the foreground of some minds as the subject of Millais' painting (a PreRaphaelite work of 1851 now to be found in Merton College, Oxford) in which the claustrophobia of boredom is so well combined with the *voluptas* of idleness. In many ways the young Tennyson was very different from the bearded sage and Poet Laureate to Queen Victoria that he was to become – but he was already a master of poetic form and euphony, so in his day this short poem was his first really celebrated work, receiving unqualified praise from even the most hostile critics. Later critics have noted that the poem, in its emphasis on mood and feeling anticipates the Preraphaelite school of poetry. As poetry of suggestion, rather than direct statement, "Mariana", as Marshall McLuhan put it "is there to prove that the most sophisticated symbolist poetry could be written fifty years before the symbolists" [3]. Harold Bloom considers Tennyson "like his precursor Keats, and like their common ancestor Spenser, [to be] one of the three most authentically erotic poets in the language" and *Mariana* "a marvellous poem of erotic repression" [4].

Two poems, then, that in one way or another, manage to evade the overridingly narrative tendency of much late Romantic and Post-Romantic English verse and to use poetry for more sophisticated ends. Two poems whose central *persona* is a woman, helpless and imprisoned: or is she? This is what I hope to find out, by analysing the relationship of the poets, the poetic voice/voices and the poems themselves to the questions of gender which are at the roots of both.

2. I shall turn to Tennyson first as "Mariana" is the earlier poem by about ten years. It appears in the poet's second published collection, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830). Franco Marucci points out that the qualification "chiefly" shows at once the author's awareness that this, like his first collection, *Poems by Two Brothers* (1827) – which appeared when he was only sixteen – was more of a miscellany than he had hoped [5]. "Mariana" would seem, on the face of it, to be a narrative poem: the unhappy love-story of the female protagonist named in the title, although its poetic form is that of the

ballad. Therefore the poet is ostensibly telling of someone other than himself, of something other than his feelings, distanced even more because this someone is female and not male. The poem is interesting because it may be seen, formally speaking, to find its place within the context of other early Victorian poetry, to lie, that is, between the subjectivity of much late Romantic poetry (in particular that of the Spasmodic poets) and the masked "I" of the dramatic monologue which was developed by Robert Browning and by Tennyson himself. This distancing is further emphasized by means of referring to an already existing fictitious figure which acts as a sort of framing device to the poem: for its title is followed by an epigraph "Mariana in the moated grange" which alludes specifically to the character of Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*. By citing the most authoritative voice in English literature Tennyson provides the reader with a powerful paratextual signal, although it is in fact a misquotation as Shakespeare does not actually speak of "Mariana in the moated grange" but, in the words of the Duke (III, I, 2779) states "There, at the moated grange resides this dejected Mariana". The deliberate misquotation foregrounds name and place and there is no doubt that the poet presupposed a knowledge of the play.

Shakespeare's Mariana is interesting in this context as she is a totally passive creature, foil to the more dynamic Isabel, and is prepared to marry Angelo even though he does not want her. And the Mariana of the poem also takes on this stereotypically feminine characteristic – passivity – and transmutes it into passion, passive passion if this is not a tautology on an etymological level. The basic opposition in this poem is in fact that of passivity vs. action and it is evident throughout the development of the "story" whereas, as we shall see, the more usually met with oppositions in Romantic and Post-Romantic works, Life/Death and Love/Death, underlined by Light/Dark, Day/Night are neutralized.

The poem consists of seven stanzas whose rhyme scheme already reflects the poet's project of giving the poem a form to "fit" its content, to echo it and to emphasize it. "Every short poem should have a definite shape," he wrote "like the curve, sometimes a single, sometimes a double one, assumed by a severed tress or the rind of an apple when it is flung on the floor" [6]. Although I do not even want to think of trying to fit *Mariana* on to the bed of

Procrustes that this probably quite random remark of Tennyson's would represent, the fact remains that the poem has a definite shape, conditioned by two factors, closure and repetition which Tennyson paradoxically manages to make interdependent.

Closure is first signalled by the number of verses, seven, which permits a central stanza, enclosed "within" three others, so to speak, a magical incantatory form. Then again the rhyme scheme, ababcddcefef, a couplet within a couplet enclosed inside two quatrains, is that type of Chinese-box-like structure that according to Freud was the symbol for the female genitals, like the head of Medusa, another Freudian symbol for the same, feared not desired. Do not let us forget that Freud, despite his greatness, was also a nineteenth-century bourgeois European male.

So, significantly, at the centre of each verse there is the essence of the feminine in formal terms as well as in those of content – especially, and this will be important for the point I wish to make, from a masculine point of view. The formal technique of embedding may be seen as a kind of repetition, so here we have a first instance of the amalgamation of repetition and closure. The final quatrain in each verse is even more significant however, being a refrain or perhaps a better term in this instance a "burden" which is the most blatantly obvious formal feature of the poem. Its rhyme scheme is identical for each verse "dreary/said/aweary/dead" and is functional in creating an impression of purposelessness and boredom, of soul-sickness and passivity, of the uselessness of action and of an end which never comes, of a closure which is effected only to reintroduce a renewal of waiting "without hope of change". The fact that the first subject of the refrain fluctuates each time only serves to underline the basic sense of hopelessness ("My life…/The night…/The day…/My life…/The night…/My life… /I…"). This is the second instance of the merging of repetition and closure.

Repetition was central to Tennyson's technique: as Sinfield points out, "the repeating of the words so that language evaporates and points beyond itself to what the poet takes to be an intuition of an ultimate reality […] the suggestion that words cannot do that which nevertheless is being done by poetical magic" is indeed quintessential Tennysonian practice. Tennyson himself once recounted a personal experience to illustrate his belief in the incantatory power of words:

> A kind of waking trance I have frequently had quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has generally come upon me thro' repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seems to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this is not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, and the surest of the surest, and weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility, the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction but the only true life [7].

Repetition, as we know, once again from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, may be an outcome or be in the service of the pleasure principle – an affirmation, a basis for change. This could be what Tennyson's mystical experience which denies death by affirming his (male) identity. Or it may be an outcome or be in the service of the death drive – a compulsive return, a fixation [8]. This is quite clearly what it means in *Mariana*, where the repetition of "He cometh not, she said/… I would that I were dead" perfectly encapsulates this fixation on the part of the female object – as envisioned by the male subject.

There is very little motion in the poem and what there is may also be said to be repetitive, downward and involuntary – the verb *fell* recurs four times in what Genette would call an *iterative* mode, that is in the past imperfect tense in order to signify habitual, invariable happenings. The only time in which we have a *singulative*, positive, upward, outward movement on the part of the winds – Romantic symbol *ne plus ultra* for inspiration, life, change – is in the fifth verse "And the shrill winds were up and away" and for a moment the whole rhythm of the verse changes. But the protagonist can only perceive this motion as repetitive and as a reflected, repeated image: "In the white curtain, *to and fro*,/She saw the gusty *shadow* sway".

Besides the repetitions on all levels: phonetic, syntactic, formal and semantic, the "sameness", the changelessness of the poem is also expressed through the neutralization of the temporal opposition Night/Day in order to blur the passing of time. In the refrain "The day is dreary" and "The night is dreary", the two contrasting

terms are rendered equal in their meaninglessness. Then, Mariana draws her curtain at twilight, not in the morning, she wakes at night, walks in her sleep, and dreams in the day. The category of space is also used in an atypical manner, especially that of external space. In the first stanza the moated grange is described, the place in which Mariana is immured, seemingly through her own lack of will to escape. Or rather the garden around the grange is described first, in terms of the inexorable passing of unexploited time. Disuse, neglect, is evident in the "flower-plots", notoriously full of flowers, thickly encrusted with "blackest moss". Moss, the typical sign of immobility, is usually thought of as being green – here we have its already negative connotation reinforced by "black" the colour of death and mourning. Other adjectives used in this first verse, "broken", "weeded", "worn" speak of the waste of space which will introduce the waste of time, and then "sad" and "strange" indicate the use of space as mindscape. All space in this poem, including the flat plains of the fens – perhaps one of the most "spacious", and fertile, spaces in the British Isles, yet described as "The level waste, the rounding grey", will become a series of concentric circles with, and pinned down as, their centre, the claustrophobic psyche of Mariana.

3. It is of Mariana as a literary device that I now want to speak before passing on to the poem by Brontë. This poem is open to the banal interpretation that is often accorded it, based on the consideration that it is the portrait of the Victorian woman as seen through the eyes of the Victorian man – an object, this first, doomed to fruitless inactivity unless used by him, with the appended thought that, as the epigraph hints, Mariana "will be" rescued and there is thus the possibility of a "happy ending". So the poem is seen as a vignette of the Victorian male's desired view of the woman who is and wants to be but can be nothing if he does not arrive on the scene. But an attentive examination of the text shows the presence of a more complex subjectivity, and a far more interesting poem – beyond its undoubted poetical merit – from a euphonic and descriptive point of view. There is, on the face of it, a sort of third person, male "narrative" poetic voice – very typical of a certain sort of Victorian verse – which is recounting Mariana's tale. And then there is Mariana's voice, the "figurative" or charac-

ter's voice, which is quoted in direct speech and becomes the refrain, a secondary, repetitive voice well-suited to a female poetic "I". But in fact the poem itself is being written by a poet who was far from being, at the time, the "typical Victorian male".

Tennyson was a person whose poetic vocation was a cause of anguish to him – someone who knew that poetic discourse was no longer the privileged voice of the epoch as it had been for the Romantics, but was marginal [9] to the mainstream discourse of the realist novel. Walter Pater, one of the strongest voices in late Victorian aesthetics, commented [10] that "imaginative prose" was the "special art of the modern world". Narrative discourse became both the official artistic voice of bourgeois patriarchy and the voice through which the attempt was made to subvert the logic of power (the Fantastic mode). Poetry, compared with creative prose writing, became, "officially" at least, a relatively minor art, and in this way the figure of the poet underwent a sort of identity crisis, having been dispossessed, displaced as it were from the pedestal of *vates* or prophetic voice – the role and function it had assumed during the Romantic heyday – to make way for the God-like figure of the "omniscient" (usually male) narrator. This narrator is present even in books written by women who, in order to have their books accepted as works of art and not as second class discourse, often assumed male pseudonyms.

Poetry then held an ambiguous position, marginalized in such a "manly" world, and poets, Tennyson among them, were all too aware of the potential "femininity" of their voices, of a "crossing of gender boundaries" as it were when they assumed the poetic voice. Tennyson expresses this fear in an unpublished early poem [11]:

> And if I be as true-cast Poets are,
> Half woman-natured, typing all mankind;
> So must I triple-man myself and case
> My humours as the caddis worm in stone…

In the poem *Mariana*, I feel, we can see this ambiguous, dual subjectivity emerging very clearly. For although the poem seemingly begins with the typically realist zoom in from the space time coordinates to the focus on the character, progressively the fact that all our perceiving is done from within Mariana, and not just seeing

but hearing, feeling, and "seeming" or imagining impinges more and more until we cannot tell where male poetic discourse ends and female character discourse begins. An androgynous voice, in short is beginning to make itself heard, a voice which is underlined by the neutralising of all masculine symbols in the poem, the poplar, the sun, the day – in this way the male principle in the poem is neutralised as the female principle is enclosed. From being a victim figure Mariana is seen in all her potential menace.

4. When we look at Brontë's poem many of the same features are evident. An apparently narrative poetic voice (even though the more blatantly narrative aspects have been erased from the final version) tells the tale of a female captive. The captive, though radically different in type from Mariana is still a stereotypical female figure – this time, we have an angelically innocent victim imprisoned in the depths of a castle dungeon. The spatial features too are stereotypical, and derive from the same model – a castle dungeon, like a moated grange originates from the Gothic genre of literature. Once again the reason for the girl's imprisonment is not given – here however she is chained down and locked in.

The general layout of the poem is different in that the poetic voice is enunciated in the first person and that, besides the poetic "I" and the captive herself, there is a third character – the warder – who also speaks. In a sense, the work could be termed "dramatic" as it treats of a discussion between three "dramatis personae" whose words are given in direct speech; the "I" quoting his own words, too, in inverted commas. The poem consists of 16 quatrains rhyming aabb in iambic hexameter or Alexandrines, the meter for heroic narrative poetry in French (which, of course, is not "counted" in six feet but in twelve syllables) and not at all usual in Brontë's poetry – or, for that matter, in English poetry *tout court* [12]. It is, however, noted for being a meter expressing the assumed stability, desired or asserted, of the poet's world-view and values. It produces a long line which is usually interrupted in the middle with a *caesura*. The first eight stanzas together with the last provide a frame to the main body of the poem which is the prisoner's discourse. The first voice is that of a man who, during the course of the poem, is characterized as "reckless", "youth[ful]" and "careless", but whom the warden of the prison recognizes as someone he

has to obey and who, we gather from other hints dropped as the tale goes on, may be the lord of the castle's son. A poetic voice of some "authority" therefore, and though created by a woman, male.

As has been mentioned above, the poem is really a fragment, as its subtitle states, of another, longer version, originally part of the "Gondal Poems". The first version of the poem, dated 9th October, 1845, was entitled "Julian M. and A.G. Rochelle" and recounts, here too in the first person, the love story between the two characters named in the title, who only appear in this specific work. Against the background of the war that is being waged in Gondal, Julian discovers, in the dungeons of a castle, a girl, Rochelle, with whom he used to play when he was a child. Touched by her plight, he frees her from her chains and cares for her for thirteen weeks, giving up all participation in the combat, and thus gaining the reputation of coward but also winning Rochelle's love. This version (much less interesting as a literary work) remained in manuscript form until 1938. "The Prisoner (A Fragment)", selected for publication by Emily herself in 1846, consists of lines 13-44 and 65-92 of the original, with the four final lines added *ex novo* at the end. All references to Gondal, together with the names of the protagonists were eliminated in this version of the poem.

It begins:

> In the dungeon-crypts, idly did I stray,
> Reckless of the lives wasting there away;
> 'Draw the ponderous bars! Open Warder stern!'
> He dared not say me nay – the hinges harshly turn.
>
> 'Our guests are darkly lodged,' I whisper'd, gazing through
> The vault, whose grated eye showed heaven more grey than blue;
> (This was when glad spring laughed in awakening pride;)
> 'Aye, darkly lodged enough!' returned my sullen guide.
> (1-8)

The point made from the beginning of the poem is that the two male figures, together with heavy chains, dungeon walls, pain and suffering have no real power over the girl captive, and that they and she have a significance which goes beyond the literary conventions

of realism or the Gothic. It is however more difficult than it seems to arrive at a stable meaning for the symbolic level of the poem and this is, here too, due to a subtle use of interwoven subjectivities and the crossing of gender barriers.

The first aspect which catches one's attention is Brontë's insistence upon the prisoner's conventionally "feminine" physical appearance: her evident fragility makes the weight of the chains and the thickness of the walls seem excessive:

> Then, God forgive my youth; forgive my careless tongue;
> I scoffed, as the chill chains on the damp flag-stones rung:
> 'Confined in triple walls, art thou so much to fear,
> That we must bind thee down and clench thy fetters here?'
>
> The captive raised her face, it was as soft and mild
> As sculptured marble saint, or slumbering unwean'd child
> It was so soft and mild, it was so sweet and fair,
> Pain could not trace a line, nor grief a shadow there. (9-16)

Just as the male "characters" are imbued with typically "strong" masculine characteristics – an idle, reckless, arrogant young lord (being so, the characteristics are as forgivable as they would have been inexcusable in a poverty-stricken girl) and a rough, grim, unbending jailer – the female character is a compound of the "angel" (as opposed to "whore") Romantic and Victorian stereotype drawn from the male viewpoint. "Soft", "mild", "sweet", "fair", saintly, young and infantile: but not incapable of speaking for herself:

> The captive raised her hand, and pressed it to her brow;
> 'I have been struck', she said, 'and I am suffering now;
> Yet these are little worth, your bolts and irons strong,
> And were they forged in steel, they could not hold me long.' (17-20)

The interesting point here consists in the fact that the captive states clearly and underlines with gesture that the injury she is suffering might be seen to be intellectual as well as physical: the reader's attention being attracted to the gesture by the semi-repetition

of the first line of the preceding stanza with the change from "face" to "brow". And the reason for her "almost" scorn of the chains which apparently bind her is given in the ninth stanza:

> Still, let my tyrants know, I am not doomed to wear
> Year after year in gloom and desolate despair;
> A messenger of Hope comes every night to me,
> And offers for short life, eternal liberty. (33-36)

5. Liberty is central to the interpretation of all Brontë's poems, to that of *Wuthering Heights* too and naturally to what little we know of her personality. She may indeed, for many reasons, be considered as a (rather *sui generis*) inheritor of male Romantic thought. Indeed it is her very love of and desire for liberty which causes the disappearance of her history from documents unmediated by her sister, Charlotte [13]. The liberty she seems to want is the liberty of uninterrupted solitude and peace in which to commune with the nature she loves – and which is expressed for her by poets and musicians – and to create, from her own vision, her idea of this nature. I have already mentioned the fact that Emily did not want to have her poems published, had never wanted anyone, not even her sisters, to see them (the story of Charlotte's raiding her bedroom to steal the poems against Emily's reiterated prohibition is well-known), had been forced into publishing them, only agreeing to do so under a male – or perhaps better "neuter" – pseudonym. In other words, her need for freedom of expression was such that she did not even contemplate an "ideal" reader.

And yet, in spite of the fact that the original version of this poem was written under the presupposition that it would not be "contaminated" by any other eyes but those of the author (or, at the most, only by those of her younger sister Anne, her *alter ego*), the underlying message is hidden, closed within layers, or frames of multiple subjectivities. The first enunciating "I" is that of a male voice – perhaps, if we have recourse to a (very roughly) Freudian analysis, this could be seen as the Ego. The second voice, belonging to the Warden, could therefore be considered as a sort of Super-ego that censors or at least "imprisons", and defines and even suggests the behaviour of his "master":

> Hoarse laughed the jailer grim: "Shall I be won to hear;
> Dost think, fond, dreaming wretch, that I shall grant thy prayer?
> Or, better still, wilt melt my master's heart with groans?
> Ah! Sooner might the sun thaw down these granite stones.
>
> 'My master's voice is low, his aspect bland and kind,
> But hard as hardest flint the soul that lurks behind;
> And I am rough and rude, yet not more rough to see
> Than is the hidden ghost that has its home in me'. (21-28)

If this rather cavalier use of the Freudian model of the psyche is accepted [14], then the voice of the captive, the only female voice in the poem, could be seen as the Id. In this way what the voice enunciates, and the force which is employed to do so, would fall quite well into this scheme:

> …visions rise and change that kill me with desire.
>
> Desire for nothing known in my maturer years,
> When Joy grew mad with awe, at counting future tears.
> When, if my spirit's sky was full of flashes warm,
> I knew not whence they came, from sun or thunderstorm. (40-44)

At this point, the analysis of the poem could stop at the banal interpretation of the frustrated personality of a woman who, in Anne Mellor's words "never married, never had a lover, never bore a child" [15]. But, as Mellor herself points out further on in her essay, Brontë refuses "[to]conform to the conventions of nineteenth-century femininity" and "[to] confine herself to the subject position of a woman in literary discourse" [16] Another Brontë scholar, Margaret Homans, mentions the author's "mobile adoption of fictive roles" [17], roles which negate the boundaries of gender in art in the same way that Brontë refused them in life.

There are, indeed, much deeper levels of signification in the poem. Beneath the possible reading of an opposition between erotic *jouissance* vs. sexual frustration, an interpretation which comes to mind when we consider the terms "Joy" (capitalized) and "desire", the former which "grows mad" and the latter which "kills",

could lie a metaphor regarding the conception and generation of the work of art. For Brontë, as Anna Luisa Zazo points out, "the imagination is her muse, her strength, her god, in a word, her poetry" [18]. Although, as Zazo emphasizes [19], she, together with all other scholars, has no idea whether Brontë was subject to mystical experiences, the final part of the poem would seem to affirm that she did:

> '[…] first a hush of peace – a soundless calm descends;
> The struggle of distress and fierce impatience ends.
> Mute music soothes my breast, unuttered harmony,
> That I could never dream, till Earth was lost to me.
>
> 'Then dawns the Invisible; the Unseen its truth reveals;
> My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels;
> Its wings are almost free – its home, its harbour found,
> Measuring the gulf, it stoops, and dares the final bound.
>
> 'Oh dreadful is the check – intense the agony –
> When the ear begins to hear, and the eye begins to see;
> When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again,
> The soul to feel the flesh, and the flesh to feel the chain'.
> (45-56)

Brontë's use of the Alexandrine finds its accomplishment beyond the skilful manipulation of the poetic narration of a hero (or villain) which encloses the story of a heroine – a movement from masculine to feminine. Until now the caesura has drummed constantly throughout the poem adding to the sense of the inexorable, of the inevitable, of the unavoidable heaviness of the prisoner's plight, the only exception being – significantly – a moment of enjambement in the second stanza "… I whispered, gazing through/The vault…" which underlines the fact that vision is the only faculty to succeed in escaping from the prison. Now the function of this, almost intrusive, metrical feature changes, to become the auditory manifestation of the break between the real and the unreal, the seen and the unseen, where vision becomes Vision.

The prisoner concludes with another image of surprising violence; even more so when we remember that Brontë's poetry was considered and/or interpreted for almost a century as "religious verse". The profoundly ambiguous ending of the last two verses

gives rise to several possibile readings of an experience which is clearly subjective. The last stage of this mystical (and/or erotic) experience seems to transform the image of the captive from a representation of the Id to a symbol of the psyche, or soul. It could even be describing a sort of "rebirthing". What in the end is evident is that here, in particular, Brontë has produced a work which is at once complex, enigmatic and polysemic as is the case with all the greatest poetry. The captive's last words maintain their ambiguity:

> 'Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less,
> The more that anguish racks, the earlier it will bless;
> And robed in fires of hell, or bright with heavenly shine,
> If it but herald death, the vision is divine!' (57-60)

an ambiguity which is recognised by the other two "characters" in the "narration":

> She ceased to speak, and we, unanswering, turned to go –
> We had no further power to work the captive woe:
> Her cheek, her gleaming eye, declared that man had given
> A sentence, unapproved, and overruled by Heaven. (61-64)

When we think of Brontë's death, her seeming desire to accelerate its arrival, documented by her sister Charlotte both in letters to her friend Ellen Nussey, and in the Preface to the 1850 edition of her sister's works, in which she writes of Emily's refusal to see a doctor, her struggle to ignore an illness as debilitating and as deadly as pulmonary tuberculosis, her "captive's" final words lose all shade of rhetoric. Death, then, is the end both for Tennyson's and for Brontë's captives. But perhaps the most significant fact in the comparison between these two poems is that where Tennyson interpreted and wrote womanhood as defeat and closure, Brontë, paradoxically, wrote it as conquest and opening-out, and History is now at last showing that she is right.

[1] Charlotte wrote to her publisher, "Permit me to caution you not to speak of my Sisters when you write to me – I mean do not use the word in the plural. 'Ellis Bell' will not endure to be alluded to under any other appellation that the '*nom de plume*'. I committed a grave error in betraying his identity to you and

Mr Smith – it was inadvertent – the words 'we are three Sisters' escaped me before I was aware – I regretted the avowal the moment I had made it; I regret it bitterly now, for I find it is against every feeling and intention of 'Ellis Bell'. Letter from Charlotte Brontë to W.S. Williams, 31 July 1848 in *The Lives, Friendships and Correspondence of the Brontë Family* (ed T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1933, vol. 2, p. 269.

[2] M. Homans, "Emily Brontë" in *Victorian Women Poets* (ed. T. Cosslet), London, Longman, 1996, pp. 37-41

[3] M. McLuhan, "Tennyson and Picturesque Poetry", in *Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson* (ed. J. Killham), London, Routledge, 1960, p. 70.

[4] H. Bloom, *Poetry and Repression. Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 147.

[5] F. Marucci, *Storia della letteratura inglese. Dal 1832 al 1870. Vol. III, Tomo 1. Il saggismo e la poesia*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2003. §§ 81-82, p. 299.

[6] H.T. Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, 2 vols., London, Macmillan, 1897, p. 871.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 268

[8] In 1920 Sigmund Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a work in which he traces a death drive just as powerful as sexuality. On the basis of observations he had made of his grandson, who in a repetitive "fort-da" game restages the disappearance of his mother, and of shell-shocked soldiers who doggedly revisit their trauma (in nightmares, for example) despite the pain it engenders, he postulates a death drive that, in its resolve to conserve the ego, wants it to seek immobility. Sexuality and death, Eros and Thanatos, seem intertwined to such an extent that the pleasure principle might turn out to be the servant of the death drive.

[9] The Victorians had what we could term an uneasy relationship with poetry. For one thing because they were not, as they themselves realized, the Romantics, they suffered from the "anxiety of influence" syndrome – a fear of the relationship, of the confrontation, with their immediate artistic forebears (or fathers), the first and second generation Romantics. And rightly so: the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had witnessed a flowering of poetry whose like had not been seen since the Renaissance and Baroque period.

[10] W. Pater, *Appreciations, With an Essay on Style*, London, Macmillan, 1889.

[11] Another fear, connected to the one mentioned above, was that the poetry was not the voice of the spirit of the age, but was expressing something esoteric, too individualistic, solipsistic, and that the poet, in short, lived in an ivory tower and did not address himself to any real hearer or receiver but simply communed with himself

[12] We should not forget that Emily had accompanied her sister Charlotte to Belgium in 1842 where she studied, among other things, French poetry and drama, as well as music (she was a skilled pianist, not in the usual drawing–room mode fashionable for women, talented or not, of accompanying themselves while they sang, but in the use of the piano as an instrument for the serious study of music). She would have had a thorough knowledge of French metrics and versification fresh in her mind immediately prior to the composition of "The Prisoner".

[13] As Stevie Davies so rightly points out in one of the best books of criticism I have read on Emily Brontë (not that this is saying much, there are so few which include her poetry), Charlotte "… showed a desire to control her beloved sister in the measure that her sister resisted it. When Emily was dead, and could

not answer back, Charlotte was free to dream up another Emily, whom she enshrined in her grief-stricken novel, *Shirley*". See S. Davies, *Emily Brontë*, Northcote House, Plymouth, 1998, p. 13.

[14] I find myself in agreement here with Margaret Homans when she statesin her volume *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, "It is useful to describe the ways in which culture has defined women, if it is remembered that these definitions are historical fictions, not necessary truths. Although Freudian theory is often accused of perpetuating sexual stereotyping, it is acutely descriptive of nineteenth-century family patterns and it offers a dynamic rather than a static model of sexual identity; in reading nineteenth-century women writers it may be useful to examine an analogy – not a causal relation – between their works and psychoanalytic models of femininity", p. 5.

[15] A.K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 188.

[16] *Ibid*., pp. 188-189.

[17] M. Homans, "Emily Brontë"… cit., p. 109.

[18] A.L. Zazo (ed.), *Emily Brontë. Poesie*, Milano, Mondadori, 1997, p. xiii. The original reads: "l'immaginazione è il suo nume ispiratore, la sua forza, il suo dio; è in verità la sua poesia". (The translation above is mine)

[19] *Ibid*., p. xvii.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING: THE SEARCH FOR A POETIC IDENTITY

1. Even today the criticism on Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) is, it seems inevitably, drawn in the direction of an examination of her life, first with her family (much exacerbated by Rudolph Besier's play "The Barretts of Wimpole Street" (1930) [1] and the successful film (1934) with Charles Laughton as the suffocating father, Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett) and then, after the romantic elopement with the poet Robert Browning, of her life with him and the relationship of her poetry with his, although interesting and informed critical attention has been paid to the works "Sonnets from the Portuguese" (written in 1845-46 and published in 1850), the cycle of love poems written for her husband, and to the long narrative poem "Aurora Leigh"(1856). In this essay my intention is that of tracing Barrett Browning's development of her art, her search for her own poetic voice, through the close textual examination of two early poems: "Minstrelsy" and "The Tempest" (1833) [2], placed within a context of other lesser known works.

Before I do this however I shall attempt to give a general picture of the artistic context in which Barrett Browning worked. Marginality has not generally been considered as exemplary of the Victorian aesthetic, an aesthetic more concerned with "heroes", with "greatness", with "manhood" and with "nation" and thus with "centrality", but many of Barrett Browning's poems spring from this ideological terrain and the dangers inherent in ignoring it. And indeed, notwithstanding the general tendencies of the time, the issue of marginality is one of which Victorian poets were very much aware, and which is paradigmatic of much British post-romantic

poetry, both from the point of view of gender and from that of genre. By the onset of the Victorian age (roughly from about 1830 onwards [3]), poetry as genre had become a marginal literary form, having fallen from the culturally central position it had occupied at the beginning of the century with the first and second generation Romantic poets, and it was fast being superceded by the novel as "top genre", if indeed it had ever held this position [4]. Walter Pater, one of the strongest voices in later Victorian aesthetics, would comment in his essay "Style" (1889) that "imaginative prose" was the "special art of the modern world" [5]. Narrative discourse became both the official voice of bourgeois patriarchy (which expressed itself most easily in the realist mode) and the voice through which the attempt was made to subvert the logic of power (generally by adopting the fantastic mode). Poetry, compared with creative prose writing, lost the primary status as cultural discourse that it had possessed in the Romantic era, even though Arnoldian criticism tried desperately to uphold the culturally central role poetry "should" have had as a sort of buttress to the values once endorsed by religion:

> There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea, the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry [6].

In this way the figure of the poet underwent a sort of identity crisis, having been thrown down from the pedestal of *vates* or prophetic voice – the function it had assumed during the Romantic heyday and which was consolidated by Carlyle in *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (1840), where he discusses the "poet as hero" [7] – to make way for the godlike figure of the omniscient narrator of prose fiction.

This cultural and aesthetic marginality was also due to the fact that, although the amount of poetry written and published increased rather than diminished during the Victorian period [8], its

very volume and diversity, and of course the effective duration of the age which is classified as "Victorian" (Queen Victoria reigned for 64 years, from 1837 to 1901) in a way dilutes its achievements and emphasizes its failures. There is indeed a great deal of extremely important and fruitful experiment going on throughout the era, experiment which (*pace* T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) may often be see as contributing towards the establishment of the foundations of modernist poetry [9]. But the focus and impulse of a unifying manifesto for Victorian poetry, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Preface* represents for the first generation British romantics or Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* for the second generation – or indeed Pound's "Make it New!" and the writings of T.S. Eliot for the modernists – is missing, particularly at the outset [10].

If there is an authoritative voice (though not a poet's) raised in this area of artistic activity, just before Victoria came to the throne, it is that of John Stuart Mill in "What is Poetry?" (1833) [11]. But this essay is more of an endorsement of what went before than a suggestion of how to break away – and though in the aesthetic discussion on the relative artistic value of poetry and narrative Mill, unlike Pater, still comes down decidedly in favour of poetry, when he makes his celebrated comparison between poetry and eloquence he rather adds to the idea of poetry as a solipsistic peripheral activity:

> Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *over*-heard. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavouring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.
>
> All poetry is in the nature of soliloquy [...] the natural fruit of solitude and meditation: eloquence, with intercourse with the world [12].

This constitutes an excellent definition of the aesthetic of the romantic lyric: indeed of Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [...] emotion recollected in tranquillity" [13]. But it does not give an accurate idea of the poetry which was to emerge in the years immediately following Mill's statement. What of the specific character of Victorian poetry, the areas in which it reacts against the dictates of romanticism? Arnold and Tennyson in their appropriation of myth and legend attempt to distance themselves from merely personal emotion. Robert Browning's dramatic monologues have a listener incorporated into their very structure, a listener whose function is to aid reciprocal communication between sender and receiver, and the narrative and political poetry of Barrett Brownings mature period addresses itself in the first place to "the world".

These poets, in other words, although they evolved their poetics within romantic subjectivity, and although they were often heavily influenced and dependent upon the epoch-breaking doctrines of their immediate artistic forebears, are reacting against the very marginality into which the sequel to the first and second generation romantics had cast them, the dangers of which had emerged in the post-Byronic "Spasmodic" poetry. This poetry, named and defined by Charles Kingsley as "vague, extravagant, effeminate" [14] culminated in such gems as Philip James Bailey's *Festus* (1839). Its sententiousness, its religiosity, the verbosity of its empty rhetoric render this verse highly comic. Romanticism going out (or up) with a bang instead of a whimper is perhaps worth quoting. Festus, the "universal knower" (a transparent mask for the poet himself), addresses the Student, advising him to follow the tides of passion in preparing his compendium of human experience:

> Let that thou utterest be of nature's flow,
> Not art's; a fountain's not a pump's. But once
> Begun, work thou all things into thy work;
> And set thyself about it as the sea
> Lashing at it day and night.
> And leave the stamp of thy own soul in it
> [...] He spake inspired:
> Night and day, thought came unhelped, undesired,
> Like blood into his heart.

The popularity and the longevity of this poem, revised, republished and re-edited throughout the Victorian age is inexplicable to modern readers, and fast became so to many Victorian poets and critics [15].

3. Isobel Armstrong cogently points out that the basic insecurity of Victorian poets, especially at the beginning of the period, is due to the fact that they were, as she says "post-Kantian":

> This meant, in the first place, that the category of art (and for the Victorians this was almost always poetry) was becoming 'pure'. Art occupied its own area, a self-sufficing aesthetic realm over and against practical experience. It was *outside* the economy of instrumental energies (for in Kant art and technology spring into being simultaneously as necessary opposites). And yet it was at once apart and central, for it had a mediating function, representing and interpreting life: These contradictions were compounded by post-Kantian accounts of representation, which adapted Kant to make both the status and the mode of art problematical by seeing representations as the constructs of consciousness which is always at a remove from what it represents. Thus the possibility of a process of endless redefinition and an ungrounded and unstable series of representations was opened out [16].

These poets were in fact the first group of literary artists to feel that their profession and what they produced was unnecessary, redundant, marginal and it was the category of art itself which created this state. One feature of their reaction to this situation is that of addressing the issue of marginality itself, not only as an aesthetic condition, but also as a social, political and ontological one.

A spin-off from this is contained in the epithet "effeminate" used by Kingsley in the above quotation to describe the extremes of solipsistic banality arrived at by Bailey and his *confrères*. For to be effeminate was another of the hidden fears of the Victorian male poet. As the century reached its height the "official" (male) artistic voice became more and more that of the realist novel. The omniscient male narrator is present in many books written by women, who, in order to have their books accepted as works of art and also as publishable and saleable artefacts, also often assumed male

pseudonyms. A classic example of both these gender-crossing strategies is the blatantly male narrator of *Adam Bede* (1859) by "George Eliot" [17].

The position of poetry in the artistic pantheon became increasingly ambiguous in such a "manly" world and male poets were all too aware of the potential "femininity" of their voices, of a crossing of genders in – as far as they were concerned – the wrong direction as soon as they assumed the poetic voice. The fear that poetry was not the voice of the "spirit of the age" but was expressing something too esoteric, individualistic, solipsistic – that the poet, in short, existed in an ivory tower, not addressing her/himself to any empirical reader or receiver but simply communing with her/his soul [18] – is displaced by the anxiety of the "effeminate" which Mellor demonstrates as already being apparent in mainstream male Romantic poetry [19].

Both male and female Victorian poets were well aware of the issue of marginality, whether social, sexual or aesthetic. And by refusing, criticizing or simply commenting on it, their poetry inevitably took on the characteristics which Mill, still from within the Romantic aesthetic, considered "eloquence" rather than "poetry". The subjective lyric becomes the more "objective" dramatic lyric or even the dramatic monologue, solipsism gives way to social comment, unengaged confession is replaced by didactic or moral persuasion and, above all, stories are told. The act of narration is assimilated from the "top genre" and genre-mixing becomes a feature of Victorian poetry, which also absorbs techniques from dramatic discourse. The function of poetry changes with the rapidly changing world it expresses – the world of reform and social revolution; and in order to ensure artistic survival the poet's voice evolves from an essentially private one to a more public one. To quote Mill once more on what he termed "eloquence", "the act of utterance is not itself the end but the means to an end". And yet, at the same time, paradoxically, by addressing the very matter which threatens it, the poetic voice finds new vigour.

"Our interest's in the dangerous edge of things" Elizabeth Barrett Browning's husband, Robert, says through the mask of his Bishop Blougram. Slavery, in its many forms, within the family, within society, between individuals, between the sexes, between nations and races may be said to be one of the most blatant examples of the

"dangerous edge" of human experience, both for those who suffer it and for those who impose it. Now I want to examine the way in which this issue of marginality is addressed both thematically and, especially, stylistically, by Barrett Browning in the poems I have chosen and which I consider to be exemplary.

3. Barrett Browning is peculiar as a woman poet in that she appears from the beginning of her career as totally self-confident and committed to her vocation. She published her first poem *The Battle of Marathon* at the age of fourteen. As Simon Avery points out:

> Throughout much of her lifetime, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was considered a shocking poet, a risk-taker, an innovator, a rebel, an iconoclast even […] Working within a surprisingly wide range of established literary genres – epic, lyric, verse drama, religious meditation, sonnet ballad and dramatic monologue – and often concurrently reconfiguring these for new purposes, she was always an experimenter, constantly pushing at the boundaries of received ideas concerning the purpose and form of poetic writing [20].

Barrett Browning, unlike many of her contemporaries, had no difficulty in acknowledging her marginal status as woman artist, and indeed a striking feature of her earliest work is that the poetic voice is unmistakably female. In one of the most successful of her early poems "Minstrelsy" (1833) [21], in which the poet reflects metaphorically upon her own "singing", she manifests the fact that the subject of the *énonciation* is feminine and not masculine. Moreover, the poem is prefaced with an epigraph taken from a poem by the medieval poet Robert le Brunne, in which he addresses a "minstrel" (the young Elizabeth clearly felt no maidenly reluctance in demonstrating the breadth of her culture and habitually began her first poems with an erudite quotation [22]):

> One asked *her* once the resun why
> *She* hadde delyte in minstrelsie;
> *She* answerëd on this manére.

Barrett Browning immediately signals through the use of italics that she has changed the pronoun – Le Brunne's male minstrel here

is a woman. During the course of the lyric, the poetic "I" tries unsuccessfully to answer Le Brunne's question, and to explain her vocation for "minstrelsy", and it is at once evident – and interesting – that no moralizing or didactic motives are given. Indeed she emphasizes the evanescence of the poetic experience and the pleasure that it brings her, in a ballad metre which is at the same time formally apposite to her subject and phonically (apparently) effortless. It begins:

> For ever, since my childish looks
> Could rest on Nature's pictured books;
> For ever, since my childish tongue
> Could name the themes our bards have sung;
> So long, the sweetness of their singing
> Hath been to me a rapture bringing!
> Yet ask me not the reason why
> I have delight in minstrelsy.(1-8)

The iambic tetrameter used here is one of the two basic metrical forms in English poetry (the other, needless to say being iambic pentameter). This four-beat metre is the dominant form in popular or oral poetry, though also found in the literary tradition. It may be met with in nursery rhymes, hymns, ballads, pop songs and other kinds of popular poetry or song and in this form is nearly always reinforced by end-rhymes – as it is here. However, in order to alleviate too great a degree of uniformity there is often a tendency to use near-rhyme – and the young Elizabeth does this in the "refrain" she creates in the last two lines of each of the six verses, making the last syllable of the final word "minstrel-sy" /'si:/ fail to rhyme with "why" /'wai/ and thus emphasizing the two basic lexemes of the poem. This near-uniformity is repeated in the length of the stanzas – the six-verse poem is given six lines to each verse – plus the refrain, the first line of which is also varied every time ("Yet, ask me not […] (7)"; "I do not know […] (15)"; ""Ask not, ask not […] (23)"; "Is there alas! no […] (31)"; "To question not […] (39)"; "When all forget to question why" (47)). Thus the final line of every verse but the last: "I have delight in minstrelsy" though it is questioned by the receiver of the poem thus becomes an unvaried and reiterated statement on the part of the poet. In the last verse the *énonciation* becomes self-referential and the pronouns are emphatically feminine:

> Years pass – my life with them shall pass:
> And soon, the cricket in the grass
> And summer bird, shall louder sing
> Than she who owns a minstrel's string.
> Oh then may some, the dear and few,
> Recall her love, whose truth they knew;
> When all forget to question why
> She had delight in minstrelsy! (41-48)

We may thus consider this little poem – a mere *bagatelle* compared with much of Barrett Browning's work – as an interesting example of the process which was to inform the rest of her work. The lyric "I" in her poetry, unless otherwise "stated" or named as the male mask in a dramatic monologue is unequivocally feminine in gender and that the minstrel born as male troubadour in medieval times will be, in her work, "translated" as female.

Notwithstanding the fact that in the last ten or fifteen years there has been a mammoth rediscovery of women romantic poets, the question of a feminine poetic "I" is not as obvious as it may seem. To turn to the theory of Elaine Showalter, by now a "given" in the history of feminist criticism, the writing of any marginal culture (or "subculture" in Showalter's terms) passes through three stages of development. First we have the stage of imitation of the prevalent modes of the dominant tradition together with the internalisation of its artistic parameters; then there is a second phase of protest and reaction against these parameters and a corresponding advocacy of minority rights and values together with a claim for independence; and finally there is the third phase of self-discovery and self recognition, essentially a search for identity. These phases may be considered both epistemologically or ontologically and they may – and often do – follow one another and overlap within the same period or in the writing of the selfsame writer [23].

4. When examining *The Tempest. A Fragment* [24] one's first reaction is that Barrett Browning is in the "imitative" stage of her poetic development and that a heavy debt to her romantic predecessors is immediately discernable:

> The forest made my home – the voiceful streams
> My minstrel throng: the everlasting hills, –

Which marry with the firmament, and cry
Unto the brazen thunder, "Come away,
Come from the secret place and try our strength," –
Enwrapped me with their solemn arms. Here, light
Grew pale as darkness, scared by the shade
O' the forest Titans. Here in piney state,
Reigned Night the aethiopian queen, and crowned
The charmed brow of Solitude,her spouse.

* * *

A sign was on creation. You beheld
All things encoloured in a sulph'rous hue,
As day were sick with fear. The haggard clouds
O'erhung the utter lifelessness of air;
The top boughs of the forest, all aghast,
Stared in the face of Heaven: the deep-mouthed wind,
That hath a voice to bay the armed sea,
Fled with a low cry like a beaten hound;
And only that askance the shadows, flew
Some open-beakèd birds in wilderment,
Naught stirred abroad. All dumb did Nature seem,
In expectation of the coming storm. (1-22)

Imitation is evident in these first two verses of the poem. The voices which echo throughout its 203 lines are those of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and, to go back even further, of John Milton. Once again self-confidence rather than the anxiety of influence emerges. Barrett Browning was quite happy to admit to her debts to the past although she deplored the lack of women poets to whom to look:

> I look everywhere for Grandmothers & see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you – witness my reverent love of the grandfathers [25]!

This is indeed an paradoxical contention now that so much work has been done on the rediscovery of a firmament of British romantic women poets. It is almost as if, as Avery, sustains:

> […] Barrett seems to be attempting to clear a space for herself as a new type of woman poet and to be defining herself *against* the traditions of women's poetry established by her direct predecessors and contemporaries [26].

At this stage in her development, however, she was in thrall to what she would later recognise as a far more dangerous influence than that of poetic progenitors or progenitrices. And it is in the development of *The Tempest* that the consciousness of this stultifying power comes (almost) to the surface. In her home life it is not to her grandparents that she looks – but to her father, the notorious "Mr Barrett of Wimpole Street", that epitome of inflexible Victorian paternity. All through her early correspondence, Barrett Browning emphasises the fact that it is her father who encourages her to learn, to write – who gives her, indeed, the same classical education that was being imparted to her brothers. But she also notes, in letters like that to Richard Hengist Horne, the ways in which her father keeps her firmly in her place, laughing at her and her "pretension to poetry" [27]:

> Papa would laugh at me if he stood near; he who always laughs whenever I say "I am busy," – laughs like Jove with superior amusement. As if people could possibly be busy with rhymes [28].

Barrett Browning herself openly recognises the need she feels for fatherly approval in her poem "To My Father on his Birthday"; here apart from the obvious expressions of filial gratitude for the affection he shows her is a specific need for paternal approbation of her work:

> […] For 'neath thy gentleness of praise,
> My Father! rose my early lays!
> And when the lyre was scarce awake,
> I loved its strings for thy loved sake;
> Wooed the kind Muses – but the while
> Thought only how to win thy smile –
> My proudest fame – my dearest pride –
> More dear than all the world beside!
> And now perchance, I seek the tone
> For magic that is more its own;
> But still my father's looks remain
> The best Maecenas of its strain;
> My gentlest joy, upon his brow
> To read the smile that meets me now –
> To hear him, in his kindness, say
> The words, – perchance he'll speak today!

Thus Barrett Browning in 1826, when she was 20 years old. In the "Dedication" to her father in her *Poems* of 1844, the year before her elopement with Robert Browning, her relationship with her father delineates itself with far graver implications. By now she is 38, a poet in her own right and widely recognised as such. She begins her dedication by asking her father to remember her as a child, as she remembers the debt she bears towards him for having given her life, "sustained and comforted" her, and invokes, now, as then, his protection against the world "to conjure your beloved image between myself and the public, so as to be sure of one smile" [29]. But she qualifies her state of mind differently this time and declares herself to be "somewhat more faint-hearted than I used to be" [30]. It is almost as if, with the growth of her reputation she feels the need to represent herself to her father as being more vulnerable, more childish and more in need of his protection than she in fact is. As if, in this way she tries to minimise the crime of having established herself in a totally "masculine" role and in this way of having invaded the paternal "territory".

5. Let us return, after this long parenthesis, to "The Tempest". It should be emphasised that the first poems by Barrett Browning were published anonymously but with no attempt to mask the gender of the poet. As Margaret Homans points out,

> […] the Romantic tradition makes it difficult for any writer to separate sexual identity from writing. Sexual identity by itself does not determine the nature of a poet's work, but where the poetic self represented in a text identifies itself as masculine or feminine, the reader must ask why it does so and to what effect. In literature as in experience, sexual identification (or polarization, if it comes to that) is not static but rather develops dynamically out of interactions, being for the most part learned through imitation of figures of the same sex and in response to figures of the opposite sex. Where the major literary tradition normatively identifies the figure of the poet as masculine, and voice as a masculine property, women writers cannot see their minds as androgynous, or as sexless, but must take part in a self-definition by contraries […] Nothing in literature is simply or inherently feminine Static definitions and symbols of femi-

> ninity have had their place in culture for so long that it is sometimes difficult to separate them from actual sexual differences, but only usage and context create symbols: nature is not inherently Mother Nature but only where Milton and Wordsworth and their readers agree to see it that way [31].

Immediately the “I” of “The Tempest” identifies itself with Nature, quite clearly, both stylistically and historically speaking, a Romantic or at least late Romantic Nature, we have the case of a feminine gendered poetic voice identifying with the feminine principle *ne plus ultra*. The personality of the subject is projected upon the forest and its surroundings, its dwelling-place (“The forest made my home”1) and all feelings expressed are represented through use of what Ruskin termed “the pathetic fallacy”, of ascribing the anguish felt by this subject to various other aspects of the natural world here presented. Thus the day is “sick with fear”, light is “scared by the shade” the clouds are “haggard” and the tree-tops “all aghast”. From the beginning of the poem, however, the thunder, something which would seem to be an integral part of the natural world with which the poetic voice is identifying is set apart and rendered antagonistic (“The everlasting hills,-/ Which marry with the firmament, and cry/Unto the brazen thunder, ‘Come away,/Come from thy secret place and try our strength,’”3-5). Raymond Williams, in his definition of Mother Nature (nature in its feminine guise, the goddess) and its various uses and acceptations, mentions the fact that:

> […] There is then great complexity when this kind of singular religious or mythical abstraction has to co-exist, as it were, with another singular, all-powerful force, namely a monotheistic God. It was orthodox in medieval European belief to use both singular absolutes but to define God as primary and Nature as his minister or deputy. But there was a recurrent tendency to see Nature in another way, as an absolute monarch.
> […] As might be expected, in matters of such fundamental difficulty, the concept of nature was usually in practice much wider and more various than any of the specific definitions. There was then a practice of shifting use, as in Shakespeare’s *Lear*:

> [...] All shaking thunder
> Cracks nature's moulds, all germens spill at once,
> That make ungrateful man [...]
>
> In [this] example there is [...] a sense of the forms and moulds of nature which can yet, paradoxically, be destroyed by the natural force of thunder [...] [32].

Barrett Browning (like Shakespeare) was most probably not thinking of a contest between the Christian God and the Romantic concept of Mother Nature but was referring to the Classical world with which she was just as familiar, and the overriding power that Zeus, or Jove, the Thunderer, with whom, as we have seen, she connected her father, maintains over the other inhabitants of Parnassus, Demeter and Persephone included. It should also not be forgotten that, like *Minstrelsy*, this poem too is headed by an epigram, this time taken from Latin literature, "Mors erat ante oculos." – *Lucan*, lib. ix. Not only is death before [our] eyes from the outset, but the quotation is taken from Lucan's *Civil Wars*, a history of internecine strife, a state of affairs which could be seen to obtain at times in Parnassus and which Edward Barrett's parental tyranny was preparing for in Wimpole Street.

Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to follow the contest between the masculine and feminine principles in *The Tempest* [33]. Nature's panic reaction to the arrival of the storm culminates in a state of speechlessness ("All dumb did Nature seem,/In expectation of the coming storm" 21-22) – but when the storm arrives in the third and fourth stanzas (referred to in the masculine gender "cataracts hissing around him" 43, and therefore depository of power "It came in power" 23) the whole balance of the poem changes. The poetic voice unhesitatingly abandons any identification with the now static and mute Nature and exchanges it for joyous recognition of her own voice in that of the thunder, the exemplary voice of God:

> Was not my spirit gladden'd, as with wine,
> To hear the iron rain, and view the mark
> Of battle on the banner of the clouds?
> Did I not hearken for the battle-cry,
> And rush along the bowing woods to meet
> The riding Tempest – skyey cataracts
> Hissing around him with rebellion vain?

> Yea! and I lifted up my glorying voice
> In an 'All hail;' when, wildly resonant,
> As brazen chariots rushing from the war,
> As passion'd waters gushing from the rock,
> As thousand crashed woods, the thunder cried […]
> (37-48)

When the subject raises her voice, the thunder replies, followed by flashes of forked lightning:

> All hail unto the lightning! Hurriedly
> His lurid arms are glaring through the air,
> Making the face of heaven to show like hell!
> Let him go breath his sulphur stench about,
> And, pale with death's own mission, lord the storm!
> (52-56)

As soon as the poetic "I" greets the lightning, challenging and even daring to precede the voice of the thunder the climax of the poem is reached:

> Again the gleam – the glare: I turned to hail
> Death's mission: at my feet there lay the dead!
> The dead – the dead lay there! (57-59)

The challenge has brought death – but not the death of the "I" but of a strange male figure which enters upon the scene at this point for the first time, and whose identity is never revealed [34]. The first reaction of the "I" is that of physical disgust and horror of the dead body, which as it is dark, she tries to recognise by passing her hands over its features. Then another flash of lightning reveals that she knows who it is:

> […] I knew that face –
> His, who did hate me – his, whom I did hate!
> […]
> Albeit such darkness brooded all around,
> I had dread knowledge that the open eyes
> Of that dead man were glaring up to mine,
> With their unwinking, unexpressive stare;
> And mine I could not shut nor turn away.
> The man was my familiar. (78-90)

Leighton rightly identifies this "familiar" as a "suppressed idea of the father" and adds

> [...] While the thunder in one sense suggests the voices of the Romantic poets with whom Elizabeth Barrett would compete, it is also, confusingly, the sign of one particular male presence, with whom it is dangerous and unnatural to compete: 'Only one person holds the thunder'. The new and tortured logic of this would-be Romantic poem links the poetic ambition to speak with a private drama in which the heart cannot afford to rival, in power, the object of its '*tenderest and holiest affections*' (Dedication to *Poems*, 1844).
> 'The Tempest' thus enacts the female poet's struggle to speak with a power that is not naturally her own. She refuses to be like Mother Nature, 'All dumb'. Instead, she chooses to share the thunder of the fathers: the father god, the father poets, and also, the father himself – the 'familiar'. However to win this struggle for speech is to know, at the very moment of triumph, the cost too dear. It is this 'dread knowledge' which the poem betrays. The speaker, in the end, is shown to have harboured a death-wish towards her victim in the very act of stealing the thunder for her speech. The idea of her guilt then comes brilliantly and nightmarishly true in the figure of the dead man at her feet. Such guilt, the poem tells, is the inevitable concomitant, for the female poet, of desiring to *say* so much [35].

Much of what Leighton is saying is feasible. But I consider that her (negative) conclusion is wrong and wrongly arrived at as she is mingling biographical data with textual. The problematics of the poem are very similar to those in Wordsworth's "Prelude" and with much the same results. The confused relationship with a numinous, sublime Nature, the lightning flash, the moment of agnition, of recognition, of sudden acknowledgement of a previously hidden ontological truth, which is typical of the wordsworthian epiphany or "spot of time", the re-emerging of the negative passions generated in infancy by the contrasting power of fundamental family bonds and the desire to elude them – all these are present in "The Tempest". What Leighton does not concede to Barrett Browning's poem is the right to be judged as a poem *tout court*, as a work of art – however flawed – and not as the confessional outpourings of a

"woman poet". The poem is a song of victory, not of defeat, and the poet herself conceived it as such – and says so (in the poem itself). And the father is not Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett, the addressee of the various dedications who suddenly rears his head, *nolens volens* from the poet's subconscious but a symbol created deliberately to work within the logic of this poem, which indeed concerns the contest between masculine and feminine principles but is based upon the firm foundations of Barrett Browning's considerable classical scholarship.

As the poetic "I" faces the 'awful' reality of death her meditations turn in this direction:

> Farewell the elemental war! farewell
> The clashing of the shielded clouds – the cry
> Of scathëd echoes! I no longer knew
> Silence from sound, but wandered far away
> Into the deep Eleusis of mine heart,
> To learn its secret things. When armëd foes
> Meet on one deck with impulse violent,
> The vessel quakes thro' all her oaken ribs,
> And shivers in the sea; so with mine heart:
> For there had battled in her solitudes,
> Contrary spirits; sympathy with power,
> And stooping unto power; – the energy
> And passiveness, – the thunder and the death!
>
> Within me was a nameless thought: it closed
> The Janus of my soul on echoing hinge,
> And said 'Peace!' with a voice like War's.

With the mention of Eleusis we are brought back to the fundamental *agon* masculine/feminine underlined by the reference to the ancient Greek mysteries, whose secrets have never been fully uncovered, of Demeter, Persephone, Hades and Zeus which classical scholars, archaeologists and anthropologists alike link to primitive fertility rites. It seems that what was revealed to the initiates by the hierophant at Eleusis during these mysteries was an ear of corn – but the most primitive version of these rites, as we learn from such scholars as Frazer, Campbell and Kerényi, involved human sacrifice. Death was used to ensure the continuation of life, and as Campbell himself tells us "[through] this cherished and

highly regarded classical mystery […] the Greek initiate learned (as a grave inscription lets us know) that 'death was not an evil but a blessing'" [36]. Gradually the opposition masculine/feminine is being rendered more complex by being linked to other oppositions, sound/silence, energy/passiveness, war/peace, life/death – and the oppositions themselves not as clearly positive/negative as they seem. It becomes more and more obvious as the poem goes on that the death of the hated male figure is (unsayably) necessary to the empowerment of the female poetic "I" and that this figure's identifying characteristics are indeed "paternal" not to say patriarchal.

The poem continues as day begins to break:

> […] I waken'd from
> My deep unslumb'ring dream, but utter'd naught,
> My living I uncoupled from the dead,
> And look'd out, 'mid the swart and sluggish air
> For place to make a grave. A mighty tree
> […] blasted, peel'd he stood,
> By the gone night, whose lightning had come in
> And rent him, even as it rent the man
> Beneath his shade […]
> There, underneath, I lent my feverish strength,
> To scoop a lodgement for the traveller's corse.
> I gave to the silence and the pit,
> And strew'd the heavy earth on all: and then –
> I – I, whose hands had form'd that silent house, -
> I could not look thereon, but turn'd and wept! (130-157)

Throughout the whole of this episode, which constitutes the central segment of the poem, the discovery of the body, the recognition, the vigil beside it and the burial, no name has been mentioned - although it is a hated "familiar". An interesting term and one which does not in the first place necessarily mean "a family member" but also familiar spirit or double. This last is just as likely here, given the Romantic gothic lexis and setting, often closely connected with problems of identity, especially female identity (the forest, the mountains, the twilight) together with the wealth of terminology belonging to the Freudian *Unheimlich*: "horror", "dread" and "awe" in its adjectival form "awful silence".

As Angelo Aparo points out: "L'esperienza del doppio si verifica […] in concomitanza con un momento fortemente dinamco dove

istanze regressive e spinte emancipatrici lottano tra loro" [37] And as we have seen in this poem from the very beginning a state of intense anxiety manifests itself – on the one hand the desire of escaping back into the safety of (feminine) maternal Nature and on the other to assume a masculine identity with the words of the male universe. It is the latter impulse which wins, and the poetic "I" defies death:

> […] knowing what I smoothly know,
> High-seeming death, I dare thee! and have hope
> In God's good time, of showing to thy face
> An unsuccumbing spirit, which sublime
> May cast away the low anxieties
> That wait upon the flesh – the reptile moods;
> And enter that eternity to come,
> Where live the dead, and only Death shall die. (196-203)

It will be with her mature poetry – after a series of ballads in which she sings a dead father – that Barrett Browning will find her authentic voice. But in these, and other, early poems, she carries out her apprenticeship. Having won the contest for the Word she will now be able to use it to enter that longed for goal of the Romantics, the Pantheon of the immortals.

[1] R. Besier, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1930.

[2] "Minstrelsy" and "The Tempest" first appeared in EBB's third volume of published poetry, *Prometheus Bound. Translated from the Greek of Aeschylus, and Miscellaneous Poems, by the Translator, Author of "An Essay on Mind" with other Poems. [Quotations from* Mimnermus *and* Theognis.*]* London: Printed and published by A.J. Valpy, M.A., Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, 1833. I shall be quoting from the volume F.G. Kenyon (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, London, Smith, Elder, & Co., 1897.

[3] See F. Marucci's seminal essay on the definition and limits of the Victorian Age which constitutes the Introduction to Volume III, Tome 1 of his *Storia della letteratura inglese. Dal 1832 al 1870. Il saggismo e la poesia*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2003, pp. 13-42.

[4] Recent research on Romantic theatre has by now proved that far from being the almost non-existent phenomenon it was held to be at least until the 1980's, it was of central cultural importance, besides being hugely popular.

[5] W. Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* in *The Library Edition of Pater's Works*, London, Macmillan, 1910, pp. 10-11.

[6] M. Arnold "The Study of Poetry" (first published in 1880 as the General Introduction to *The English Poets* (ed. T.H. Ward), in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, (ed. R.H. Soper), 11 vols., Ann Arbor, The University of

Michigan Press, 1960-77, vol. XI, "Matthew Arnold: English Literature and Irish Politics", pp. 161-188.

[7] T. Carlyle, *Collected Works*, 30 vols., "Centenary Edition" (ed. H.D. Traill), London, Chapman and Hall, 1896-1899.

[8] One has only to remember the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, unpublished until 1918, and indeed that of many unpublished women poets whose work is at last reaching the public eye/ear in anthologies such as the significant landmark volume A. Leighton, M. Reynolds (eds.), *Victorian Women Poets*, Oxford, Blackwell,1995.

[9] On this controversial subject see C. Christ, *Victorian and Modernist Poetics*, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1984, particularly the last chapter.

[10] This is not to say that the literary men and women of the time did not question themselves as to the nature of poetry, as we may see in the first section of Joseph Bristow's anthology of extracts from leading Victorian poets, scholars and literary critics, *The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona*, London, Croom Helm, 1987. It is indeed in this age that the "literary critic" *per se* actually came into being, and Victorian poetry is in fact the first contemporary poetry to be "studied".

[11] J.S. Mill "What is Poetry" in *The Collected Works* (ed. J.M. Robson et al.), 33 vols., Toronto, Toronto University Press, 1965-1991.

[12] *Loc. cit*.

[13] W. Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Wordsworth. Poetical Works* (ed. T. Hutchinson, revised by Ernest de Selincourt), Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 734-741.

[14] C. Kingsley, "Thoughts on Shelley and Byron" in *Literary and General Lectures and Essays*, Vol. XX of *Collected Works*, London, Macmillan and Co., 1880.

[15] For a detailed and fascinating explanation of the history and popularity of *Festus* see F. Marucci, *Storia della leggeratura inglese*… cit., pp. 890-892.

[16] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics, Politics*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 3-4.

[17] See A.K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 7 for the developments of this gender-crossing trend which ended with male novelists appropriating female discourse for their own artistic ends by the end of the nineteenth century.

[18] A. Tennyson addressed this subject in *The Palace of Art* (1832, revised 1842).

[19] See A.K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, cit., on Keats's "ideological cross-dressing", pp. 171-186.

[20] S. Avery, R. Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, London, Longman 2003, pp. 2-3.

[21] F.G. Kenyon (ed.), *The Poetical Works*… cit., p. 68.

[22] Robert Mannynge of Brunne (Bourne, Lincolnshire), 1298-1338, was a Gilbertine monk whose work *Handlynge Synne*, a lively religious manual adapted from William of Wadington's *Manuel des Pechiez (Péchés)*, was written in the eight-syllabled iambic metre of the original. The language is Middle English of the E. Midland dialect of a northern type and shows that EBB's reading was indeed wide-ranging.

[23] E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, London, Virago, 1978, pp.10-16.

[24] F.G. Kenyon (ed.), *The Poetical Works*… cit., p. 59.

[25] P. Kelley, R. Hudson, S. Lewis (eds.), *The Brownings' Correspondence*, 14 vols., Winfield, Kansas, Wedgestone Press, 1984-1998, vol. 10, p. 14.

[26] S. Avery, R. Stott, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* cit., p. 3

[27] E. Kintner (ed.), *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barret:t 1845-1846*, 2 vols., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1969, I, p. 119.

[28] E. Barrett Browning, *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning Addressed to Richard Hengist Horne* (ed. R.S.T. Mayer) 2 vols., London, Richard Bentley and Son, 1877, p. 284.

[29] E. Barrett Browning, *The Poetical Works*, London, Smith, Elder, and Co., 1897, p. xv.

[30] *Loc. cit*.

[31] M. Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity. Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 3-4.

[32] R. Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London, Fontana, 1983, pp. 221-222.

[33] When considering the title another paternal "benevolent despot", Shakespeare's Prospero, also comes to mind.

[34] Although there has been much speculation upon this point. The subject of the poem was suggested to Barrett Browning by a real event. She was the witness of an actual storm during which she saw a tree struck by lightning not far from her. Later she was told of the death by lightning, during the same storm, of two young women.

[35] A. Leighton, M. Reynolds, *Victorian Women Poets* cit., pp. 50-51.

[36] J. Campbell, *The Masks of God. Primitive Mythology*, London, Souvenir Press, 1973 (1959), p. 186.

[37] "The experience of the double occurs at an intensely dynamic moment when both regressive impulses and emancipatory drives are conflicting with one another." (*my trans*). Angelo Aparo, "Dal persecutore al compagno segreto", in E. Funari (ed.), *Il Doppio*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1986, p. 91.

“LOVE OR RHYME”: WENDY COPE AND THE LIGHTNESS OF THOUGHTFULNESS

1. Wendy Cope was born on the 21st July 1945 in Kent. Her poetry has been compared with that of the American comic poet Dorothy Parker and the comparison is an apt one though it should not be forgotten that among Cope’s poetry there are works of social comment and also many love poems. After gaining a degree in Modern History at St Hilda’s College, Oxford, in 1966 Cope qualified as a teacher and began working in London primary schools. She started to write poetry in 1972 after a period of psychoanalysis. From 1984 to1986 she taught music.

She published her poetry for the first time in 1979 in the *Times Literary Supplement* and in other influential literary magazines. Her first collection of poems, *Across the City*, appeared in 1980 and was followed in 1986 by the best-seller *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, published by Faber. In 1987 Cope won the Cholmondeley Prize for Poetry and in 1993 was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1995 she was awarded the prize for comic poetry By the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1988 she published *Twiddling Your Thumbs*, a book of verse for children and in 1991 the narrative poem *The River Girl*. *Serious Concerns*, her second collection, came out in 1992 and was an enormous success, selling over 40,000 copies. Her latest collection *If I Don’t Know* was published in 2001. Besides publishing all her collections with Faber, she has also edited several anthologies for them.

2. It would seem almost a crime to turn Wendy Cope’s poetry into the subject for a “serious” academic essay. Too serious, too “heavy” for a poet who, in the poem “Variation on Belloc’s *Fatigue*”, sums up her own “life and works”:

I hardly ever tire of love or rhyme
That's why I'm poor and have a rotten time. (*SC* 48) [1]

Cope's main object here is obviously that of amusing and diverting her reader. But when she makes fun of herself in the poem quoted, of her "rhyme" and of her weakness for things of the heart, for "love", she is, right from the title, however brief it is, aiming her parodic arrows at the poet (male) and his own poetry. In the case of Belloc the "rhyme" in question is very close, from the point of view of genre, to Cope's: that is it belongs to the category of "light verse". I shall begin my analysis by examining these two words, first separately and then in conjunction.

Cope has often commented ironically, in prose and verse on the reluctance of the poetic establishment to concede poetry the right to solicit laughter. Indeed, in her latest collection, she addresses the issue in no uncertain terms. I quote the first two verses:

A Poem on the Theme of Humour
(for Gavin Ewart)
'Poems can be in any style and on any theme
(except humour).'
Rules for the Bard of the Year competition 1994

Dear Organisers of Bard of the Year,

Suppose I were to write a completely solemn,
joke-free and unamusing poem
And to send it in with my £3 entry fee,
And suppose the subject of that poem were humour in poetry,
Would you accept it?

There are serious things I want to say on this subject,
Such as how absolutely right you were to make that rule,
Because if humour is allowed into a poem,
People may laugh and enjoy it,
Which gives the poet an unfair advantage. (*IIDK,* 43)

Cope often foregrounds the word "serious" as the antonym of "light" – in the above-quoted poem just as in the title of her second collection, *Serious Concerns*. In an interview she affirms:

> I dislike the term 'light verse' because it is used as a way of dismissing poets who allow humour into their work. I believe that a humorous poem can also be 'serious'; deeply felt, and saying something that matters [2].

However there are other possibilities in this word-play which have indeed been pointed out by one of the greatest contemporary exponents of lightness in fiction if not in poetry. What is "lightness" and what value has it in the world of art? (A particularly postmodern issue I should add, not only, of course, in the field of literature). Let us turn to Italo Calvino, from whom we laymen (or laypersons?) have learnt quite a lot about astrophysics simply by reading his *Cosmicomiche* (1965), in which humour, laughter, comedy are mingled with pathos and irony and parody coincide with pages of lyrical beauty (I am thinking in particular of the tale "Senza colori").

The first chapter of Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* treats the "value, quality or peculiarity of literature" (as Calvino defines it [3]) of lightness. Calvino does not consider himself so much a "light" writer as a writer "of lightness", and he begins his opening lecture – which as we know was sadly fated never to take place – by affirming this belief:

> [...] my working method has more often that not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes form people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities: above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language.
> In this talk I shall try to explain – both to myself and to you – why I have come to consider lightness a value rather than a defect; to indicate the works of the past in which I recognize my ideal of lightness; and to show where I situate this value in the present and how I project it into the future.
> I will start with the last point. When I began my career, the categorical imperative of every young writer was to represent his own time. Full of good intentions, I tried to identify myself with the ruthless energies propelling the events of our century, both collective and individual. I tried to find some harmony between the adventurous, picaresque inner rhythm that prompted me to write and

> the frantic spectacle of the world, sometimes dramatic and sometimes grotesque. Soon I became aware that between the facts of life that should have become my raw materials and the quick light touch I wanted for my writing, there was a gulf that cost me increasing effort to cross. Maybe I was only then becoming aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world – qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them.
> At certain moments I felt that the entire world was turning into stone: a slow petrification, more or less advanced depending on people and places but one that spared no aspect of life. It was as if no one could be spared the inexorable stare of the Medusa [4].

Lightness therefore as an intrinsic quality of literary style. And not simply of narrative style but also of that of poetry. In Calvino's opinion poets are at an advantage over novelists in this respect. After having had recourse to the poetry of Ovid and Montale for examples of what he is trying to express, he says:

> It is hard for a novelist to give examples of his idea of lightness from the events of everyday life without making them the unattainable object of an endless *quête*. This is what Milan Kundera has done with great clarity and immediacy. His novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is in reality a bitter confirmation of the Ineluctable Weight of Living, not only in the situation of desperate and all pervading oppression that has been the fate of his hapless country, but in a human condition common to us all […] His novel shows us how everything we choose and value in life for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight [5].

Calvino goes on to distinguish between two degrees of lightness what he calls "the lightness of thoughtfulness" and "the lightness of frivolity". He adds "thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy" [6]. It is true that the maker of light verse may sometimes deliberately "err" on the side of frivolity. But for the most part Cope's poetry, as I hope to demonstrate, illustrates Calvino's contention that "we would be unable to appreciate the lightness of language if we could not appreciate language that has some weight to it" [7].

3. Now for the second question, only apparently innocent and always worth asking, "What is poetry?" a question which intellectuals, poets themselves, and last but not least, readers have been asking themselves for centuries. Perhaps here the question could be posed in a more relevant way as "What is the difference between poetry and verse?" Robert Darling, in his essay on Cope's poetry (or verse) discusses the difference between the two terms, mentioning *en passant* "the modern and post-modern distrust of the seemingly simple, a bankrupt view passed down from Ez Po and Old Possum" [8] – both of whom are butts of Cope's parody. Darling sustains:

> If the fashionable critical establishment has such suspicion of accessible verse, it would seem that light verse would be unworthy of the critic's time. Indeed, considering the disastrous separation of poetry and verse, light verse might not be considered poetry at all [...] I assume, here for this audience that light verse is poetry [9].

As I agree – at least as far as the subject of this essay is concerned together with many of her illustrious predecessors (Gavin Ewart, Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, W.S. Gilbert, to name but a few) – let us consider the nature of poetry with Wendy Cope herself, who replies in the first place to the elected bard of the first generation of Romantic poets:

An Argument with Wordsworth
'Poetry... takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity'
(Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*)

> People are always quoting that and all of them seem to agree
> And it's probably most unwise to admit that it's different for me.
> I have emotion – no one who knows me could fail to detect it –
> But there's a serious shortage of tranquillity in which to recollect it.
> So this is my contribution to the theoretical debate.
> Sometimes poetry is emotion recollected in a highly emotional state. (*SC*, 47)

Cope's poetry has a relevance and significance which goes beyond the desire (not to be dismissed lightly!) to divert, to entertain and to make the reader laugh. But she also laughs at critics who want to relegate her to the usual place reserved for women who dare to try to write poetry (as opposed to verse): that of second-class/rate scribbler of (at best) minor works, while emphasising the fact that most of her poems may be defined humorous [10]. She dedicates the first of the two poems "Serious Concerns", from the eponymous volume, to a critic writing for *The Spectator*, Robert O'Brien. His opinion of her as poet, quoted at the beginning of the poem in the form of an epigraph (a favourite practice of hers) is that "she is witty and unpretentious, which is both her strength and her weakness". Cope replies to this backhanded compliment as follows:

> I'm going to try and overcome my limitation –
> Away with sloth!
> Now should I work at being less witty? Or more pretentious?
> Or both? (*SC*, 15)

O'Brien's article obviously continued in the same patronising manner, calling to account both Roger McGough and Brian Patten, "They have something in common with her in that they all write to amuse". Cope's answer comes straight from the hip:

> Write to amuse? What an appalling suggestion!
> I write to make people anxious and miserable and to worsen their digestion. (*SC*, 15)

4. Indeed, Cope writes to amuse, and she succeeds in her intent, at least as far as I and at least 40,000 other readers are concerned. But this is not her only aim. And it is also this other aspect of her work which interests me here. Many of the poems of the first two collections and several of the third make use of parody, a stylistic device which is of course typical of post-modernist art and to which some people respond with a sigh, if not with a yawn of boredom. Cope forestalls boredom with the weapon of humour: if nothing else, her detractors may say, at least she makes me laugh. Let us take the example of "Waste Land Limericks" in *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*:

In April one seldom feels cheerful;
Dry stones, sun and dust make me fearful;
Clairvoyantes distress me,
Commuters depress me –
Met Stetson and gave him an earful. [...]

The Thames runs, bones rattle, rats creep;
Tiresias fancies a peep –
A typist is laid,
A record is played –
Wei la la. After this it gets deep.[...]

No water. Dry rocks and dry throats,
Then thunder, a shower of quotes
From the Sanskrit and Dante.
Dah. Damyata. Shantih.
I hope you’ll make sense of the notes. (*MCKA*, 20-21)

This verse form, typical of the nonsense of Edward Lear could seem almost too easy. Who among us has not tried, more or less successfully, to write a limerick? However, when we read “A Nursery Rhyme (as it might have been written by T.S. Eliot)” we begin to sit up and take notice:

Because time will not run backwards
Because time
Because time will not run
Hickory dickory

In the last minute of the first hour
I saw the mouse ascend the ancient timepiece,
Claws whispering like wind in dry hyacinths.

One o’clock,
The street lamp said,
‘Remark the mouse that races towards the carpet.’

And the unstilled wheel still turning
Hickory dickory
Hickory dickory
dock (*MCKA*, 19) [11]

We smile: but, as Mikhail Bakhtin among other illustrious “literati” has taught us, parody has other, more “serious”, functions

– cultural, artistic and, in our case, strictly literary ones – besides merely soliciting mirth. For example, that of helping to break with the past by using the forms and styles of that past in a constructively critical way. When it is a question of parody which is intended to be ideologically engaged and politically constructive, the attempt is that of reconstructing the butt in a form more suitable for its times, to (re)present it in a modernized and more relevant way.

Cope's gift for parodic verse has been described by Mirella Billi as

> "[…] extraordinary […] which does not simply mean that she is brilliant in recalling the style and tone of other poets' verse while amusingly re-writing or imitating them, but that she subversively de-constructs and criticizes form, and with form, meanings and cultural values underlying it.
> Her "parodies", besides revealing her vast and extremely perceptive knowledge – and her command – of poetic forms and styles, trace a sort of "critical survey" of English poetry in the last four decades, particularly focussing on the Fifties and the great influence of the Movement on the poets of the following generations" [12].

In "All Purpose Poem for State Occasions" Cope looks back to one of her predecessors in the comic verse business, W.S. Gilbert, for the style of her poem [13]. Her butt, however, is none other than Ted Hughes, then poet laureate:

> The nation rejoices or mourns
> As this happy or sombre day dawns.
> Our eyes will be wet
> As we sit round the set,
> Neglecting our flowerbeds and lawns.
>
> As Her Majesty rides past the crowd
> They'll be silent or cheer very loud
> But whatever they do
> It's undoubtedly true
> That they'll feel patriotic and proud.
>
> In Dundee and Penzance and Ealing
> We're imbued with appropriate feeling:

> We're British and loyal
> And love every royal
> And tonight we shall drink till we're reeling. (*MCKA*, 14)

Once we reach the parodies of the *lares et penates* of poetry in English (Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Eliot and Pound), Cope's intent could seem audacious if not almost blasphemous. In the case of Wordsworth perhaps a little less blasphemous. Here is "A Nursery Rhyme (as it might have been written by William Wordsworth)":

> The skylark and the jay sang loud and long,
> The sun was calm and bright, the air was sweet,
> When all at once I heard above the throng
> Of jocund birds a single plaintive bleat.
>
> And, turning, saw, as one sees in a dream,
> It was a Sheep had broke the moorland peace
> With his sad cry, a creature who did seem
> The blackest thing that ever wore a fleece.
>
> I walked towards him on the stony track
> And, pausing for a while between two crags,
> I asked him, 'Have you wool upon your back?'
> Thus he bespake, 'Enough to fill three bags.'
>
> Most courteously, in measured tones, he told
> Who would receive each bag and where they dwelt;
> And oft, now years have passed and I am old,
> I recollect with joy that inky pelt. (*MCKA*, 18)

Wordsworth, as Billi points out "has become a common target for parodists [...] because of the stereotypes, in subject-matter, images and poetic language, of his imitators which are also present in a whole tradition of poetry". This is a particularly apt parody, however, a mix of the nursery rhyme "Baa baa black sheep" and the poem "Resolution and Independence" in which the poet meets "the leech-gatherer on the lonely moor" (which I, and probably Wendy Cope, learnt by heart at school!). The black sheep takes the place of the lonely leech-gatherer, and the clues to the hypotext, which have to be given for the full success of any parody are brushed in with skill. Both poets can hear the skylark and the jay, both feel a sense of the oniric ("And the whole body of the

man did seem/Like one whom I had met with in a dream"), Wordsworth's sun "is rising calm and bright" above a moor as well as Cope's, the blackness of the sheep's fleece, just like the age of the leech-gatherer is extreme, and both characters are courteously spoken notwithstanding their solitude and sadness. But there are other clues if this poem of Wordsworth's is not known by the reader. The "crags" remind us of the "Prelude" and "When all at once I heard above the throng" cannot help but recall "When all at once I saw a crowd/A host of golden daffodils".

The dexterity with which the parody is carried out here is owing to lightness of touch and inventiveness. Cope is "resolute" in pursuing her aim but at the same time has enough "independence" to create another poem, not simply a burlesque of the original. The metre of the parodic version is the same as that of "Resolution and Independence" (iambic pentameter) but the verse form is different, shorter and lighter, (quatrains with cross-rhyme instead of septets with rhyme royal). Cope does not want to be accused of rewriting Wordsworth even in parody – she wants to demonstrate the easy way out which the wordsworthian poetic "I" has taken (in "Resolution and Independence" as elsewhere), in making indigence and misery picturesque and an alibi for facile sentimentality.

Cope does not stop at Wordsworth, however. Although it may sometimes seem that the canon of literary taste as far as mainstream culture is concerned has remained immobile, despite decades of feminism, Cope dares to tread on the lawns of "establishment" English literature with a light and airy step:

> The expense of spirits is a crying shame,
> So is the cost of wine. What bard today
> Can live like old Khayyám? It's not the same –
> A loaf and Thou and Tesco's Beaujolais.
> I had this bird called Sharon, fond of gin –
> Could knock back six or seven. At the price
> I paid a high wage for each hour of sin
> And that was why I only had her twice
> Then there was Tracy who drank rum and Coke,
> So beautiful I didn't mind at first
> But love grows colder. Now some other bloke
> Is subsidizing Tracy and her thirst.
> I need a woman, honest and sincere,
> Who'll come across on half a pint of beer. (*MCKA*, 56)

Thus Jason Strugnell, Cope's parodic mask, an admixture of J. Alfred Prufrock, Hugh Selwyn Mauberly and a series of other, less well-known fictional poets. It is indeed no coincidence that "Strugnell's Sonnets", witty parodies of Shakespeare, of which the above is the first, are dedicated to D.M. Thomas, whose parody (pastiche? quotation?) in his novel, *The White Hotel*, involved him in a huge discussion about the boundaries between quoting and plagiary.

5. When I began to examine Wendy Cope's poetry as a possible area of research into post-modern rewriting – not only did I re-read the poems of the writers she was parodying (all, without exception, male) but I decided to have a look at the poetry of her immediate female precursors. I found among my books *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets*, an anthology that had given me great enjoyment when it first came out in 1985, the year before the publication of *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*. This volume has by now, after 20 years, become a "set text" for literature courses in schools and universities. Jeni Couzyn, the editor, was born in 1942, the same year as Cope, and it is clear that for her too the problem of male suzerainty over the world of poetry, a hegemony acquired above all through privileged access to the publishing world, is, to her too, of vital importance. She begins her introduction to the volume as follows:

> Poetry in England has not always been dominated by men, as Shakespeare acknowledged in *Twelfth Night*:
>
> *The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,*
> *And the free maids that weave their thread with bones,*
> *Do use to chant it.*
>
> The Gaelic traditional poetry of the Scottish highlands is one of the great oral traditions of the world [...] In a six-volume collection[of 1899 [14]]the greater proportion of reciters were women, and it seems [...] from the content of the poems [...] that they were made by women and handed down from mother to daughter. They are a collection of work songs, healing charms, stories and prayers and spells, woven into the essential texture of the lives of those who spoke them [...] [15].

Couzyn's own poetry appears at the end of the volume but the other poets included are all older than she is, from Stevie Smith (1902- 1971) and Kathleen Raine (1908-2003) to Denise Levertov (1923-1997) and Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001), and then going on to poets who just precede both herself and Cope: Elaine Feinstein (1930-), Ruth Fainlight (1931-), Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), Jenny Joseph (1932-), Anne Stevenson (1933-) and Fleur Adcock (1934-).Each selection from the poets' works is preceded by an introduction in her own words (with the exception of Smith and Plath who had both died before the anthology's publication).

These introductions, in which the authors discuss their work and recognise the poetry which had the greatest artistic influence upon it, constitutes the most interesting aspect of the book as far as the present discussion is concerned, as every poet mentions the difficulty she encountered when she was looking for models for women's poetry. Those born in the thirties indeed still tend to mention male instead of female models, and even more surprising is the fact that none of them mention either Smith or Raine. Denise Levertov affirms that her "favourite poets were all men" [16]; Elizabeth Jennings claims that her "influences had been Auden, Edwin Muir and Robert Graves and, of course, the great lyrical tradition since Shakespeare" [17]. Jennings goes on to cite the names of Keats, Hopkins and Eliot; Feinstein mentions Pound and Wallace Stevens (she does mention a woman poet but this is the Russian Marina Cvetaeva, not anyone writing in English); Fainlight, too, mentions Stevens, and adds John Clare, Baudelaire and Poe; Joseph cites Browning, Anne Stevenson, Yeats and Adcock, though she admits the paradox, says:

> […] the poets I read were male: Blake, Milton, Eliot, Rilke. If I thought about this at all I regarded it as a mere historical accident: poets had happened for some centuries to be men; well, so had scientists and doctors and professors until recently. It wasn't going to stop me [..] I used to enjoy being the token woman at poetry readings; now I enjoy finding that there are so many of us: The once tediously frequent question of whether women can "really" be poets already sounds old-fashioned [18].

Only Jeni Couzyn, the editor, mentions the names of two women poets, Emily Brontë and Kathleen Raine. When talking about the origins of her vocation for poetry writing, she adds:

> When I was fifteen one of my sisters gave me two long-playing records of Dylan Thomas reading his own poems. I listened to them endlessly, absorbing his music [19].

When I was fifteen I bought myself the same records together with the hardback *Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas*. And I am sure that there were no recordings available by women poets of their own selected works. Indeed, it was the near impossibility of finding the works of women poets in order to be able to read them that caused the phenomenon described above. In the introduction to the Bloodaxe anthology, Couzyn cites a volume published in 1980, *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse, 1945-1980*, edited by D.J. Enright, in which among the forty poets included only three are women. Searching in the anthologies on my own bookshelves I discovered that this is already a satisfactory percentage. Looking through the indexes of my beloved Penguins – *Georgian Poetry, Imagist Poetry, Poetry of the Thirties, Poetry of the Forties, British Contemporary Poetry After 1945, The New Poetry, Children of Albion, Contemporay American Verse* – and of that of the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, it is immediately evident that they all follow the same pattern. Male first names prevail: David, Alun, Henry, Mervyn, James, Sean, Dylan, George, Frank, Sidney, Dorian, Roy, Patrick, Neil, Ivor, Richard, Keith, Alex, Paul, and so it goes on. I should add that, parenthetically, that in these anthologies, brought out by "establishment" publishing houses, the word "verse" is a perfect synonym of "poetry".

Poems by Stevie Smith or by Kathleen Raine, to think only of the two poets included in the Bloodaxe volume, contemporaries of many of the male poets who appear in these collections, could have certainly been published alongside this infinity of male poetic production and perhaps even with greater success. Because not all the poets here are named Thomas Stearns or Wystan Hugh. Both Smith and Raine can write efficacious verse on that most serious subject, death, with the best of their male counterparts. Let us look, for example, at "Not Waving, but Drowning" by Smith:

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking,
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no, no, no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning [20].

On the same subject is "The Dead" by Kathleen Raine:

Not because they are far, but because so near
The dead seem strange to us;
Stripped of those unprized familiar forms they wore,
Defending from our power to wound
That poignant naked thing they were,
The holy souls
Speak, essence to essence, heart to heart,
Scarcely can we dare
To know in such intimacy
Those whom courtesy, or reticence, or fear
Hid, when covered in skin of beasts,
Evading, and evaded,
We turned the faces of our souls away.
Only the youngest child is as near as they,
Or those who share the marriage-bed
When pity and tenderness dwell there [21].

Smith and Raine are both concerned here with an elegiac vein of poetry – besides the "pity and tenderness" evoked by the latter they express and give form and voice to the regret felt for incomprehension when the dead were living and to the realisation that, in Eliot's words: "What the dead had no words for when living/They can tell you being dead". Smith's subject is masculine, Raine's is plural and neuter. Both poems, although completely different in style and tone, clearly, to quote Schmidt, "take their [stylistic and formal] bearings from Modernism" [22].

When, however, we examine an elegy by Cope, we discover that here we have a truly postmodern elegy, whose feminine subject belonged, when alive, to the emarginated and the unconsidered (as far as the poetic voice was concerned, too). "Tich Miller" (subject and title of the poem) is a clumsy, unattractive and physically handicapped little girl described at the moment of yet another act of exclusion on the part of a society which is training up its young to discriminate between success and failure. The simple syntax, the colloquial vocabulary and the deliberately minor tone collaborate in the creation of a totally contemporary effect:

> Tich Miller wore glasses
> with elastoplast-pink frames
> and had one foot three sizes larger than the other.
>
> When they picked teams for outdoor games
> she and I were always the last two
> left standing by the wire-mesh fence.
>
> We avoided one another's eyes,
> stooping, perhaps, to re-tie a shoelace,
> or affecting interest in the flight
>
> of some fortunate bird, and pretended
> not to hear the urgent conference:
> 'Have Tubby!' 'No, no have Tich!'
>
> Usually they chose me, the lesser dud,
> and she lolloped, unselected,
> to the back of the other team.
>
> At eleven we went to different schools,
> in time I learned to get my own back,
> sneering at the hockey players who couldn't spell.
>
> Tich died when she was twelve. (*MCKA*, 29)

The anthology edited by Couzyn shows how, during an epoch when the reality of women's lives was hardly ever considered to constitute material for male poetic inspiration, women poets were already using this reality for such an end and not only writing poems on the subject but publishing the results. The university

presses of Oxford and Cambridge and also the more "popular" Penguin, while proposing the various post-(First World) war anthologies were totally ignoring the expression of one side of the post-war experience: the voices of wives, of mothers, of lovers, workers and artists who spoke of experiences which only women could express. Just as only a male voice could tell of the horrors of trench warfare or sing of the exaltation of combat, of the generosity and tenderness which spring from acts of heroism and altruism. Many women's voices celebrate the struggle, sometimes mortal, between "love" and "rhyme", a metaphor which in the case of Syvia Plath, for example, became a horrifying reality, a reality which is foreshadowed in many of her poems and especially in the work "Edge":

> The woman is perfected.
> Her dead
>
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
> The illusion of a Greek necessity
>
> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
> Her bare
>
> Feet seem to be saying:
> We have come so far, it is over.
>
> Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
> One at each little
>
> Pitcher of milk, now empty.
> She has folded
>
> Them back into her body as petals
> Of a rose close when the garden
>
> Stiffens and odours bleed
> From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.
>
> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
>
> She is used to this sort of thing.
> Her blacks crackle and drag [23].

This is with all probability Plath's last poem, written a few days before she committed suicide. There is no doubt that from the anguish that the desperate frustration of her life at that time sprang some of the finest poems written by man or woman – but there is also no doubt that this poetry cost her her life and was thus paid for too dearly.

7. Cope's parody, her "light verse" does not simply constitute a series of extremely diverting exercises in poetic skill, but represents an incisive satirical attack upon blinkered publishing policies. She, too writes poetry which describes female reality, poems of love, disappointment and hope, not disdaining a very British rhetorical device – that of bathos:

> It wouldn't be a good idea
> To let him stay.
> When they knew each other better –
> Not today.
> But she put on her new black knickers
> Anyway. (*MCKA* 31)

Tongue-in-cheek (as Robert Darling observes "she rarely descends into male-bashing" [24]), a true iconoclast, Cope tilts against the *monstres sacrés* of the world of male poetry,and invites her colleagues to write, to publish, to find themselves readers in exactly the same way as men do, to consider these male poets simply as human beings who know how to write verse and whom it is perfectly possible to criticize.

As we have seen Cope is certainly not afraid of parodying Shakespeare's sonnets: this is in fact something that people have done before her and will do again and is a "subversive" literary exercise which could be said to smack of the predictable. But Strugnell, her poetic mask, is capable of more than this. His/her parodic poems may be seen to constitute a veritable "rewritten history" of modernist and postmodern poetry. Let us take a look at "Strugnell's Haiku":

(i)

The cherry blossom
In my neighbour's garden – Oh!
It looks really nice.

(ii)

The leaves have fallen
And the snow has fallen, and
Soon my hair also…

(iii)

November evening:
The moon is up, rooks settle,
The pub is open. (*MCKA*, 56)

But apart from the great names of Modernism – Eliot and Pound, a glance at the parodies created according to the technique of "stylization" as Bakhtin would have it, give us, *in nuce*, a potted history of post- (Second World) war male poetry up to and including the present day. William Empson, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, Geoffrey Hill, Craig Raine, Peter Porter, Roger McGough: and here I cannot help quoting another example to illustrate Cope's parody of the latter from the "trilogy" "the homeless hammer":

II *second sight in Brockwell Park*

my toenails listen
to the soggy grass
mankind – a wind-tossed ice-cream wrapper
life – a melancholy bus
I walk, I have these visions
and they are really quite depressing (*SC* 57)

Cope's extraordinary technical skill, mastery of metrical and rhyme schemes, and command of imagery, deconstructs and rewrites the poetry of an epoch and reveals the desire that in these cases, too, parody is signalling the desire for change, for the breaking of a tradition – a tradition which is fencing out the other half of the poetic world: women poets. Cope coins an acronym – TUMP –

as the title of another poem and describes it during the poem's course:

> Don't ask him the time of day. He won't know it,
> For he's the abstracted sort.
> In fact he's a typically useless male poet.
> We'll call him a tump for short.
>
> A tump isn't practical, smart or efficient,
> He probably can't drive a car
> Or follow a map, though he's very proficient
> At finding his way to a bar.
>
> He may have great talent, and not just for writing –
> For drawing, or playing the drums.
> But don't let him loose on accounts – that's inviting
> Disaster. A tump can't do sums.
>
> He cannot get organized. Just watch him try it
> And you'll see a frustrated man.
> But some tumps (and these are the worst ones) deny it
> And angrily tell you they can.
>
> I used to be close to a tump who would bellow
> 'You think I can't add two and two?'
> And get even crosser when, smiling and mellow,
> I answered 'You're quite right. I do.'
>
> Women poets are businesslike, able,
> Good drivers and right on the ball,
> And some of us know our seven times table.
> We're not like the tumps. Not at all. (*SC* 34)

In another work "Poem Composed in Santa Barbara", Cope further elaborates her desire to emphasise difference rather than sameness:

> The poets talk. They talk a lot.
> They talk of T.S. Eliot.
> One is anti. One is pro.
> How hard they think! How much they know!
> They're happy. A cicada sings.
> We women talk of other things. (*SC* 36)

"We women talk of other things". This indeed is the essence of Cope's message. That women talk of other things and that they talk about them in another way. Not for Cope is the road of *amertume*, of the persecution complex, of simple spite. Hers is the way of lightness, the "lightness of thoughtfulness" which at one and the same time causes laughter and reflection: hers is a poetry which simultaneously explores the "serious concerns" of postmodern feminism – gender, aging, segregation, inequality, together with problems common to all artists – creativity, originality, the status of the work of art. In the words of Calvino "of literature as an existential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living" [25].

[1] Hilaire Belloc's poem goes, "I'm tired of love, I'm still more tired of rhyme/But money gives me pleasure all the time".

[2] Interview available on the website: www.bedfordmartins.com/litlink/poetry/cope.-htm.

[3] I. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, (trans. Patrick Creagh), London, Vintage, 1996, p. 1.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[8] R. Darling, "Wendy Cope and the Weight of Light Verse", *Expansive Poetry and Music Online Review*, Copyright 1996-2001 by EP&M Online and Somers Rocks Press.

[9] *Loc. cit*.

[10] Once again Calvino comes to mind, as he in his turn, cites Panofsky "As melancholy is sadness that has taken on lightness, so humour is comedy that has lost its bodily weight [...] It casts doubt on the self, on the world, and on the whole network of relationships that are at stake", I. Calvino, *Six Memos*... cit., p. 19.

[11] Perhaps one should quote the old English nursery rhyme, first published in 1744 and documented as being a favourite of Sir Walter Scott's, and in this case the hypotext of the parody:

Hickory dickory dock,
The mouse ran up the clock,
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory dickory dock.

[12] M. Billi, "Very serious concerns: the poetry of Wendy Cope", *Englishes*, I, 1 (1997), p. 87.

[13] The song "My name is John Wellington Wells" from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer.*

[14] Carmichael (ed.), *Carmina Gadelica/Ortha nan Gaidheal*, 6 vols., Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1900-1901.

[15] J. Couzyn (ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women's Poetry*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle, 1985, p. 13.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 201-2.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 216-17.

[20] M. Schmidt (ed.), *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, London, The Harvill Press, 1999, p. 198. Although we are nearly in the twenty-first century here things have not yet changed much. Out of 117 poets only 23 are women.

[21] J. Couzyn (ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book*… cit., p. 66.

[22] M. Schmidt (ed.), *The Harvill Book*… cit., p. xxxviii.

[23] J. Couzyn (ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book*… cit., p. 164.

[24] R. Darling, "Wendy Cope… cit.

[25] I. Calvino, *Six Memos*… cit., p. 26.

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INDEX

Adcock, F., 110
Alexander, G., 30
Alonso, J.C., 15, 31
Anne, Queen of England, 14, 31
Aparo, A., 94, 97
Aretino, Pietro, 27
Ariosto, Ludovico, 24, 28
Armstrong, I., 81, 96
Arnold, M., 78, 80, 95
Auden, W.H.,110
Avery, S., 83, 86, 96, 97

Bailey, P.J., 80, 81
Baillie, J., 8
Bakhtin, M., 105
Barbauld, A., 47
Barrett Browning, E., 7, 9, 77-97

Barrett, E., 77, 87-88, 90, 93
Baudelaire, Ch., 110
Behrendt, S., 47-48, 56
Belloc, H., 99-100, 118
Bembo, Pietro, 24, 27
Besier, R., 77, 95
Billi, M., 106, 107, 108
Blake, W., 110
Bloom, H., 61, 74
Bristow, J., 96
Brontë, A., 59, 60, 70
Brontë, Ch., 59, 70, 73, 74
Brontë, E., 7, 9, 59, 60, 67-75, 111
Browning, Robert, 62, 80, 82, 88, 97, 110
Buonarroti, Michelangelo, 24, 29
Byron, G.G., 40, 47, 96

Calvino, I., 101-102, 118, 119
Campbell, J., 93-94, 97
Carey, G., 12
Carlyle, T., 78, 96
Carroll, L., 103
Castiglione, Baldassare, 11, 26, 30
Chambers, D., 56
Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, 25
Charlotte Augusta of Saxe-Coburg, 47
Christ, C., 96
Cicero (Marco Tullio Cicerone), 27
Cixous, H., 35, 39, 52, 56
Clare, J., 42, 56, 110
Coleridge, S.T., 79, 86
Colonna, Vittoria, 9, 11-12, 24-26, 29
Cope, W., 7, 9, 99-
Couzyn, J., 109-110, 111, 113, 119
Crisafulli, L.M., 8, 10, 55
Curran, S., 35, 41, 43, 55, 56
Cvetaeva, M., 110

Dalton, J., 36, 55
Daniel, S., 13
Darling, R., 103, 115, 118, 119
Davies, S., 74
De Quincey, T., 36

d'Este, Ercole II, 24
d'Este, Isabella, 24
de Selincourt, Ernest, 96
de Vere, Edward Earl of Oxford, 30
de Vere, Susan, 30
Domenichelli, M., 10, 31
Dowland, J., 13
Dowland, R., 13
Drayton, M., 13
Dudley, M., 13
Duncan-Jones, K., 18, 30

Eliot, G., 82
Eliot, T.S, 79, 103, 105, 107-108, 110, 112, 116
Elizabeth I, Queen of England, 24
Enright, D.J., 111
Empson, W., 116
Ewart, G., 100, 103

Fainlight, R., 110
Feinstein, E., 110
Franco, V., 9, 11-12, 24, 26-29, 30, 33
Fraunce, A., 13
Freud, S., 63, 64, 74, 94
Funari, E., 97

Gamage, B., 12
Gambara, V., 25, 26
Genette, G., 64
George IV, King of England, 37, 47
Gilbert, W.S., 103, 106, 118
Gonzaga, Federico, 24
Graves, R., 110

Harington, J., 13
Hemans, F., 8, 47, 56
Henri III, King of France, 26-27, 30
Herbert, G., 23, 24
Herbert, Mary Countess of Pembroke, 12, 15, 30
Herbert, W., 14-15, 31
Hill, G., 116
Hoby, T., 11, 30
Homans, M., 71, 74, 75, 88, 97
Hopkins, G.M., 96, 110
Horne, R.H., 87, 97
Howard, Ch., 12
Hudson, R., 97
Hughes, T., 106, 116
Hutchinson, T., 96

James I, King of England, 13-14, 24
Jennings, E., 110
Jones, I., 31
Jonson, B., 13, 14, 31
Joseph, J., 110

Kant, I., 81
Keats, J., 42, 61, 110
Kelley, P., 97
Kennedy, D., 56
Kent, E., 42
Kenyon, F.G., 95, 96, 97
Kingsley, Ch., 80, 81, 96
Kintner, E., 97
Kundera, M., 102

Larkin, Ph., 116
Landon, L.E., 8, 47
Lanyer, A., 24
Laws, J., 31
Lear, E., 103, 105
le Brunne, R., 83-84, 96
Leighton, A., 92, 96, 97
Levertov, D., 110
Lewis, S., 97
Lickbarrow, I., 7, 9, 35-56
Lobanov-Rostovsky, S. , 17, 31
Lucan (Lucano Anneo), 90

Macdonald, J.G., 24
Malcolmson, C., 23, 31
Mandell, L., 56

Manxfeeld, T., 13
Marucci, F., 61, 74, 95, 96
Mayer, R.S.T., 97
Mazzola, E., 30
McGough, R., 104, 116
McLuhan, M., 61, 74
Mellor, A., 44, 47, 56, 71, 75, 82, 96
Mill, J.S., 79, 80, 82, 96
Millais, J., 61
Milton, J., 86, 89, 110
Montale, E., 102
Muir, E., 110

Nash, O., 103

O'Brien, R., 104
Ovid (Publio Ovidio Nasone), 22, 102

Parker, D., 99, 103
Parrish, C., 35, 36, 45-46, 55, 56
Pater, W., 66, 74, 78, 79, 95
Patten, B., 104
Paul III, Pope, 25
Payne, S., 31, 55
Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca), 16, 17, 21, 22, 25, 27, 28, 29
Pietropoli, C., 8, 10,
Plath, S., 110, 114-115
Poe, E.A., 110
Pole, Cardinal Reginald, 25
Porter, P., 116
Pound, E.., 79, 103, 107-108, 110, 116

Radcliffe, A., 23
Raine, C., 116
Raine, K., 110, 111-112
Raleigh, W., 12
Reynolds, M., 96, 97
Rilke, R.M., 110
Roberts, J., 12, 13, 14, 15, 21, 29, 30, 31
Robson, J.M., 96
Rosenthal, M., 27, 33
Ruskin, J., 89

Sannazzaro, Jacopo, 25
Sansovino, Francesco, 27
Schmidt, M., 112-113, 119
Shakespeare, W., 12, 62, 89, 97, 107, 108-109, 110, 115
Shelley, P.B., 79, 86, 96
Showalter, E., 85, 96
Sidney, K., 13
Sidney, H., 13
Sidney, Ph., 12, 13, 16, 18, 23, 30
Sidney, R., 12, 13, 30
Smith, Ch., 8
Smith, S., 110, 111-112
Southey, R., 36, 47
Spenser, E., 12, 61
Steele, I., 40
Stevens, W., 110
Stevenson, A., 110
Stone L., 23
Stott, R., 96, 97

Tennyson, A., 59, 61-67, 74, 80, 96
Tennyson, H., 74
Thomas, D., 111
Thomas, D.M., 109

Venier, D., 27
Venier, L., 27
Venier, Maffio, 27
Venier, Marco, 27, 28
Vickers, N., 29, 33
Victoria, Queen of England, 61

Waller, G., 18
Whitney, I., 24
Whyte, R., 13
Williams, R., 89, 97
Woolf, V., 24
Wordsworth, J., 35, 41, 56
Wordsworth, W., 36, 42, 43, 44,

56, 79, 80, 86, 89, 92, 96, 103, 107-108
Wriothsley, H., 13
Wroth, C., 14
Wroth, J., 14, 31
Wroth, M., 7, 8-9, 11-24, 29, 31
Wroth, R., 13-14, 31
Wroth, W., 15
Wu, D., 35, 39, 46, 55, 56
Wynne-Davis, M., 24
Yeats, W.B., 110

Zazo, A.L., 72, 75

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