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Female Voice and Female Power in Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues

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Abstract: *From the perspective of narrative voice in female narratology, this paper first explores the silenced women, who lose right to voice, and the female narrators, who lose control over voice in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues. However, despite their inferiority in voice, which is what modern feminists fight to obtain, both those silenced female characters and female narrators represent a small and precious victory for female power. Silenced women show the power to make men fear losing their dominance. The female narrators, on the other hand, demonstrate complete adaptation to the male-dominated society by unknowingly using male privilege for their own purposes. By studying the female voice in Browning's work and further analyzing texts, we can learn certain limitations of his time, his delicate observation of and unique insights into gender power relations, and probably his hope for females to break the established ethic.*

Keywords: *Female Voice, Female Power, Robert Browning, Dramatic Monologue*

1. Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues and Female Characters

Dramatic monologue is a type of poetry written in the form of a speech of an individual character. A single person addresses and interacts with one or more auditors, while readers get clues about details of a story and the speaker's temperament and character. Xiao Minghan summarized three main features of the dramatic monologue. First, the speaker narrates in the first person separated from the author to maintain objectivity. Second, the author's voice is expressed in the speaker's voice through various indirect ways. Third, the speaker's words not only express the message he wants to convey, but also reveal and shape his own character in turn [1]. The unique characteristics of dramatic monologues make the study of different voices meaningful. A thesis by Li Hongxia has emphasized three kinds of voices in dramatic monologues—voice of the speaker, the audience, and the poet—and interplays between them [2]. It provides a foundation for studying voices in dramatic monologues. Yet there are other characters who are closely connected with the voice of the speaker, the audience, and the poet. They are equally significant to study.

Though the term dramatic monologue does not enjoy a long history, the Victorian period represented the high point of it in English poetry. One of the most prominent poets is Robert Browning. In Qian's systematic study of the narrators in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, she analyzed the characteristics of Browning's speakers, one of which is that Browning prefers to set male characters as narrators. According to scholars, in Browning's four most typical collections of dramatic monologues, Dramatic Lyric, Dramatic Romance and Lyric, Men and Women, and Dramatic Characters, male speakers account for more than 70% of the poems. In total, there are 81 male narrators and 11 female narrators. There are also five poems with both male and female narrators, and nine poems in which the gender of the narrator is unknown. The murdered female figure is particularly typical of Browning's poems, and female figures often appear as art-objects created by male artists [3]. Despite these, Qian did not delve into the voices of female characters both as narrators and as objects at the mercy of male speakers.

Like Qian, most scholars have focused on the silenced females as the Other in Browning's dramatic monologues. U. C. Knoepflmacher creatively initiated that Browning understood the complex gender politics of artistic representation. He concludes that the dramatic monologue provided a form with which Robert Browning could "attempt to give voice to a Female Other as well as his persistent skepticism about the process of projection that such a voicing involved. Like Keats, Browning knew that poetry, like all art, can distort the Other into what she is not" [4]. In Browning's attempts to deauthorize the male speakers, real images of females emerge. In this process, readers undoubtedly play a vital role in releasing the voices of the female "Others" by decoding Browning's lines and discovering the true features of the

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male speakers.

The study of female voices cannot be separated from the discussion of power relations between men and women. "Feminist Reading of 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Lover'" by Chen Li-sha and "An Analysis of Female Subversive Power in Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' from the Perspective of Feminism" by Wang Yaqiong studied the power relationship between male speakers and silenced females, and more importantly, notes the silenced duchess's everlasting power over the male narrator [5][6]. However, due to the limitation of the number of texts analyzed, both scholars do not deal much with Browning's own views and opinions on women.

In general, more studies have focused on Browning's monologues in which female characters are silenced by men. However, to gain a fuller insight into Browning's observation on women's issues, his female narrators must be taken into account. Are the male power relations reflected in the silent female characters and the female narrators consistent in Browning's works? How does Robert Browning view the power struggle between the sexes? By selecting more poems whose narrators include both men and women, this paper attempts to address the above problems.

2. Women in Inferiority

2.1 Female Characters Being Silenced

To illustrate, from the beginning to the end of "My Last Duchess", the deceased Duchess does not say a single word, but the poem is filled with the Duke's subjective description of her behavior and demeanor. Even when the Duke could have approached his wife about her misconduct (as the Duke himself saw it), and the Duchess could have spoken up and confessed to the Duke, the Duke "choose/Never to stoop" (lines 41-42) and killed the opportunity for his late wife to give out her voice.

Moreover, the silenced females are usually fixed into certain objects. Painting has been the central imagery of "My Last Duchess" and the description of the Prior's mistress in "Fra Lippo Lippi". The Duke of Ferrara, who is jealous of his lady's affectionate smile, orders her to be murdered and has her smile, painted by a famous artist, framed. As mentioned before, the Duke manipulated his wife by killing her so that he can control his late wife's portrait through the curtains according to his will and achieve absolute control over her. Throughout this passage, the duke humanizes the painting by using phrases like "there she stands" (4), which implies that the duchess herself, rather than her representation in the painting, is leaning against the wall, and "will't please you sit and look at her" (5), which substitutes for asking the messenger to look at "it" or "the painting." Again, this shows that he sees the lady and the piece of art as being identical.

As for Herodias in "Fra Lippo Lippi," she is also flattened into "the 'fixed' and immovable Andromedas of graphic art" [5]. What readers can learn and conjecture is that she is the Prior's mistress who is a "white smallish female with the breasts" (195), through Lippo's report about her from the Prior's words.

2.2 Female Narrators Being Restricted

Even when female characters have the opportunity to narrate stories themselves, they still "lack control over the language" [7]. They are fully conscious of their inability to speak in a patriarchal society and turn to seek the men's exclusive power for shelter and protection.

In "Count Gismond," the countess tells a companion about a time in her life when she became entangled in the web of her cousins' unrecognized hypocrisy and jealousy, as well as Count Gauthier's attempt to disgrace her on her birthday. Her husband showed up in time, defeated Gauthier, and kept her reputation. Like the Duke of Ferrara in "My Last Duchess," the countess is an unreliable speaker who weaves a lie to her hearer, but has much less freedom in speaking. In fact, the two dramatic monologues were originally published together under the common title Italy and France, in the third volume of Bells and Pomegranates (1842) [8]. Therefore, it is meaningful to compare these two narrators. Alison Case notes that: while male speakers in dramatic monologues seek to organize and convey to others a coherent self-image which will provoke sympathy, forgiveness, respect, or even fear—with varying intentions, honesty, and success—the countess seems to know that she is unable to make speech work for her in presenting a believable self to the world, so in the face of anyone with the power to judge her on the basis of her speech, she retreats to the safety of silence. [7]

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In the case of "My Last Duchess," from start to finish, the Duke is the dominant power. In terms of space, he leads the envoy like a tour guide around his estate and art collection, instructing him on what to look at, what to consider, and even where to sit. The Duke actually puts himself above his visitor by making the envoy sit while he is standing, demonstrating the hierarchy of power that he seeks to uphold in all of his contacts with others. In terms of the content of the monologue, the Duke reveals his real purpose at the moment near the end of the poem: to get the Count's beautiful daughter and most importantly the dowry. But this does not prevent him from maintaining his self-image as a dominator. Otherwise, why does he tell the story of his late wife and even disclose the secret of her death to the envoy? If he had placed himself in a lower position to marry the Count's daughter, he would have said how kind and considerate he had been to his ex-wife. In fact, he is warning his future wife of the consequences of disobedience to him. His self-image persistent throughout the monologue is to put pressure on the envoy and intimidate his future wife into doing as he wishes by provoking fear.

Compared with the Duke, though the countess is able to silence Adela to whom she tells her story because Adela is "too powerless (or too sympathetic) to contradict the countess in her lie," she can never have her secret unveiled to Gismond. She is "distrust of" and must be more cautious with her words. "In her description of Gismond's defense of her…," Case wrote, "the Countess continually tries to transfer to physical actions the dangerous burden of language" (217). The Countess keeps attempting to translate the hazardous load of language into physical acts in her account of Gismond's protection of her as well. Gismond knocks Gauthier down with a "blow that wrote / In blood men's verdict there" (lines 75-76), and upon his presence, "the truth stood up" (78). She calls him "Cleaving till out the truth he clove" (96) as he swings his sword at the dead Gauthier. The Countess ensures that her report of Gauthier's dying confession, "'I have lied / To God and her'" (102-103) will be comprehended as a repudiation of his public accusation even though, strictly speaking, that accusation was addressed to neither God nor her, by describing the physical struggle between Gismond and Gauthier as a form of language affirming her innocence. Last but not least, even the phrase "Our elder boy has got the clear / Great brow" (121-122) seems to be an attempt to make the kid's outward appearance confirm his legal paternity and, hence, her purity [7]. When physical actions are not available for her to transfer to, the countess tends to weave lies to cover up the truth. One of them can be spotted directly from readers' perspective: at the end of her narration when she realizes Gismond's presence, she makes a lie about the conversation she and Adela have been having.

The countess is always in a passive state when resorting to these strategies. Not knowing the schemes of her cousins and Gauthier beforehand, she must take emergency actions with no time to respond and prepare. While the Duke is to obtain what he desires, the countess is trying to preserve what she has at the moment. She cannot even solve the problem solely on her own but depend on her husband to stand out for her, kill Gauthier, and keep her purity.

"A Woman's Last Word," another female-narrated work by Browning, is also regarded by some as "a context of pathos where a male-dominated world suffocates feminine self-assertion" [9]. The wife and speaker requests to her husband that they stop arguing for the night and enter into a peaceful sleep. Her willing of obedience is most evident in the second half of the poem where she starts with asking a number of different things about her husband. She first asks that he "Be a god" (line 21) and look after her. He needs to "hold" (23) her and "fold" (23) her into his "arm" (24) so that the fights would end. This may serve as both the catalyst and the cornerstone of their reconciliation. Additionally, the wife requests that her husband "Teach...only teach, Love" (25). She should hear nothing but happiness and joy from him, not the conflict they previously did. If he complies with her desire, she will start to "speak" (27) and "[t]hink" (28) like him. The speaker further positions herself in a passive and submissive role in their relationship by taking his teachings to heart and speaking and thinking in his way. In the eighth stanza, she promises to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that the remainder of the night is tranquil. The "both demands" (30) of body and soul are included here. Here, the speaker offers herself to her husband to appease and soothe him in an effort to end the argument.

3. Females in actual dominance

However, despite the inferiority in voicing and controlling their own voice, women in such a disadvantaged position seem to have found a unique way to survive and quietly achieve a shift in dominance.

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3.1 Deconstruction of Male Power by Silenced Females

"Feminine strategy and superiority in a battle of the sexes" [9] can find roots in why female characters would be silenced by male speakers. Herbert Sussman presents Victorian middle-class masculinity as a code of conduct and a restriction on women's purity and fidelity [10][11]. Conversely, if women do or are suspected to do the opposite, they also pose threat to manliness and male dominance. This is exactly the case in My Last Duchess.

In My Last Duchess, on the one hand, the duchess's behaviors towards other men are an insult to his status in the eyes of the Duke. On the other hand, in the process of getting along, he finds himself powerless in the face of his wife, unable to control her behavior, words and thoughts. Confining her in the portrait seems to an excellent choice to take back his absolute control. But he ignores the fact that "her death did not stop her struggle against male power, and the power that she felt threatened by patriarchal society was left on the painting" [12]. Her pure beauty and smile remain.

The Duke, by contrast, is the one trapped in the game between two sexes however he repeatedly tries to construct the duchess's image of an unfaithful wife. Though he brags about his capacity to cover and reveal his wife's face at will ("since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I" [lines 9-10]), his wife's expressions continue to be the same each time she is revealed. The "spot of joy" (21) that tainted her in her husband's eyes while she was alive will continue to do so for as long as he gazes upon her photo. This "spot of joy" was there throughout her whole marriage. The constant smiling and small talk that irritated him during their marriage will continue to trouble him. The phrase "faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat" (18-19) will continually depict a disconcerting intensity, and "the depth and passion of [her] earnest glance" (8) will continue to challenge the Duke's attempt to explain it away. In spite of his efforts to replace the living expressions of his wife with a lifeless artistic image that he is able to manipulate, there she will continue to "stand/ As if alive" (46-47).

The repetition of explaining to himself and others the unfaithful image of his late wife is only a repeated battle with the Duke himself. More importantly, "the Duke inadvertently speaks for her and becomes the passive medium through which her silenced expressions are finally heard" [13]. In other words, he becomes "the passive medium" between the Duchess's voice and the reader. Because the Duke cannot help but repeat himself over and over again whenever he is talking about the Duchess, this misrepresents the degree to which he claims to have control over both his wife and his words, and it compels readers to question the validity of his claims. Therefore, repetition denotes the point at which the deceased woman's voice splits the cohesiveness of the dramatic monologue and separates the speaker's perspective from her own. For instance, the Duke's obsessive repetition of the word "stoop" (34, 42, 43) discredits his boast that he never stooped before his wife and hints that even if he does control the duchess during her lifetime, she is the one who controls him after she has passed away. As a result, the Duke ends up speaking for his late wife incautiously. In the interplay between the Duke and readers, the pure and innocent voice of the young Duchess is enabled to be expressed for readers to make judgements.

U. C. Knoepflmacher agrees that repetition in the Duke's discourse "belies his efforts at composure and control" and argues that, on the contrary, it forces the reader to identify with the Duke's silenced wife. "[S]timulated into reanimating what Browning's speakers have deanimated," we find ourselves watching for any clues in the Duke's speech that tell the truth. According to Knoepflmacher, it is the Duchess's very muteness that inspires the reader to become her "liberator", as it were, for as he puts it, "[u]nless rescued by the reader," the Duchess is condemned to "remain the perennial captiv[e] of masculine speech" [13]. As the readers empathize with the duchess and exposes the Duke's lies, the reader helps her deconstruct the male power once again.

3.2 Use of Male Power by Female Narrators

Part 2.2 has illustrated female's awareness of their inferiority in the male-dominated society and their proactive compliance with this status difference. But if analyzed carefully, some female narrators are actually using the established rule to satisfy their needs.

As mentioned earlier, Countess Gismond knows that she cannot get rid of the accusations about her affair on her own. The wisest thing to do at this point is to ask her husband to set Gauthier straight and prove her innocence. For people like her and her husband who has a high social standing, persuading her husband of her purity is the first step toward persuading everyone else. Then after the countess uses Gismond's authority to defeat Gauthier and solve the source of the "lie," her innocence, status and

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everything she has is assured. Gismond, while exercising his male privilege, was hoodwinked by his wife and was not the true beneficiary.

The female speaker in "A Woman's Last Word," too, is not a truly obedient wife. Instead, she is so conscious of male nature that she employs both rational and emotive strategies to manipulate her husband and have him respond to her request. She spends the first half of lines "blunt[ing] his drive to overcome her by force of argument" and giving him "an awareness of the marital harmony they share" [9]. Comparing their situation to that of Adam and Eve, she concludes with her choice of avoiding reasoning and arguing for truth. Here she does not just blindly choose to give up the argument; she provides the reason which would sound more convincing to her husband: her truth is bound to differ from his. On the one hand, she does not completely deny what she believes to be the truth. By doing this, she retains her capacity for rational thought. On the other hand, while reminding her husband of the danger of seeking truth, she is still placing him at the center and affirming his absolute dominance with no possibility to provoke him. Then, as previously elaborated, the wife shows complete obedience to her husband offering her body and spirit. In fact, this shows that she is extremely aware of her husband's psychology and desires. After being calmed, the man needs to be reassured his power in the marriage so that he can be relieved to make up with his wife without losing any face. Physical intimacy acts as another benefit, which can catalyze the husband's willingness to stop fighting. At the end of the poem, the speaker uses terms like "sorrow" (35), "weep" (37), and "foolish" (38), which create a pitiful image of herself to arouse her husband's sympathy. More importantly, they demonstrate her inferiority in terms of emotion to him, consolidating his need for dominance again. Looking back throughout, the husband, the possessor of male privilege, is consistently manipulated and guided by the female speaker until a temporary marital harmony is achieved. Male power was originally a weapon to oppress women, but eventually it is used by women in turn, in order to better survive in a male-dominated society.

4. Conclusion

By examining the poems narrated by women and some narrated by men, Browning's concern for female issues can be found. His choice of predominantly male narrators may, on the one hand, illustrate his own limitations and, on the other hand, reflect his full awareness of the differences between the power positions of two sexes.

In general, female characters are inferior in voicing. In male-narrated monologues, women's stories and images are shaped by men's words, which tend to be biased or one-sided. Moreover, women are usually fixed into objects. Given the ingrained assumption that humans are superior than objects, the objectification in itself is a downgrade of women. This practice also gives men more freedom to exercise control over women, since objects cannot move, think, or talk on their own. The female narrators who can speak still lack of control over language and often seeks the protection of male power. In Countess Gismond's case, same as the Duke of Ferrara as an unreliable speaker, she is so afraid of the words she says that might reveal her secret. All of these show the Victorian male power over women.

If viewed from a different perspective, however, the female characters in Browning's works are not completely powerless. For those female characters who are silenced, though they do not literally have voices, they have showed the endless possibility to frighten men into maintaining their superiority. Readers, after exposing the true nature of male speakers, can act as liberators of female power. Female narrators take active actions to use the inequality between two sexes and male privilege and achieve a shift in dominance.

Considering the female voices in Browning's poems comprehensively, we can see his delicate observation of and unique insights into gender power relations in the Victorian era. Furthermore, he probably offers some hope and a blessing for women to break the ethic.

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