

'It Does Not Mean Me, But a Supposed Person': Browning, Dickinson, and the Dramatic Lyric

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Abstract:

Although scholars have explored the importance of the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Emily Dickinson, very little research exists on the implications of her admiration for Robert Browning. Within the context of Browning's nineteenth-century US reception, this essay considers the profound and seminal effect this writer had on Dickinson's vocation as a poet and her understanding of poetry. Focusing in particular on Dickinson's reading and response to Browning's *Men and Women* (1855), it explores connections between Browning's dramatic lyrics and Dickinson's creation of dramatic speakers and situations. Developing earlier scholarship on Dickinson's use of personae and the influence of drama and performance on her works, this essay argues that Dickinson found in Browning's poetry distancing strategies that complicated the notion of the lyric as a form of personal address and/or biographical revelation. Rather than granting the reader access to the poet's interiority or corporeal presence, Dickinson, like Browning, creates 'supposed persons' who speak in a confidential, intimate manner about particular events and incidents. Following Browning, Dickinson constructs speakers whose identities are divided, contradictory, and fragmented, and, in so doing, she further impersonalizes the personal lyric by creating the possibility of a difference between what her speakers say and what her poems mean.

In the early 1860s, Emily Dickinson wrote some of her greatest and most original poetry, drawing on the innovations and inventions of contemporary poets. She also began a twenty-four-year correspondence with the essayist Thomas Wentworth Higginson. In 1862, the first year of their epistolary exchange, she revealed much about her conception of the role of the poet and the nature of poetry, and even listed the poets she most admired. On 25 April, for example, in her second letter to him and responding to his inquiry about her books, she told him: 'For Poets - I have Keats - and Mr and Mrs Browning' (Dickinson, 1986: 404; L261).<sup>1</sup> Despite Dickinson's comment and her many subsequent epistolary references to Browning, only piecemeal attention has been given to her reading of and response to his works (Capps, 1966: 87-91, 168; Howe, 1985: 69-74; Phillips, 1988: 115-24). While the publication of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and her death on 29 June 1861 are often taken by critics as being highly significant for Dickinson's creative output, this essay makes the case for the profound and seminal effect of Browning's dramatic lyrics, in particular those found in his collection entitled *Men and Women* (1855), on how and what Dickinson wrote. Reading Dickinson's 1862 letters to Higginson in the context of Browning's US reception and Higginson's own great admiration for Browning, this essay focuses on intimations which suggest that Higginson, on some level, recognized Dickinson was writing in an obscure, disjointed style similar to Browning's, and that Dickinson declared her first-person poems used 'supposed persons' with the expectation that Higginson would interpret her as following Browning's dramatic method. Her poems, like Browning's, are not offering readers access to her mental or emotional state or corporeal presence, but those of fictional characters who describe in a confidential, intimate manner their states of

consciousness and experiences at particular moments. Focusing on the poems that she sent Higginson in 1862, this essay tests Dickinson's claim to be using Browning's dramatic technique to complicate the lyric's association with personal address, sincerity, authenticity, and biographical revelation, while maintaining its function in the communication and exploration of interiority and subjectivity. It argues that her creation of dramatic speakers and situations replicates, and even intensifies, Browning's experimental representations of self-divided subjectivities and personal identity as provisional, fragmented, illusionary, and precarious. The 'divided consciousness' in her poems, as in his, can be read as signifying the reader's obligation to posit and accept the poem's fraudulent division between 'the speaking "I" and the poet's "I"' (Sinfield, 1977: 32); moreover, her poems, like his, can be interpreted as sites of irony, disjunction, and contradiction that position the poet and reader in a hermeneutic alliance against a limited, flawed speaker.

### **Browning's reception in the US**

In 1861, a year before Dickinson declared that Browning was one of her favourite poets, his wife, Barrett Browning, told his sister Sarianna of Robert's treatment in England owing to what she called '[the] infamy of that public'. To illustrate her point, she mentions 'an English lady of rank', who asked an American minister: 'whether "Robert was not an American"'. The minister answered: 'is it possible that you ask me this? Why, there is not so poor a village in the United States, where they would not tell you that Robert Browning was an Englishman, and that they were sorry he was not an American' (Orr, 1908: 233). Commenting on this, Barrett Browning adds:

Very pretty of the American minister, was it not? -and literally true besides [. . .]  
to you I may say, that the blindness, deafness and stupidity of the English public

to Robert are amazing [. . .] While, in America he is a power, a writer, a poet -he is read -he lives in the hearts of the people. 'Browning readings' here in Boston - 'Browning evenings' there. (Orr, 1908: 233-34)

Barrett Browning accurately captures her husband's reception in Britain, where his works were described as perplexing, incomprehensible, and even unreadable, and where he was criticized for his coarse subject matter and unrefined style, which were explained by his lack of a formal education and his middle-class, non-conformist background (Woolford & Karlin, 1996: 240-41). While her comments do reflect the fact that her husband was admired earlier and read more widely and intensely in America than in Britain, they exaggerate his popular appeal at this time and ignore the American reviewers who also criticized the inaccessibility, immortality, and irregularity of his writings (Greer, 1952: 22-23, 76-77, 81-82). However, Barrett Browning prophetically envisions the incorporation of Browning into 'the hearts of the [American] people' through the transmission and dissemination of his works in various media (Prins, 2008) and the flourishing of Browning societies across America from the late 1870s onwards; these societies were made up of *Men and Women*, academic and non-academic members, all dedicated to reading his poems aloud and interpreting them (Glazener, 2014: 185).

Browning's positive US reception in the 1860s was the result of the enthusiastic praise lavished on his works from the 1840s onwards by highly influential cultural figures, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, George William Curtis, Rufus Griswold, James T. Fields, and Richard Grant White, who encouraged Americans to see themselves as rising, unlike their British counterparts, to the challenge of this poet's obscure, unconventional, and controversial works. Higginson was one of the most committed of these American Browningites: he first read Browning in 1841 and subscribed to all

eight parts of Browning's *Bell and Pomegranates* series (1841–46). He was also one of the leading members of the Boston Browning Society, founded in 1885 (Higginson, 1896: 767). In one of the Society's publications, Higginson wrote an essay entitled 'The Biography of Browning's Fame' (1897), which confirms that Americans were the first to recognize Browning's importance, noting positive early reviews by Margaret Fuller, in 1843, and James Russell Lowell, in 1848, as well as underlining the appreciative reception of the first American reprint of his works, *Poems by Robert Browning* (1849) (Higginson, 1897a: 1–6). There is a real sense in his essay that the hostility of British and American traditionalists only increased the enthusiasm of Browning's early American admirers, all of whom were of the poet's generation or the next. In an earlier April 1862 *Atlantic Monthly* essay, 'Letter to a Young Contributor', which inspired Dickinson to initiate their epistolary relationship, Higginson declared that American literature was now 'thoroughly out of leading-strings' and 'the nation which supplied the first appreciative audience for Carlyle, Tennyson, and the Brownings can certainly trust its own literary instincts' (Higginson, 1862: 406). Connecting incisive literary judgements with looming creative powers, Higginson goes on to promise his readers that 'this American literature of ours will be just as classic a thing, if we do our part, as any which the past has treasured' (Higginson, 1862: 409). If appreciating these British writers was a mark of the intelligence, cultivation, and taste of his fellow countrymen and women and a sign that they were fine-tuning their creative powers, then their admiration of Browning's demanding works indicated America's cultural maturity and even its implicit superiority.

Writers such as Higginson did not merely promote and popularize the reading of contemporary British poetry, they created a context in which Americans saw themselves as taking the lead in its definition and categorization. In fact, with the

publication of his book *Victorian Poets* (1875), the American critic Edmund Clarence Stedman invented this field of study and made the 'transatlantic interdependence of nineteenth-century poetry [. . .] the ground on which to articulate the various national poetic fields' (Cohen, 2005: 166). His conceptualization of British poetry was, for Stedman, the necessary first step in his attempt to determine the features that made contemporary American poetry distinctive and unique. While acknowledging Browning as the founder of a dramatic school of poetry, Stedman criticized his formal eccentricities and continued abstruseness. In contrast, other American reviewers argued that it was the challenging nature of Browning's work that appealed to Americans because it required their active participation; this point was emphasized by contemporary reviewers, one of whom noted that Browning's poems were 'not easy reading', but that 'He brings you meaning, if you bring him mind' (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1864b: 641). Such comments reiterate Browning's statement in his preface to *Paracelsus* (1835) that his poetry 'depends more immediately on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success' and on the 'co-operating fancy' of the reader in the construction of meaning (Browning, 1991: I, 114). Browning's demand for the cooperation of his reader tapped into American protocols of reading that favoured a more equal, co-productive, and democratic relationship between author and reader (McGill, 2003: 14–16, 84–86). By declaring Browning to be one of her favourite poets, Dickinson is telling Higginson that she is an active participant in her culture's veneration of this poet and is someone sufficiently knowledgeable to understand his cerebral poems, which were regarded as engaging with issues of morality and faith, and controversially exploring all aspects of human nature, both virtuous and vicious (Conway, 1869: 256–59). She is communicating to him what she most enjoyed about

reading Browning, which was that his works required and facilitated her imaginative engagement and, by implication, stimulated her own poetic powers.

### **Reading *Men and Women***

Dickinson's high opinion of Browning most likely derives from her reading of his most recent collection, *Men and Women*. The contents page of her 1856 copy of this work, now in the Special Collections at Amherst College's Frost Library, has marks beside the following poems: 'Evelyn Hope', 'In Three Days', and 'One Way of Love'. In 1871, she told Higginson that it was 'a broad Book' (Dickinson, 1986: 491; L368) and in other letters she alludes to or quotes from five of its poems, 'In Three Days' (Dickinson, 1986: 607; L547), 'Evelyn Hope' (Dickinson, 1986: 677; L669), 'Love Among the Ruins' (Dickinson, 1986: 817; L891), 'By the Fireside' (Dickinson, 1986: 859; L966), and 'The Last Ride Together' (Dickinson, 1986: 889; L1015), making it the contemporary collection of poetry to which she most frequently refers. These references, which derive from the last fifteen years of her life, offer some indication of the significance of this collection to her. Her initial reading of this book in the late 1850s coincides with the period in which she began writing poems in a concerted way and assembling them into fascicles. By 1862, Dickinson had been reading this collection for, at the very least, six years and presumably had incorporated its innovations into her poetic productions. In fact, the complexity and difficulty of the poems in this collection necessitated just such a careful and ongoing response. Recognizing the demands of *Men and Women*, American reviewers sought to make their readers the type of 'cooperating' ones that Browning required. One reviewer advised that Browning's 'poems are not to be tossed off with a glance':

They have an essential value -a profound thought -a startling intensity of passion - and not an easy exterior grace. His poems are the life of a man of most catholic mind and subtle sympathy, put into verse. They seem entirely obscure and rugged when you first try them, but they finally yield a wonderful music and a profound coherency. (*Putnam's*, 1855: 656)

There is a strong suggestion that reading Browning's elliptical, profound, intense, and musically diverse poetry at this time offered Dickinson a model for her own, which similarly required readers 'to change their reading habits radically' and 'cooperate actively' in the construction of meaning (Hagenbüchle, 1993: 25). Particularly in Britain, reviewers of *Men and Women* connected the effects created by Browning's deliberate perplexity with the worst features of the 'spasmodic school' of poetry, which was derided by its opponents for its popularization of extreme subjectivity, stylistic intensity, and syntactical irregularity (Martens, 2011: 251-52). A reviewer in the *English Literary Gazette* found in this volume 'all that complication of crudeness, obscurity, and disorder, by which the mystical and spasmodic school of poetry is [known]' (as quoted by Watkins, 1958: 57). In contrast, many American reviewers attempted to defend Browning against such an association; one reviewer suggested that Browning's 'individuality is not a spasmodic use of words for thoughts; but it is the exquisite perception of a strong and rich mind, using words with a delicate skill and an inward music' (*Putnam's*, 1856: 381). Readers are advised that the spasmodic features of Browning's verse, which meant that 'as you read [some of the poems], you shudder', are the result of the fact Browning 'boldly aims to express what is, in its nature, so evanescent and shadowy -to put into words processes of thought and feeling, so delicately inwrought and fluctuating, that only sharp self-observers and students of human character can pursue them' (*Putnam's*, 1856: 374, 375). This defence of

Browning's syntactical and structural irregularity confirms Cristanne Miller's demonstration that, in antebellum America, there was an active acceptance of innovative, inventive, and experimental poetic practices that deviated from traditional poetic forms (Miller, 2012: 32–34). However, others remained wary of the effects of Browning's style. In a letter to Lucy Larcom, dated 1855, the American poet John Greenleaf Whittier equated reading *Men and Women* with the experience of an electric shock, while noting that his wife's sensibility was more adapted to Browning's spasmodic style:

Elizabeth has been reading Browning's poem ('Men and Women'), and she tells me it is great. I have only dipped into it, here and there, but it is not exactly comfortable reading. It seems to me like a galvanic battery in full play -its spasmodic utterances and intense passion make me feel as if I had been taking a bath among electric eels. But I have not read enough to criticize. (Pickard, 1907: I, 370)

These warnings about the side effects of reading this collection provocatively evoke Dickinson's own understanding of great poetry as having the power to stun readers with 'Bolts -of Melody' (Dickinson, 1998: 374; Fr348).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps with Browning's work in mind, in August 1870, she told Higginson: 'If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way' (Dickinson, 1986: 473–74; L342a). In his second letter to her, Higginson characterized Dickinson's poems as sharing features of the 'spasmodic school'; she responded: 'You think my gait "spasmodic" - I am in danger - Sir - You think me "uncontrolled" - I have no Tribunal' (Dickinson, 1986: 409; L265). In his response to her, he discusses Browning's career. Perhaps fearing his label has offended, he may have

reminded her that Browning and Keats were regarded as precursors of the spasmodics (Martens, 2011: 251), and that her other favourite poet, Barrett Browning, was also given this appellation (Faas, 1988: 139). He may have even told her, as he would later tell the Browning Society, that he had been reading Browning's poems since 1841 and knew them by heart, and 'the earlier poems of Browning, "Paracelsus", "Sordello", "Bells and Pomegranates" -to which last [he] was among the original subscribers -appear just as rich a mine as ever; [and that he] read[s] them over and over, never quite reaching the end of them' (Higginson, 1897a: 5). What is clear is that Higginson mentioned the verse drama *Pippa Passes* (1841), which is the first volume of *Bells and Pomegranates*, for in her reply, dated July 1862, Dickinson states: 'You spoke of Pippa Passes - I never heard anybody speak of Pippa Passes - before. You see my posture is benighted' (Dickinson, 1986: 412; L268). Here, Dickinson fears her confession that she has not heard of this work exposes her admiration for Browning as merely a posture. This exchange implies that the man she wrote to for literary guidance was sympathetic to the challenging nature of Browning's poems, both their spasmodic form and controversial content, and someone with whom she could speak of Browning. Higginson was, however, more critical of Dickinson's enigmatic, eccentric style than he was of Browning's: while he suggested she rectify her poetics and delay to publish, when he met Browning in London, in 1878, Higginson reprimanded him for revising his earlier poems to placate obtuse readers (Higginson, 1897b: 753, 758). Despite the fact Dickinson's poems left him 'somewhat bewildered' (Higginson, 1891: 445), he came to admire what he described as the 'strange power' of her writing (Dickinson, 1986: 461; L330a), a power to fascinate and frustrate that he had long admired in Browning's.

## **Dramatizing 'imaginary persons'**

Until the 1860s, for British readers the difficulty of Browning's poetry was exacerbated by his, at the time unconventional, decision to write first-person poems from the perspective of a range of different speakers, varying the diction and sentence structure of his poems to suit their speech patterns (Martens, 2011: 9–10). This poetic innovation caused so much confusion that, from 1842, he began including the following definition in which he explained that his poems were 'Dramatic Pieces, being, though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine' (Browning, 1991: II, 345). In the same July letter to Higginson, Dickinson echoed Browning's well-known definition, indicating that she too was an artist who transcended her personality to get inside the minds of others: 'When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean - me - but a supposed person' (Dickinson, 1986: 412; L268). These words may represent a statement, either reactionary or anticipatory, to prevent Higginson from following the convention of reading first-person poems, especially those by women, as personally expressive, or from assuming that, as a 'spasmodic' poet, she was presenting her unmediated subjectivity. In light of the fact she was addressing a Browningite and her subsequent allusion to *Pippa Passes* and her 'posture', her manifesto invites Higginson to connect and compare her 'supposed persons' to Browning's 'imaginary persons'. There is no evidence that Higginson took up her invitation. While most critics have abandoned the naive assumption that Dickinson's poems are unmediated expressions of her thoughts and emotions, few have explored the idea of Dickinson as a skilled crafter of characters who disappears behind her creations. Eberwein and Phillips, for example, have examined Dickinson's use of diverse personae and noted the way Victorian poetry facilitated her adoption of 'the voices of imagined characters', her entering 'vicariously

into situations remote from her own life' and bringing of 'a substantial measure of dramatic objectivity into her apparently subjective verse' (Eberwein, 1985: 95; Phillips, 1988). Her claim to be writing lyrics à la Browning, however, has been ignored. Typically, scholars agree with Richard Sewall that, although Dickinson 'found encouragement in Browning's distinctive form. Her themes or preoccupations were different from his, her tone was habitually more lyric, and she had very little of his interest in creating characters' (Sewall, 1974: 716). Such an assessment rests on a twentieth-century understanding of the type of poetry Browning was writing, namely, that he was the innovative practitioner of dramatic monologues rather than the composer of dramatic lyrics. Yet, although the term 'dramatic monologue' was first used in the mid-nineteenth century, it was not fully defined until 1908, when the American critic Samuel Silas Curry classified it as:

[O]ne end of a conversation. A definite speaker is conceived in a definite, dramatic situation. Usually we find also a well-defined listener, though his character is understood entirely from the impression he produces upon the speaker. We feel that this listener has said something and that his presence and character influence the speaker's thought, words, and manner. The conversation does not consist of abstract remarks, but takes place in a definite situation as part of human life. (Curry, 1908: 7)

Tellingly, many of Browning's own poems do not always conform to this or later stricter definitions of the genre, and his own previously mentioned formulation is closer to Alan Sinfield's more inclusive definition of the dramatic monologue as 'a poem in the first person spoken by, or almost entirely by, someone who is indicted not to be the poet' (Sinfield, 1977: 23).

Dickinson and her American contemporaries were less concerned with establishing a definition of the genre and instead interpreted Browning's poems as psychological portraits:

[In his poems] men and women are men and women, and not Mr Browning masquerading in different-colored dominos. We implied as much when we said that he was an artist. For the artist-period begins precisely at the point where the pleasure of expressing self ends, and the poet becomes sensible that his highest duty is to give voice to the myriad forms of nature, which, wanting him, were dumb. (*North American Review*, 1848: 374–75)

American reviewers saw Browning as a self-transcending, sympathetic fashioner of a range of personalities. Browning 'impersonates dramatically', as one contemporary reviewer puts it, creating 'persons, not mere figures labelled with a thought', who 'are discovered in rare exalted or peculiar moments'; his readers 'silently observe [each person's] secret passion' 'in all its frankness' (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1864a: 644, 645).

Building on these ideas, Stedman, in 1874, declared that Browning was the founder of a dramatic school of poetry and the 'poet of psychology' who explored:

[T]hose secret regions which generate the forces whose outward phenomena it is for the playwrights to illustrate. He has opened a new field for the display of emotional power -founding [. . .] a sub-dramatic school of poetry, whose office is to follow the workings of the mind, to discover the impalpable elements of which human motives and passions are composed [. . . he is the] modern genius [who] chooses to seek for the undercurrents of the soul rather than to depict acts and situations. (Stedman, 1874: 168)

Here, Stedman reflects commonplace ideas about Browning's work and influence, but also evokes Browning's own idea of drama, from his original preface to his 1837 play

*Stafford*, as 'Action in Character, rather than Character in Action' (as quoted by Woolford, 1988: 61). His poetry was understood as centring on the communication of the inner drama of 'imaginary persons' who expressed themselves at specific, often decisive, points in time (see *Harper's*, 1859: 270–71). Higginson too praised Browning's 'dramatic attitude', connecting it with his ability to describe a range of mental conditions that were not his own and to 'sound the depths of all human emotion' (Higginson, 1870: 59; 1871: 88). Browning's poems appealed to Americans such as Dickinson for the same reasons that Shakespeare's plays did: Americans were schooled in rhetoric and declamation, enjoyed public readings and theatre, and were especially drawn to literature that explored psychological complexity (Glazener, 2014: 173–75). Unsurprisingly, then, America's leading Shakespearean Richard Grant White declared that *Men and Women* showed 'Browning was the greatest dramatic poet in English literature since Shakespeare's time' (as quoted by Greer, 1952: 79–80). Other commentators concurred, suggesting that Browning, like Shakespeare, presented 'stock-figures of humanity', who 'had love that maddened and grief that shattered, murdering ambition, humorous weakness' (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1864b: 641); and that Browning was 'the most purely dramatic genius in English literature since the great dramatic days' (*Putnam's*, 1856: 372).

Steeped in Shakespeare and influenced by the fledging dramatic lyrics of the poets Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, published in the 1820s, and by Browning's and Tennyson's subsequent development and dissemination of this form, from the 1830s onwards, leading American poets of the day experimented with this genre. Citing examples from the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, John Pierpont, Richard Henry Wilde, Edward Coote Pinkney, Lydia Maria Child, William Cullen, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Wetmore Story, James Russell Lowell,

and Julia Ward Howe, Paula Bernat Bennett concludes: 'nineteenth-century American poetry is replete with dramatic lyrics' (Bennett, 2013). Americans turned to this genre, as their British contemporaries did, for its aesthetic diversity and flexibility, but also because, as Bennett explains, 'the dramatic lyric was an inherently pluralistic and even democratizing form' that allowed poets to cross gender, racial, and class lines (Bennett, 2013). The frequent use of dramatic lyrics by American women poets such as Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Hannah Flagg Gould, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Frances Sargent Osgood, E. Paula Johnson, and Sarah Piatt (Bennett, 2003: 29–37, 105–07; Bennett, 2013) confirms that women poets on both sides of the Atlantic were attracted to this form as a means of critiquing gender conventions and social norms and unsettling the identification of the 'female poet with the category of the personal' (Byron, 2003: 61; see Armstrong, 1993: 318–80;). It seems that women poets were attracted to Browning's specific technique because it located speakers in a specific historical and/or social context in order to establish an often-fraught relationship between identity and environment. In turn, these women used his dramatic method to give voice to the psychological complexities of marginalized figures or victims of oppressive external forces; engage with a variety of social issues and ideas in contestatory and satirical ways; and cross boundaries and categories in order to unsettle such regulatory distinctions (Byron, 2003: 61–69). Using this genre, women poets could maintain their allegiance to codes of feminine decorum, reticence, and reserve, while experimenting with alternative identities and imaginative and liberating possibilities; they could also differentiate their carefully crafted poems from a sentimental feminine variation of the first-person Romantic lyric (see Jackson, 2005: 212-19) associated with artless sentiment and the outpourings of raw emotion. Reflecting on the possibilities afforded by the genre and its frequent use by poets at this time, the British poet and dramatic

monologist Augusta Webster, in an essay entitled 'Poets and Personal Pronouns' (1879), declares:

Turn over the pages of any dozen poets now living, *Men and Women* [. . . and] suppose the first personal pronoun not artistically vicarious but standing for the writer's substantive self; what an appalling dozen of persons! [. . .] [H]ow do they preserve their reason through such a conflicting variety of emotions, sonnet by sonnet and stanza by stanza? We have only to try to imagine what, if I meant I, must be the mental state of these writers of many emotions, to see, in the fact of their being able to correct their proofs and get their books through press, consoling evidence that, as a rule, I does not mean I.

(Webster, 1879: 153–54)

Webster's essay, like Dickinson's statement to Higginson, however, not only underlines the similarity between personally expressive lyrics and dramatic ones, but also highlights the opportunity it afforded women poets to masquerade self-protectively behind the 'invented speaker[s] voice', creating intimacy, immediacy, and sincerity, but also deploying hyperbolic and dramatic strategies in the service of social critique (Sinfield, 1977: 25).

### **Self-divided 'imaginary persons'**

Browning's speakers reveal their mental and existential states, often unintentionally, presenting perspectives which are flawed or incomplete, as well as demonstrating their fallibilities, iniquities, deluded perceptions, and even pathological tendencies (Faas, 1988). The focus, as suggested in *Men and Women's* 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', is on self-appraising figures who 'catch a thing within a thing, / See more in a truth than the truth's simple self, / Confuse themselves'; and what interests is:

the dangerous edge of things.

The honest thief, the tender murderer,

The superstitious atheist [. . .]

We watch while these in equilibrium keep

The giddy line midway: one step aside,

They're classed and done with.

(Browning, 1995: 95–96)

Browning's readers are offered unique access to such figures who experience self-conflict, self-contradiction, or a psychological crisis brought on by the discrepancy between a private inner identity and a public outer one. They typically know more than these figures, foregrounding the irony that the poems and speakers are expressing different meanings (Bristow, 1991: 57). Clarifying such self-mutability and self-conflict, Henry Jones in his 1893 lecture, 'Browning as a Dramatic Poet', told the Boston Browning Society that character in Browning's work:

[I]s a living process, an endlessly varying movement, a continuous new creation.

The unity of character is never broken, but it is never fixed. Nothing can be said to be, but all is becoming. There is nowhere a static element; amidst all the doing there is nothing done [. . .] Character thus presents itself at each moment as made up of latent potencies capable of being awakened by the clash with outward circumstances, and of taking ever a new form in the conflicts by which it maintains itself. (Jones, 1897: 206–07)

It was just such features that made Browning's poetry exemplary of Victorian poetry's rejection of Romanticism's autonomous, unified, authoritative, and stable first-person speakers (Bristow, 1991: 26–27) in favour of the representation of selfhood as a site of contradiction and division rather than one of revelation and authenticity (Armstrong,

1993; Slinn, 1991). The early and sustained appeal of Browning in America was because his dramatic lyrics allowed writers to respond to an increasingly complex and socially diverse American nation entangled in competing and contradictory ideas and ideals and 'cognitive dissonances' (Bennett, 2013). Moreover, this genre spoke of a 'culture rife with contradiction and opposition' and attracted critics, readers, and poets because it encouraged the adoption of a variety of 'performative identities', which were emerging as a quintessential component of American literature, present in contemporary texts that were replete with dramatizations of self-invention, reinvention, and self-division (Bennett, 2014: 128). Browning's dramatic lyrics became paradigms for Dickinson and her contemporaries of how to transfer the power and energy of public speaking and drama, especially Shakespearean, into the private and more concise space of the lyric; and how to make identity so fluid that it is often impossible to discover a definite self, or a performer behind the performances. The daily inner drama of just such an unsolidified selfhood is what Dickinson regarded as the 'Vitallest' type of performance, which is 'infinite[ly]' enacted 'In the Human Heart - / Only Theatre recorded / Owner cannot shut -' (Dickinson, 1998: 731; F776) and far superior to Shakespeare's plays which perish in recitation. It is this kind of internal stage show that each of Dickinson's 'supposed persons' vocalizes.

### **Action with supposed persons**

*Men and Women* offered Dickinson two basic types of dramatic lyric. Poems of the first type, such as 'Fra Lippo Lippi', 'Andrea del Sarto', and 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', are spoken by a named character, often a historical one, who describes at length his or her past and present life; while poems of the second type, such as 'A Lovers' Quarrel', 'Any Wife to Any Husband', and 'A Woman's Last Word', are shorter and spoken by an

unnamed individual who offers a fleeting glimpse of his or her consciousness and existential state at a specific moment. If, in the former type, 'the reader must imagine the speaker as an outward presence, as we in our bodies register others in their bodies, from the outside in', then, in the latter, readers are 'imaginatively conflated with the speaker, understanding him from the inside out, seeing with his eyes and speaking with his voice as if on our behalf' and witness 'an outward scene that he is understood as seeing, with the camera implicitly taken as our eyes' (Rader, 1984: 104). Many of Dickinson's first-person poems correspond to the dramatic lyrics of the second type in which speakers give clues as to their personalities, circumstances, feelings, and thoughts, but the situation of the utterance remains ambiguous and often names and geographical or historical locators are not given. By not providing titles, though, Dickinson makes it difficult to identify and individuate her speakers, or differentiate them from each other, or tell whether they are male or female, and, in so doing, she intensifies Browning's trademark obscurity.

In 1862, Dickinson sent Higginson a representative sample of the types of poems she wrote: definition poems (Dickinson, 1998: 146-47, 299, 325; Fr112, Fr282, Fr304); poems about the natural world (Dickinson, 1998: 137, 236, 358; Fr98, Fr204, Fr334); poems that explore aspects of human experience (Dickinson, 1998: 163, 266, 351-52; Fr124, F243, Fr328), and first-person poems (Dickinson, 1998: 259-60, 347, 361-62, 406-07, 441-42; Fr236, 325, 336, 381, 418). Her unequivocal announcement in her third letter that she used 'supposed persons' may have responded to an implicit or explicit connection Higginson made between the personal information she disclosed in her second letter — about the death of her tutor, her abandonment by another companion, and her religious scepticism—and the first-person poem enclosed therein: 'There came a Day at Summer's full' (Dickinson, 1998: 347; Fr325). By enclosing similar poems,

'Your Riches, taught me, poverty - ' (Dickinson, 1998: 441-42; Fr418) and 'Some keep the Sabbath going to Church - ' (Dickinson, 1998: 260; Fr236), in her third letter -poems which might also be interpreted in light of the biographical information she has given him -she is challenging Higginson to interpret such poems as he would Browning's dramatic lyrics. He is asked to distinguish between her subjective, autobiographical construction in her letters and a similar construction in her poems, while underlining her freedom to 'pose' in both (Sewall, 1974: 538). Higginson's challenge, which is taken up in this essay's final section, is all the more difficult for contemporary Dickinson scholars who do not usually interpret these as stand-alone dramatic poems. For example, 'There came a Day at Summer's full - ' is usually interpreted as part of a group of poems that employ bridal and crucifixion imagery to represent the postponement of a transgressive earthly love until an otherworldly reunion in heaven (Eberwein, 1985: 103-08). In a similar manner, 'Your Riches, taught me, poverty - ', which was sent to her sister-in-law, is typically read as a biographical poem that charts their passionate relationship and Sue's transition from being Dickinson's girlhood friend to becoming the wife of the poet's brother, Austin (Sewall, 1974: 163-65). These two first-person love poems respond to *Men and Women's* central themes of love and loss: the attempt of human beings to make eternal the transitory 'good minute' of romantic unions and of a love 'more than tongues can speak' (Browning, 1995: 196; see Woolford & Karlin, 1996). Although it does not deal with human love, 'Some keep the Sabbath going to Church' does present the idea of making the good moment an everlasting experience; it rejects conventional churchgoing and the idea of eventually journeying to heaven in favour of making the worship of God and the worship of nature identical. Rather than postponing the experience of heaven, it becomes something enjoyed on earth: 'So instead of getting to Heaven, at last / I'm going, all along' (Dickinson, 1998: 260; Fr236).

In the love poems, however, the speakers recall an earlier moment of bliss and plenitude, which they would have made eternal, from a later time of despair and deprivation. Bringing together ideas from the poems in *Men and Women* to which she alluded in her letters, Dickinson's poems evoke the existence of an incomparable human passion or unparalleled lover that eclipses civilization's 'triumphs and [. . .] glories and the rest' (Browning, 1995: 5), and the longing for and yet impossibility of preserving such a love or lover (Browning, 1995: 80). In 'Your Riches, taught me, poverty - ', the millionaire speaker looks back on her initial relationship with and subsequent loss of a childhood friend whose incomparable personal worth, like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, 'beggars' all description. The speaker is transformed into an impoverished millionaire and the economic, exotic, and aristocratic terms and objects used to approximate this treasured person are similarly inadequate. Living in the aftermath of loss, the speaker infinitely chastises herself for allowing this 'Pearl' to slip through her inexperienced fingers. In a similar manner, in 'There came a Day at Summer's full - ', the speaker describes the joy of an amorous union with just such an unrivalled being, and then the lovers' forcible separation. The speaker equates their tryst with religious enactment of Christ's last supper and makes their severance from each other equivalent to Christ's suffering on the cross:

Each was to each the Sealed Church,  
Permitted to commune this - time -  
Lest we too awkward show  
At supper of the Lamb (Dickinson, 1998: 347: Fr325).

Having shared his comparable fate, the lovers, like Christ, will also defeat death:

Sufficient Troth, that we shall rise -  
Deposed - at length, the Grave -

To that new Marriage,

Justified - through Calvaries - of Love -

Surpassing the treatment of prohibited love in *Men and Women's* 'In a Balcony', 'The Statue and the Bust', and 'Respectability', Dickinson's poem ends with the idea of a 'new Marriage' between the lovers, which by implication is more powerful than traditional human matrimony or the symbolic marriage between Christ and a human soul. The speaker of 'Some keep the Sabbath going to Church - ', unlike the speakers of the above poems, lacks mental complexity; he/she is one of Dickinson's natural and uninhibited rustic speakers, who are at once naive and astute, simple and yet logical, and, as Cristanne Miller demonstrates, derive from Dickinson's engagement with the ballad tradition (Miller, 2012: 88–92). The impoverished millionaire of 'Your Riches, taught me, poverty -' and blasphemous Christ impersonator of 'There came a Day at Summer's full', however, are, like Browning's speakers, complex, self-contradictory figures. Rather than living in the present and public world of things they possess, these speakers are trapped in their private preoccupations with what is absent and lost, and, respectively, with the elegiac reliving of a moment of careless loss or the idea of a future otherworldly reunion; they are psychologically self-divided owing to the 'infinite passion and the pain / Of finite hearts that yearn' (Browning, 1995: 196). Although both speakers exist at the intersection point of competing discourses, this is particularly true of the speaker of 'There came a Day at Summer's full', whose belief in the heavenly reunion of transgressive lovers represents a misunderstanding of religion and the arrogant delusion that human idolatry and the blasphemous appropriation of religious ideas will be divinely rewarded. The speaker is not only unaware of contradictions within his/her thought process, but also of an inability to control the situation described. Treating the poem as a dramatic lyric would mean detecting the difference

between what the speaker says and what the poem means, namely, it allows us to suggest that Dickinson's poem critiques rather than subscribes to the sentimental literary tradition which popularized the notion that loved ones separated on earth would be reunited in heaven (St Armand, 1984: 117-52).

In the final letter Dickinson sent to Higginson in 1862, she enclosed 'Before I got my eye put out' (Dickinson, 1998: 361-62; Fr336) and 'I cannot dance upon my Toes - ' (Dickinson, 1998: 406-07; Fr381), first-person poems in which the circumstances of the utterances are incredibly vague, as both speakers have retreated from interactions with the world of things and other people into the cerebral realm of thoughts and ideas. Dickinson's psychological portraits of these supposed persons intensify the levels of identity contradiction in the love poems. In 'Before I got my eye put out', the imaginary person contrasts an earlier experience of the natural world prior to losing his/her eyesight with their current position of engaging with the environment through intuition and supposition. While implying that the beauty of nature is overwhelming, particularly for someone who has been shut out from it, the speaker clearly prefers the unreality and possibility of blindness to the accuracy and certainty of sight. Blindness becomes a way of rectifying, while also identifying, a level of self-division that derives from a conflict between an inner or ideal conception of reality and the actual or outer state of affairs; sight would mean the 'Heart / Would split'. What Dickinson is exploring is a familiar characteristic of Browning's speakers: their intransigency and preference for their often idiosyncratic perspective, for a vision gained by the 'soul [rather than the eyes] open the Window pane' (Dickinson, 1998: 362; Fr336).

Just as this blind visionary contrasts him or herself with 'other creatures, that have eyes -/ and know no other way', the speaker of 'I cannot dance upon my Toes - ' opposes her position as an invisible, unknown performer with that of the acclaimed

ballerina. Recalling Browning's 'Popularity', which contrasts a great poet at whom 'few or none [. . .] watch and wonder' with a successful one whose works are 'priced and sellable' (Browning, 1995: 190), Dickinson's poem presents a speaker who is psychologically divided between a reality in which she is an uninstructed, hidden, natural, and even rebellious artist and her fantasy of having a ballerina's cultural visibility, acclaim, skill, knowledge, costume, and self-display:

I cannot dance upon my Toes -  
No Man instructed me -  
But oftentimes, among my mind  
A Glee possesseth me  
That had I Ballet knowledge -  
Would put itself abroad  
In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe -  
Or lay a Prima - mad -  
(Dickinson, 1998: 406; Fr381)

The poem ends with the suggestion that the speaker 'knows' the 'art' of the ballerina, and can imagine herself publicly enacting it, even though her more innate ability remains hidden within the private realm; her talent is all the more powerful for being secret:

Nor any know I know the Art  
I mention easy - Here -  
Nor any Placard boast me  
It's full as Opera -

In a manner similar to a dramatic lyricist, the speaker creates an alternative reality in which she imagines being a successful dancer, whose identity is acknowledged and whose abilities are esteemed. The suggestion is that the speaker can envision not only being a ballerina, but also experiencing the 'Glee' of internally and vicariously putting on a one-woman opera. Dickinson's Browningsque speaker has the art, she 'mention[s] easy -Here', to imagine, verbalize, or poeticize a performance involving many different voices and characters, and, by implication, to perceive the world from many different perspectives. Going even further, Dickinson's poem blurs the line between the self who has no practical ballet knowledge and the self who can easily fantasize that she has such skill; it also highlights that identity and circumstances within dramatic lyrics are fictions which give the false impression of having substance and truth. Her description of this fantasy performatively creates the world and self that are described, drawing attention to the fact that the lyrical selfhood, whether dramatic or otherwise, is always an illusion of language. The poem evokes other Browning poems such as 'Fra Lippo Lippi' in which the figure of a female performer is used to thematize divided subjectivity. The monk-painter Fra Lippo associates the sensual dancing of Salome with the type of unrestrictive corporeal art that he wishes to create:

Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,  
Left foot and right foot, go a double step,  
Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,  
Both in their order?

(Browning, 1995: 20)

For Fra Lippo, Salome's dancing body is indistinguishable from her female identity; her liberated, unified, and albeit subversive selfhood is used by the monk as a counterpoint to a psychological duality that, for this lusty monk and iconoclastic painter, is the

privilege and curse of men like himself. Dickinson's poem also calls to mind those by Browning written from a female perspective. In one such poem, 'A Woman's Last Word', female self-division is comparable with, if not more acute than, its male equivalent; the speaker implies that behind the prescribed performance of submissive femininity lies not merely 'sorrow' and 'weep[ing]', but proscribed thoughts and feelings, and a buried self (Browning, 1995: 14). Dickinson's speaker displays the intellectual and imaginative component that is denied to women by men such as Fra Lippo, and hints at the psychological and creative breadth, scope, and variety that a woman, such as the speaker of 'A Woman's Last Word', must curtail to perform the unified role of a woman on the domestic or professional stage. However, as in the other dramatic lyrics that Dickinson sent to Higginson, she draws attention to a disparity between what her supposed persons say and what her poems might mean. Dickinson's poem implies that its speaker is a fantasist who, in her retreat to a realm of privacy, possibility, and power, has become a self-absorbed, self-closed, and hackneyed version of the nineteenth-century poet who is excluded or has excluded herself from the world. To transcend stereotypes of compliant or defiant women, the speaker has, the poem implies, moved beyond classification and become a disembodied voice, a ghostly imagination and the antithesis of Fra Lippo's dancing Salome. Trapped within and yet attempting to evade discourses of female ability, public performance, and renown, she is another of Dickinson's self-divided, self-contradictory characters trapped in a self-generated contradiction.

## **Conclusion**

Had Dickinson published her work in the 1870s and 1880s, reviewers, especially if

they were aware of her love of Browning and her comment about writing from the perspectives of 'supposed persons', might have viewed some of her poems as dramatic lyrics akin to Browning's; moreover, her obscure and 'spasmodic' style might have been characterized as Browningsque. Dickinson's contemporary Sarah Piatt was criticised for her decision in her recently published collections to follow Browning into obscurity and eccentricity. William Dean Howells, for instance, suggested in his 1877 *Atlantic Monthly* review of her collection *That New World and Other Poems* (1877): 'Our geniuses are not so many that we can afford to have any of them fall a prey to eccentricity or self-conceit -that way, madness and Browningism lie' (as quoted by Bennett, 2001: xxx). A reviewer of her next volume, *Dramatic Persons and Moods* (1880), writing in *Scribner's Monthly* in 1880, worried that the subtlety of Piatt's psychological portraits would not be appreciated by her readers because her 'method is a profound one, in that it works from within outward, and a faulty one, in that it implies more sympathy than she is likely to obtain, and more intelligence than is possessed by one reader in a hundred' (as quoted by Bennett, 2001: xxx). If these comments echo those made about Browning's dramatic method, then the reviewer's remarks about Piatt's style - that it is 'wayward, abrupt, enigmatic, and prolific in hints and innuendoes, and questions it neglects to answer' - could easily be made about Browning's (as quoted by Bennett, 2001: xxxi). Would the same criticisms have been levelled against Dickinson? When her poems were published in the 1890s, however, it was to Robert Browning - 'the decade's darling' - rather than to Barrett Browning that her work was most frequently compared (Buckingham, 1989: xvii). Dickinson's reviewers, unlike Piatt's, celebrated the fact that Dickinson's work showed Browning's 'influence', were written in his 'spirit', and were 'worthy' of him (Buckingham, 1989: 561, 244, 17-19). Critics made continual connections between her poems and his (Buckingham, 1989: 32, 39, 121, 124, 411, 428, 532); one reviewer even

dared to ask 'could Browning himself have bettered this?' (Buckingham, 1989: 487). Like Browning's, her poems are not 'readily understood' and are 'as enigmatical and mystical as anything in Browning'; as a result, they are 'read aloud in fashionable gatherings and discussed with only less awe and acumen than are brought to bear upon the works of Browning himself' (Buckingham, 1989: 520, 134, 152). Moreover, just as one reviewer claims she has 'a soul akin' to Browning's (Buckingham, 1989: 100), another predicts that her writings with their 'abnormal straining after epigrammatic effect', 'disjointed appearance', and 'utter subjectiveness', 'are just the sort of stuff of which cults are made' and:

[O]ught to attract the Browning cranks who have tired of the old fad and have not yet found a new one. In fact, this Amherst recluse appears to have been a feminine Amiel trying to express herself in Browningsese. (Buckingham, 1989: 390)

That Piatt and Dickinson were associated in different ways with Browning underlines his centrality in American culture and the joys, pleasures, and pitfalls of reading or attempting to imitate his cerebral and perplexing poetry. This essay has demonstrated the importance of Browning's influence on Dickinson's writings and on nineteenth-century American poetry more generally, pointing to the necessity of examining the dramatic lyric as a nineteenth-century transatlantic phenomenon. It stresses the need to take seriously the way Dickinson and her contemporaries created a range of 'supposed persons' with thoughts and feelings, often deliberately different from their own, and characterized these personae as figures of self-conflict and self-contradiction who articulate a clash between an inner and outer identity. Finally, this essay opens up a critical space in which to explore the possibility that Dickinson and other nineteenth-century American poets, like their British counterparts, followed Browning in

foregrounding a distinction between the meaning of a poem and the utterance of its speaker.

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to Paula Bernat Bennett and Britta Martens for their help with this essay.

## Notes

1. All references to Dickinson's letters cite the letter number from Johnson and Ward's edition and are given in the text following the abbreviation "L".

2. All references to Dickinson's poetry cite the poem number from Franklin's edition and are given in the text following the abbreviation "Fr".

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