‘Read it through my marks’: Revision and Female Authorship in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the way that women prepared their manuscripts for publication in the mid-nineteenth-century to understand the prescriptions on gender that influenced the development of their texts. It considers markings, deletions, and cuts to contribute to ‘manuscript textuality’ which informs an interpretation of self-reflexive images within the text. The project argues that women embrace self-reflexivity as a means to engage in an active negotiation of gendered discourses in the nineteenth-century marketplace. By analysing the ways in which texts are edited with a view to reception, this methodology opens up new opportunities for interpreting the gendered dimensions to transformations of form. Revision often allows women to mitigate the impact of their language, while refining self-reflexivity in the text hints at something potentially transgressive which has been taken out. Chapter one analyses how the collaborative way that Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is revised engages with clear social imperatives involved with life writing. Collaboration allows Gaskell to shift the narrative voice between ambiguity and authority in order to manage the distance between the author and subject. Chapter two then turns to Charlotte Brontë’s cuttings on the manuscript of *Villette* to understand how her representation of an unconventional female subject is influenced by an awareness of the text’s reception. Excisions reveal how Brontë embraces silence as a productive narrative mode for her protagonist, which enables her to maintain control over the way she is represented and received by Victorian society. Chapter three examines Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s revisions of *Aurora Leigh*, which allow her to refine her challenge to poetic traditions in the mid-nineteenth-century by embedding it within the very rhythm and sounds of her lines. Attending to the manuscript not only provides new perspectives on well-trodden material; it allows us to understand how women were not silenced by gender prescriptions in the mid-nineteenth-century but actively negotiated them through the act of revision.
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Dedication

In loving memory of Re
INTRODUCTION

Do you, who have so many friends - so large a circle of acquaintance - find it easy, when you sit down to write, to isolate yourself from all those ties, and their sweet associations, so as to be quite your own woman, uninfluenced, unswayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect other minds; what blame, what sympathy it may call forth? Does no luminous cloud ever come between you and the severe Truth as you know it in your own secret and clear-seeing soul?

Charlotte Brontë to Elizabeth Gaskell, 1853
[original emphasis]¹

Charlotte Brontë’s 1853 letter to her friend and fellow author Elizabeth Gaskell captures an experience of female authorship that is central to this project’s defining question: how was the production and revision of mid-nineteenth-century female authored texts influenced by gender? Brontë uses the cloud metaphor to suggest that a woman’s understanding of the ‘severe Truth’ can be obscured by their awareness of a text’s reception. The ‘ties, and their sweet associations’ that bind her to society preclude her ability to be ‘[her] own woman’ at the point of writing and the cloud’s luminosity mediates the text even before it is realised on the page. The manuscript - as well as countless other materials, such as the author’s letters, reviews of their works, and domestic circumstances - can provide historical evidence to support a reading of the ways that women tempered their texts before publication.²


² For example, Nicola Thompson’s Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels (New York: New York University Press, 1996) notes ‘gendered codes and hierarchies’ within nineteenth-century reviews of novels; according to Thompson, reviews could ‘prescribe and regulate critical value.’ She argues that Charlotte Brontë’s 1850 ‘Biographical Notice’ encodes and reworks these values by manipulating ‘gender messages’ to mitigate the reception of a new edition of Wuthering Heights in response to the controversy surrounding its initial publication.
However oppressive - or repressive - Brontë’s consciousness may seem, she uses metaphor to materialise her unresolved ambivalence about self-awareness. Indeed, the ‘associations’ that influence her mind are ‘sweet’ and the author envisages ‘sympathy’ from her readership as much as she does ‘blame;’ the ‘luminous cloud’ metaphor reflects this uncertainty. Its ‘luminous’ appearance suggests that writing can distract from the darker, perhaps more unattractive, truths that it distorts. However distorting the cloud may be, the fact that it is ‘luminous’ hints that it still transmits some light, which is often equated with truth. The poet’s ‘visionary power’ is linked to light and truth in *Aurora Leigh*, for example, such as in this passage from the First Book, which characterises the eponymous heroine’s fledgling poetic nature:

You catch a sight of Nature, earliest,
In full front sun-face, and your eyelids wink
And drop before the wonder of’t; you miss
The form, through seeing the light. (I. 956-9)\(^3\)

Brontë’s chosen metaphor is the cloud, which obscures the light (or truth), but Barrett Browning’s concern is the light itself and the extent to which she can translate it; the overwhelming brilliance of the sun transmits light but momentarily obscures her sense of ‘form’. She is therefore unable to glimpse and understand the ‘wonder’ of ‘Nature’ (with a capital N). The light makes her ‘eyelids wink/And drop,’ a submissive gesture that symbolises her lack of confidence as a poetic subject at this point, as well as the sometimes discomfiting truth of the world she is confronted with. This is symptomatic of the poet’s plight in the novel-poem, where she seeks to assimilate her understanding of the world with the form of her poetry. On the other hand, Brontë’s letter suggests a struggle

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with the extent to which form can temper the ‘Truth’ and the amount of light the cloud should still transmit.

‘Truth,’ as it appears in Brontë’s letter (whether that is philosophical or social), is also burdensome, even subversive, contained as it is within the ‘secret,’ albeit ‘clear-seeing,’ soul. In this case, the ‘severe Truth’ seems to relate to the reception of truths that will affect the ‘circle of acquaintance’ or ‘sweet associations’ that are present in the mind of the female writer when she begins composing a text. Brontë seems to be aware of her position as a mid-Victorian woman within a network of voices that can influence the composition of her text: the ‘ties’ she has to society, such as her friends, publishers, reviewers and readers of her work who will receive it with ‘sympathy’ or ‘blame’.

How does a female writer like Brontë remain her ‘own woman’ when publishing? She appears to embrace the tension within the cloud metaphor through the process of literally writing this question (which ends up being a rhetorical one): ‘Don’t answer the question. It is not intended to be answered.’ Inspired by the self-reflexivity of Brontë’s metaphor, this project attends to the revisions made by female authors when preparing their texts for publication. It examines the ways these texts mitigate or negotiate social anxieties or pressures from a textual perspective. My methodology is a form of close textual analysis which pays attention to markings, crossings out, substitutions and excisions on manuscripts, as well as the words on the page, which is allied to a broadly feminist theoretical approach. I analyse three key mid-century texts: Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856).

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4 *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, iii, p. 182.
Brontë specifies that her struggle with ‘consciousness’ occurs at the point of writing; revisions often temper language and imagery in preparation for publication and therefore provide evidence of the spectrum between the ‘severe Truth’ and the ‘luminous cloud’. This project argues that female expression can be read through textual instability; my research enters the established conversation around which behaviour and forms of expression were deemed permissible for women in the mid-nineteenth-century and investigates how these forms of expression manifest themselves on the manuscript. Unlike other recent textual studies, this project does not always read revision in terms of censorship or repression. Although she characterises editing as self-censorship, this project is inspired by Julia Briggs’s work on the relationship between Virginia Woolf’s editing and the aesthetic of her texts, which ‘remain fully conscious of whatever processes of silencing they may have undergone.’ Working across multiple genres (life writing, prose and poetry) has led me to identity a pattern of self-reflexivity in female writing of this period. The texts at the centre of this project are self-reflexive in the sense that they often use direct address to the reader, or imagery that reflects on the physical nature of the text, to gesture to revision and multiple possible readings.

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5 Ileana Marin, for example, interestingly studies ‘the fragments that were suppressed from the text’ (p. 11) to understand the Victorian mentality to publishing but characterises this as ‘erasure’. She suggests that anything taken out of the text is suppressed in response to external publishing pressures. Ileana Marin, *Victorian Aesthetics of Erasure in Fiction and Illustration* (Iaşi: Institutul European, 2015), p. 11 <https://www.academia.edu/41693331/Victorian_Aesthetics_of_Erasure_in_Fiction_and_Illustration> [Accessed 23 February 2020].

Roger Chartier also uses the word ‘erasure’ in the context of revision and the ephemerality of texts before the industrial revolution. However, in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace, ‘erasure’ becomes a more loaded term which suggests a desire to repress aspects of the text. Roger Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

A review of publications from major academic journals in Victorian studies over the past ten years, including *Victorian Studies, Victorian Literature and Culture*, and *Victorian Poetry* suggests that incorporating the manuscript in a formal analysis of the text is a relatively unexplored approach. Ileana Marin is the first to explore the consequences of Brontë’s editing style in *Brontë Studies*, whose other archival studies primarily focus on the juvenilia or seek to explore previously unpublished works. Scholarships dedicated to Gaskell, Brontë and Barrett Browning is also only beginning to incorporate the manuscript in literary study. In the past ten years, *The Gaskell Journal* has not published an article that focusses on draft materials of Gaskell’s work though there is some interest in understanding the professional dimensions of her authorship. *Victorian Poetry* pays vast amounts of attention to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s work but archival studies are similarly limited to uncovering unpublished works. Textual studies tend to focus on uncovering unpublished materials, which can facilitate new

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interpretations of well-trodden material, or exploring the material aspects of publication in the nineteenth-century.¹⁰

The three texts analysed in this project are chosen not simply because of their influence and high-profile reception in the Victorian period. They also take as their focus the female artist; whether that is Gaskell’s attempt to balance professional female authorship with domesticity in the Life, Brontë’s exploration of female autobiography and representation in Villette, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s search for a female poetics in Aurora Leigh. Self-reflexivity is a necessary part of artistic reflection and manuscript revisions reveal the extent to which these authors tempered their thoughts on the act of representation as they were writing.

Gaskell’s Life in many ways transformed the life writing genre by bringing together the traditionally male-dominated ‘Life and Letters’ style of biography - exemplified by James Boswell’s Life of Samuel Johnson (1791) - with narrative traits of the novel.¹¹ Additionally, the fact that the memoir was written about the private domestic life of a woman (and a controversial one at that) by a woman increased the pressures acting upon Gaskell when composing and revising the biography for publication. For instance, in the letters she sent at the time of

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¹¹ The literary merit of Gaskell’s Life was an unusual feat for a female biographer; Linda H. Peterson gives a brief but useful history of female autobiography up to the mid-nineteenth-century in her essay on the Life for The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell, ed. by Jill L. Matus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). She argues that, by the mid-nineteenth-century, ‘no biography of a woman writer had realised a noteworthy form or achieved literary distinction’ (p. 60).
composition, Gaskell described writing the memoir as a ‘serious task’ from which she would have to ‘omit a good deal of detail’ because it was being published.\textsuperscript{12} She also welcomed her husband’s collaboration when revising and editing the text. The \textit{Life} itself registers this caution, particularly at the memoir’s close: ‘I have little more to say. If my readers find that I have not said enough, I have said too much.’\textsuperscript{13} \textbf{Chapter one} argues that, by using revision to make the reader complicit in her act of narration (at the same time as shutting them out from it), Gaskell exposes the contingent authorial decisions that form her innovative biographical style.

\textit{Villette} was similarly unusual for its moment because of the means through which it captures and experiments with female subjectivity; indeed, Caroline Franklin has recently described the novel as a ‘proto-modernist’ portrait that anticipates new prose forms.\textsuperscript{14} In the mid-Victorian period, this unconventional form of narration was met with ambivalence. Incidentally, the critical responses to the novel are good examples of the conflicting attitudes of ‘sympathy’ and ‘blame’. Upon its publication, Harriet Martineau sympathetically described the novel as ‘the strangest, the most astonishing’ of Brontë’s works because of its shift between silence and ‘enigmas’; on the other hand, the more conservative reviewer Anne Mozley considered the plot’s ‘want of continuity’ to be a ‘defect’.\textsuperscript{15} These


\textsuperscript{14} Caroline Franklin, \textit{The Female Romantics: Nineteenth-century Women Novelists and Byronism} (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 157. Franklin argues that the lack of a distinct beginning and end to the novel, as well as Lucy Snowe’s ‘insistence on consciousness as process,’ is how this text anticipates modernism.

contrasting opinions are testament to the mastery and influence of Brontë’s style in *Villette* but also give us a sense of the climate in which Brontë was publishing. Indeed, Lucy Snowe’s silences in the novel can be read as a reaction against the impossible standards to which female authored fiction was held; a reading which is further developed by attending to Brontë’s act of cutting the manuscript. **Chapter two** explores how the manuscript of *Villette* shows that Brontë’s editing established Lucy’s evasion as a productive mode so that the protagonist’s silences, ‘enigmas’ or ‘raillery’ hold multiple meanings.16

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was more explicit about disrupting convention when publishing her epic novel-poem *Aurora Leigh*. She imagined her text ‘running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms’; her main tactic for causing this interruption was simply to ‘[speak] the truth’…‘plainly’.17 The fact that Barrett Browning considered speaking (or in this case writing) ‘plainly’ to be antagonistic is particularly revealing about the nature of female expression in the mid-Victorian period. Barrett Browning’s experimentations with form and genre certainly did influence and transform Victorian poetry but - according to the very nature of her dense and knotted poetry - meaning is not produced as ‘plainly’ as the poet first imagines. Revisions show that she consciously played with the words and rhythms of her lines so that her metre reflected her meaning. It also provided her with a tool through which she could establish multiple scansion and readings of her poetry, which tempers her impulses to simultaneously disrupt and conform to traditional poetic conventions.

This duality has been noted by Linda Shires who argues that, elsewhere in her

16 Martineau, p. 172.
poetry (particularly that published in periodicals), Barrett Browning engages in ‘cross-dwelling’ to negotiate the kinds of ‘ideological crises’ that this project interrogates. According to Shires, Barrett Browning’s work balances conformity with subversion through her systematic use of double-meaning and ambivalence.

Chapter three extends Linda Shires’ idea of ‘cross-dwelling’ to argue that Barrett Browning embraces the very hybridity of her novel-poem form and uses revision to litter her lines with disruptive metres and double meanings in a way that reflects on the nature of female composition.

The Manuscript and Material Culture

Material culture has become increasingly central to research in Victorian literature. This is not just limited to the ways in which literature engages with contemporary objects and ephemera, but also about the relationship between the text’s physical circulation in society and its meaning. An early example of this kind of study is Elaine Freedgood’s historical approach to understanding how Jane Eyre ‘secretes…hides…and emits’ history by studying the way that Charlotte Brontë furnishes several houses with mahogany furniture. As well as indicating the ‘locations of deforestation and slavery’ for which mahogany was a metaphor in the Victorian period, she argues that it signifies a source from which Jane draws ‘consolation and a sense of power’. More recently, Catherine Maxwell has demonstrated a sophisticated way of using material culture for interpreting texts in


Though her study focuses largely on literature of the fin-de-siècle, she combines historicism, philology and close-reading to explore how the material culture of perfumery influences the aesthetics and language of the literature she takes as her subject. This kind of multi-layered approach to materialism has inspired and informed how this project analyses the physical appearance of the manuscript, its relationship to the way the text is produced and how this can facilitate an interpretation of the text.

We can tease out these multiple layers in an example from the end of the *Villette* manuscript. At this point in the text, it is clear that Lucy Snowe and Monsieur Paul share romantic feelings towards one another. The following excision occurs after M. Paul’s rant at Lucy about her recent habit to dress in ‘flaunting, giddy colours;’ an obviously jealous outburst that comes after he discovers her making a watchguard for one of her ‘gentlemen’ friends (he finds out later it is for him). Before he leaves, Lucy reports that M. Paul asks her ‘[w]hether what he had just said would have the effect of making me entirely detest him?’ This is her response as it appears on Brontë’s manuscript:

> I hardly remember what answer I made, or how it came about; I don’t think I spoke at all, [c. four words excised]; but I know we managed to bid good-night on friendly terms.

The physical appearance of the manuscript places pressure on the text at this point because Brontë’s cut differentiates this deletion from others, which are simply crossed out. This suggests that there is something potentially incriminating about

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the four words which were originally written, or at least worth concealing from her publishers. Despite not being able to identify what was originally written here, this revision provides an additional perspective on the text: it reinforces Lucy’s evasiveness throughout the novel because, instead of sharing more detail about her feelings and exchanges with M. Paul, she cannot remember whether she even spoke, let alone what she said. The manuscript therefore not only deepens our understanding of Brontë’s playfulness with the genre in which she professes to be writing - an autobiography depends on its subject’s ability to ‘remember’ - but reinforces her subject’s silences to downplay the conventions of the romance-narrative that occur in the novel.

Critics are exploring this kind of relationship between materiality and meaning, though they generally focus on post-publication texts rather than the manuscript. For example, Tom Mole takes a different approach to literary inheritance in *What the Victorians Made of Romanticism*, where he studies the physical ways in which the Victorians shaped reputations of Romantic texts by recirculating them in modified forms. The illustrations, anthologies, appropriation of Romantic characters and emblems etc. enhance our understanding of both Victorian attitudes towards Romanticism and the material practices involved in canon formation. Another example which uses materiality as a means to facilitate interpretation is John Pfordresher’s *The Secret History of Jane Eyre*, which takes a largely biographical approach to the novel’s composition but attempts an allegorical reading by focussing on the material circumstances of Brontë’s creative process and publishing history.
These studies, among others, indicate the extent to which the physicality of a text, and its medium, can influence meaning. Barbara Heritage’s bibliographical study of *Jane Eyre* explains how the Victorian publishing marketplace impacts ‘both the format and narration of Brontë’s writing’. She explores Brontë’s distinction between the physical book as a commodity and its intangible literary content to suggest that *Jane Eyre* was a ‘compromise’ between the ‘demands of the British marketplace for fiction’ and her authorial integrity. She demonstrates how Brontë manipulates the structure of the novel to embrace the practicalities of the publishing industry (such as the conventional three volumes) but also comment on her own textuality; thus *Jane Eyre* ‘defends itself from the potboiler fiction of its time’. Heritage therefore demonstrates the rewards of ‘synthetiz[ing] bibliography with formalist literary criticism’. Her essay is useful in showing how contemporary readers ‘misread Brontë as merely mass-market romance’ but also highlights how bibliographical study often excludes the physical status of the manuscript. Rather surprisingly, up to now the interactive relationship between authorial expression, literary manuscripts and interpretation of the text has been underplayed within the study of material culture, bibliography and textual criticism.

23 Neil Fraistat and Julia Flanders have argued that the digital age has transformed our understanding of the relationships between texts and material culture. For example, the digital archive - which makes manuscripts and other unpublished materials relatively accessible - exposes ‘precisely how texts get mediated’ (p. 1). Not only this but reading on screens has made readers confront that ‘the meaning of words are interdependent with the graphic elements in which they are embodied, surrounded, and displayed.’ (p. 2) Neil Fraistat and Julia Flanders (eds.) ‘Introduction: Textual Scholarship in the Age of Media Consciousness’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Textual Scholarship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 1-15.


25 ibid., p. 457.

26 ibid., p. 454.

27 ibid., p. 485.
Critics tend to force a distinction between the ‘text’ and the physicality of its material form (i.e. manuscript, hardback, periodical); for example in Katie King’s argument that bibliography can facilitate feminist approaches to texts written by women. She attributes this to how ‘bibliography could shift my frame of analysis from the world in the text to the text in the world’. Presumably there are two worlds which the text inhabits - the author’s world and the reader’s world - both of which can inform its interpretation. King implies, however, that any analytical frame must choose between interpreting the writer’s worldview through the narrative of their work or attending to the context of the text’s production. This underplays how these two theoretical strands can interact with one another at a codicological and analytical level, blurring the boundaries between feminist ideas about the production and reception of the text, and the interpretive implications for the text. In the example above, the manuscript shows us how Brontë maintained control of her text in the world through her editing technique; this style of revision also reflects and reinforces the evasive nature of the text’s protagonist and facilitates a reading of the extent to which Lucy Snowe divulges the nature of her romantic feelings in the world of the text.

In 2013, Michael G. Sargent used the term ‘manuscript textuality’ to describe how the manuscript shares ‘a number of characteristics of production and transmission’. His focus is primarily on the different voices involved in a completed text’s transmission; the compositors, editors and correctors who are potentially responsible for some of its minor variants. Indeed, multiple voices are

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present on all the manuscripts studied here, which bear the marks and signatures of the compositors who reproduced the text in print. However, these marks are minimal compared to the authorial marks that constitute most of the manuscript’s ‘textuality’. This project works against the idea that the manuscript is simply an indication of the text’s historicity and redefines ‘manuscript textuality’ to consider, from a formalist perspective, cuts, scribbles and palimpsestic substitutions made before the text was circulated. These marks do not simply indicate that the text was written, revised and circulated at a particular time but require interpretations from the manuscript-reader.

Revision and Authorial Intention

Marta L. Werner’s work on Emily Dickinson is an early demonstration of manuscript textuality. Indeed, the poet she takes as her subject somewhat necessitates an approach which deconstructs the uniformity of published editions by considering draft materials to be a part of the text. Dickinson notoriously avoided publication during her lifetime and the experimental nature of her poetry has encouraged a recent trend in which critics resist authoritative (arguably

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30 See, for example, Manchester, John Rylands Library, Elizabeth Gaskell Collection, MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 8r which is signed ‘Hartley’; Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 4r which is signed ‘Ross’; Houghton Library, Harvard, ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 417r which is signed ‘Matthews’.

31 For example, Bernard Cerquiglini characterised traditional attitudes towards manuscript-study when he argued that the pre-publication text and its interaction with the marketplace is ‘the point that makes analysis possible’ because it is ‘a precise indication of its historicity’. In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology, trans. by Betsy Wing (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p.vii.
patriarchal) editions that standardise her variations in language and punctuation. Werner accordingly argues that her edition of Dickinson’s work ‘is about undoing’ this standardisation. According to Werner, modern editions overlook the important ‘relationship between message and medium’ illustrated by Dickinson’s manuscripts. For example, these textual witnesses often present ‘multiple or contingent orders’ for a poem, as well as alternative substitutions at the end of lines. Werner’s study is not just limited to additional variants presented by the manuscript (which seems to be the primary focus in many manuscript studies) but argues that there is ‘an aesthetics of open-endedness’ present on the manuscript that is registered within Dickinson’s poetry. According to Werner, Dickinson intentionally disrupted ‘textual authorities’ by producing a feminine discourse - a ‘poetics of immediacy’ - that relied on her ability to physically play with order and meaning in her manuscripts.

While studies in Emily Dickinson have benefitted from Werner’s work, the potential within her methodology has not been explored elsewhere. Emily

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32 Incidentally, the blurb of Thomas H. Johnson’s recent Faber edition of Dickinson’s Complete Poems (2016) illustrates the problematic act of standardisation that Werner resists. Johnson has apparently ‘presented the poems in their original contexts’ but ‘where alternate readings were suggested, he has chosen only those which the poet evidently preferred’. Aside from debates surrounding authorial intention, Werner’s edition does indeed undo our sense of what Dickinson ‘preferred’ by suggesting that each variant is as significant as the other. For an edition which sympathises with Werner’s approach see, for example, Cristanne Miller’s recent edition of Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them, annotated edn. (USA: Belknap Press, An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2016).


34 ibid., p. 4.

35 ibid., p. 3.

36 Angus Easson’s work on Elizabeth Gaskell often uses this methodology to present alternative or repressed opinions in her manuscripts. For example, in ‘Two Suppressed Opinions in Mrs. Gaskell’s Life of Charlotte Brontë’, Brontë Society Transactions, 16.4 (1974): 281-3, he uncovered Gaskell’s self-censorship of a passage in which she exposes Charlotte Brontë’s distaste towards Roman Catholicism.

37 Werner, p. 2.

38 ibid., p. 22.
Dickinson’s manuscripts seem central not only to her creative process but for understanding her poetry. This project experiments with what happens when we implement Werner’s approach with a relatively conventional Victorian text (although the texts at the centre of this study were certainly not conventional in many ways, they generally adhered to the standard publishing process in the mid-nineteenth-century in which a published text was produced and the manuscript was inaccessible to the common reader). It interrogates the extent to which the material experience of writing and revising a text for publication influences the way that representation functions in the text.

The theoretical and methodological debates involved in textual criticism’s work of establishing authoritative editions of a text facilitate an answer to this question. Though this project is not interested in providing a framework for authoritative editions of a text, the accompanying discussions about authorial intention and draft materials have implications for the way that the manuscript is handled. Sally Bushell’s *Text as Process* has been hugely influential in informing my methodology. Her work on textual process is the first critical study to sufficiently and extensively theorise the interpretive possibilities offered by pre-publication material. As a consequence of its unique nature, the book raises a lot of questions that this project will address. Most importantly, however, she extends our understanding of ‘manuscript textuality’ in a way that stresses the significance of draft materials for enabling a richer understanding of a published text; not just in highlighting the various stages through which a text is produced but helping us to understand why a text is written in a particular way and its effect on meaning:
The manuscript-page, as a material object, holds meaning in two dominant ways: in the intentional acts of the maker on the page, and in the physicality of the manuscript as a present-at-hand thing.\footnote{Bushell, Text as Process: Creative Composition in Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Dickinson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), p. 229.}

If the manuscript ‘holds meaning’ then this raises constructive questions about where textual meaning is located and the role the reader plays in creating it. In what way can the ‘physicality of the manuscript’ contribute to an interpretation of the text? Indeed, is it possible for modern readers to consider the manuscript as a ‘present-at-hand thing’, removed from the conditions in which it was composed? In a digital age - in which there is also generally little evidence of a text’s genesis on computers - any reader would find it difficult to ignore the physical historical evidence on the handwritten manuscript.

Bushell’s work claims not to focus on the ‘social meaning’ of a text, which she attributes to ‘the later stages of production and transmission’ rather than the ‘text’s emergence and development’. Instead, she classifies revisions according to ‘intentional/unintentional meaning’, which runs the risk of privileging the compositional experience of certain literary voices that are relatively unmediated by the social implications of their expression;\footnote{ibid., p. 5.} her use of ‘a Tennysonian, or Joycean, or Wordsworthian first draft’ as a referent is particularly telling.\footnote{ibid., p. 7.} Bushell’s definition of meaning as a ‘complex shifting state within process’ and draft materials as part of a ‘continuum of the text’ are useful but she takes for granted that these shifting states are aesthetic, textual choices alone and not in fact impacted by the prospect of how the text will be received within the discourses surrounding its ‘production and transmission’.\footnote{ibid., pp. 1-2.}
Bushell’s position results from her optimistically inclusive endeavour to develop a ‘universal framework’ for interpreting any author’s work in its developmental stages.\textsuperscript{43} The attempt to be inclusive is, however, paradoxically exclusive of the differential pressures involved in any writer’s social experience that can mediate their text (i.e. gender, race, class, sexuality). Bushell notes, for example, that Emily Dickinson (a quintessential subject for manuscript-study) does not conform to her typology as smoothly as Wordsworth and Tennyson, but attributes this to Dickinson’s idiosyncratic approach to writing (the reason why her manuscripts are frequently studied) rather than acknowledging how her social position as a female author may impact authorial intention. By underplaying the social conditions in which a text is composed, Bushell misses the opportunity to explore an interesting dimension to her argument; that Dickinson was in fact consciously working ‘counter’ to a reading of authorial intention.\textsuperscript{44} This project will attempt to interrogate this gap to some extent by presenting a diverse range of female-authored texts. Bushell is right that some cases do not fit her universal mould in conventional ways but, by taking the social circumstances of a text’s development into account, my research uncovers patterns for explaining how revision can productively contribute to a sense of authorial identity and representation.

It is difficult to dismiss how an awareness of the text’s reception can influence the production of the manuscript text. This is particularly the case in this project, which focusses on female authors who - to different extents - negotiate the expectations of the society in which they are publishing, as well as the impact of

\textsuperscript{43} Bushell, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{44} ibid., p. 168.
their writing within that society. The self-editing of their manuscripts raises further questions regarding intention: is intention related to meaning or to the specific words written on the page (for example when an author disguises their meaning in more ambiguous language)? Are instances of self-censorship working against an author’s intention? Issues surrounding authorial intention have often been left to editorial theorists, such as Morris Eaves, who defines ‘[d]ocumented self-censorship’ as ‘a social corruption of individual authorial intention, a change of mind under external coercion.’

Certainly, his use of such dramatic language as ‘corruption’ and ‘coercion’ ironise the extremity of myths about the corruptive force of the modern editor. Nevertheless, he does have a point. The manuscript illustrates the ways that the female text is influenced (though not necessarily coerced) by the social circumstances surrounding its composition. This does not mean that the text is corrupted. It is possible that reading self-censorship as ‘unintentional’ or ‘anti-intentional’ could undermine texts written by Victorian women. Instead, women use editing as a device which allows them to both conform to and subvert the social discourse surrounding female expression.

Revision offers an author the opportunity to embrace double-meaning as a mode that simultaneously fulfils these two positions. This was a strategy employed by Elizabeth Gaskell in the *Life* - and her husband William, who collaborated with her on the text’s revision (his substitutions are presented in bold) - particularly when dealing with difficult subjects, such as Branwell Brontë:

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The year 1840 found all the Brontës living at home, excepting Anne. I do not know for what reason the plan of sending Branwell to study for an artist at the Royal Academy fell through.⁴⁶⁴⁶

These may appear to be minor changes made by William but they revise Gaskell’s tone towards Branwell Brontë to both mitigate her treatment of him and make the passage more ambiguous. Firstly, William’s claim that Gaskell is ‘not aware’ is not as strong as her original statement which could have implied that she had not done her research as a biographer. To be ‘not aware’ also seems more frivolous and non-committal, which is characteristic of Gaskell’s tone when dealing with subjects that she finds difficult. For it is most likely that Branwell’s plan did ‘fall through’ - rather than being ‘relinquished’ out of choice - because of his notoriously bad behaviour. While these are subtle changes, William’s revisions here mitigate the social impact of the biography and the deference of the authorial voice at this point while introducing ambiguity that allows the reader to fill in the gaps about Branwell (based on what they learn about him throughout the text). These revisions register the mix between Gaskell’s (or William’s) authorial intentions and social intentions that are acting upon the text.

Feminist textual criticism has historically found it difficult to balance the relationship between the author’s intention and what Betty T. Bennett describes as the ‘other tacit assumptions that have influenced text development’.⁴⁷ These discussions fail to reach a suitable conclusion for how texts written by mid-

⁴⁶ MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol.1 fol.183r.
nineteenth-century women should be edited but they remind us that the author’s experience when writing a text is not free from the social and political discourses that influence the conditions of its transmission. This project will analyse the physical evidence left by authors when mediating their text through revision to understand the ways that they negotiate these social influences through language. The influence that composition and transmission can have upon the text is important when considering the way meaning is created, destroyed and subverted.

If markings and revisions can demonstrate how a writer assumes control of the way their text will be received through their linguistic choices then draft materials play a vital role in the interpretation of the text. Of equal interest is approaching the manuscript as a literary object in its own right. A study of the way the text is composed and revised, for example, may disrupt formalist readings of how self-reflexivity operates within the narrative. Sally Bushell is cautious to strike this balance within her own typology:

Creative intentionality is enclosed by a compositional context within which intentional acts occur, but it also “contains” the potential for an escape into a limitless context of the unwilled totality to which it is ultimately subservient. This allows us to respond to the materials of process both referentially - treating the manuscript materials as an intentional object bearing meaning in the form of intentional acts on the page - and ontologically, since those same materials also exist as part of the open truth of the work of art and of the individual in response to it.\(^\text{48}\)

\(^{48}\) Bushell, pp. 58-9.
Following from her reading of Barthes, Bushell recognises that the author cannot control the reception and sometimes ‘unwilled’ interpretation of their text once they have released it into the world. However, this project will complicate Bushell’s idea of ‘creative intentionality’ by considering how an author may resist their ‘subservience’ and use their awareness of their contemporary ‘totality’ to compose and edit into existence a specific version of their text. Bushell demonstrates how manuscript material can perform the function of both revealing authorial intention and resisting it but what happens when an author may try to withhold possession of their text, which can extend to self-reflexivity in post-publication editions that are revised and censored? I will interrogate Bushell’s distinction between ‘referential’ and ‘ontological’ study of the manuscript by emphasising the social dimension within both of these perspectives. The relationship between composition and self-editing is a significant dynamic that can be read within the text's development to expose the author’s historical and

49 In his seminal essay ‘The Death of the Author’, Roland Barthes disputes the idea of authorial intention completely and argues that, at the point of writing, ‘the author enters into his own death’. (p. 142) ‘To give a text an Author’, he writes, ‘is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.’ (p. 147) He implies that textual meaning is developed not through composition but through reading - it is ‘language’ that ‘acts’. (p. 143) While it is useful to relieve the text of reductive historicist readings, Barthes does not recognise how any form of reading places a limit upon the text - limits that are indeed predicated on a reader’s social position. These limits do not preclude interpretation, but facilitate a response to the text in which meaning is created. Barthes argues that meaning can only be located within language, which in itself initiates a disconnection that ‘calls into question all origins’. (p. 146) This disconnection occurs not simply at a linguistic level, however, but a social one - language is communal and thus is itself always embedded within specific social contexts. To rid the text of these external influences, Barthes denies it any teleology; draft materials and manuscripts would and should not have any influence on our understanding of the authoritative, final version of a text. Revision within a manuscript, however, can show a woman manipulating not only the process of the text’s reception within society, but the ways in which language conveys and subverts meaning. It is the very relationship between language and origin, and how it is negotiated both within the text and on the manuscript, that can facilitate interpretation of the literary text through the author’s experience while writing it. One may not be able to make any absolute claims to intention, but can develop meaning through the intentional markings that articulate the labour of a text’s production. Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text (London: Fontana, 1977)
social position (treating the materials ‘referentially’) and can impact the text’s interpretation (treating the materials ‘ontologically’ as a part of the literary work).

To understand why this kind of methodology has been largely overlooked within literary studies, we might turn to Zachary Leader’s 1996 work on revision. He focusses purely on Romanticism and therefore concludes that, because they are ‘inorganic refinements’ that demonstrate ‘second thoughts,’ revisions go against the Romantic notion of ‘creative power…outside conscious control’.  

Likewise, Lewis C. Roberts’ work on Geraldine Jewsbury and professional authorship in the Victorian period suggests that revision complicates a similar mindset involved in the reception of female authored texts. Because they were implicitly created in the domestic sphere, the female text was distanced from the ‘written forms of labor’ (editing, proofing, reviewing) that indicated its relationship to the marketplace. In any case, recent authoritative editions often prioritise one version of a text as final (often the first edition), suggesting that any amendments made prior to this were cast aside by the author. Leader dismisses ideas about final authorial intention to argue that observing the process of a text is key to understanding its relationship to identity and representation:

> When the self is thought of as inherently indivisible and continuous, revision is often seen as a simple matter of refinement or clarification, ‘bringing out’. When the self is thought as something towards which one works, an aspiration or value rather than something given, revision is as much an attempt to establish personal identity as to reveal it.

Leader is right to identify how the production of a text is formative and part of a process, both in terms of identity and meaning. His distinction between notions of

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52 Leader, p. 5.
essential and developing identities is useful here, although identity is not always something tangible that follows a clear narrative.\textsuperscript{53} Linear forms of identity construction are incompatible with the study of texts written by women because critics of nineteenth-century female identity have convincingly asserted how women lacked a ‘coherent narrative of selfhood’.\textsuperscript{54} In the case of the texts studied here (all of which explore female identity and its representation), identity is not so much ‘established’ and ‘revealed’ but negotiated within the context of the nineteenth-century literary marketplace through alternative kinds of representation, such as double-meaning, which are often explored during revision.

John Bryant’s work on the ‘rhetorical’ act of scholarly editing provides a useful poetics for reading excisions or revisions as sites that produce meaning. He claims that it is not just the act of producing a scholarly edition that is interpretive, but revealing the text’s multiple stages of development ‘facilitates interpretation’.\textsuperscript{55} He explains that, as readers of textual process, we construct ‘revision narratives’.\textsuperscript{56} These narratives are not only linked to the formal development of the text, but the social and ideological positions of the past and present which influence our understanding of how the text is formed. Thus, the efforts of editors to produce a single version, while still recognising the text’s development, actually undermines the ‘multiple textual identities’ which are important for

\textsuperscript{53} Indeed, in his only case-study of a female-authored text, Mary Shelley’s \textit{Frankenstein}, Leader’s argument of identity-formation falls short when he dismisses her collaboration with Percy Shelley as a practical decision rather than an aesthetic one, ‘she merely bowed to what she saw as reality: she was exhausted from nursing a child and running a family’ (p. 191).


\textsuperscript{56} Bryant, p. 1044.
understanding a work; for Bryant, it is at these very sites of multiplicity that
meaning is produced:

Revision sites, whether authorial or editorial, consensual or imposed, are
hot spots of cultural contestation, and the revision narratives we construct
in speculating about what happens at these sites clarify and make
transparent the dynamics by which writers and readers reproduce or resist
the ideology of their culture.57

Bryant captures the significance of revisions for informing our understanding of
how texts are negotiated for publication; they are indeed ‘hot spots’ that shed light
on meaning within the text. There is often no way to identify or distinguish
between revisions that are produced with an aesthetic aim for the text or an eye to
the text’s reception. The modes through which female writers ‘reproduce or resist’
ideologies may not be so distinct; women in the mid-nineteenth-century often blur
this binary to capture their experience in writing.

The development of the authors and works at the centre of this project have
been taken into account by critics of their manuscripts in the conventional sense
of uncovering previously unseen material. However, the relationship between the
textuality of their manuscripts and the aesthetic choices within their texts needs
more attention. Josie Billington has worked with the manuscripts of Gaskell’s
fictional works but uses them to support her claim that Gaskell was a keen close-
reader of her texts. Billington’s work places emphasis on the linguistic
significance of the post-publication edition rather than locating meaning within
the developmental stages of the text.58 Nevertheless, Billington’s excellent
monograph, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Shakespeare*, uses manuscript

57 Bryant, pp. 1044-5.
58 Josie Billington, ‘Watching a Writer Write: Manuscript Revisions in Mrs Gaskell’s Wives and
Daughters and Why They Matter’ in *Real Voices on Reading*, ed. by Philip Davis (Basingstoke:
revisions to demonstrate how Barrett Browning intentionally tests the limits of blank verse to suit her purpose as a poet, which challenges outdated readings that consider her metre to be chaotic and spontaneous. This project builds on Billington’s work, which reads Barrett Browning’s revisions as ‘disrupting the rhythmic flow of her first instincts, while…reinstating regularity often to showcase its opposite’. Revisions do not simply censor a woman’s work but allow her the freedom to experiment with form and genre, as well as its ability to simultaneously disrupt and conform to convention.

Marjorie Stone’s work on the vast and fragmentary Elizabeth Barrett Browning archive does not necessarily facilitate interpretations of her poetry but explains how the ‘ambiguity’ of manuscript material can deconstruct our preconceptions about the text, rather than reinforcing them; ‘its “hard” documentary facts are subject to mediation, morphing into less definitive interpretations.’ The ‘mediations’ Stone refers to are actually considered the most mundane aspects of transcribing (sometimes illegible) autograph manuscripts, whose significance is often overlooked by modern editions:

Frequently such transcriptions edit out the “noise” of indecipherable deletions - or indeed all deletions - along with variations in spacing that may or may not be significant; conjectural identifications of words or phrases; marginal marks and indications of unusually heavy emphasis that cannot be conveyed through underlining, double-underlining, or italics; shifts from pencil to pen or use of different ink colours; indications of inserted words or lines; and, importantly, records of where such insertions appear (above the line, below it, horizontally beside it, or vertically or diagonally in the left or right margins).

61 Stone, p. 40.
All of these seemingly insignificant factors, which contribute to the physicality of the manuscript, mean that ‘perfect transcriptions’ are as elusive as the ‘perfect interpretation’ of a work, or an ultimate understanding of authorial intention. Indeed, the only way of producing an unambiguous transcription is through photography or facsimile; a choice made by the editors of the twenty-one volume series The Cornell Wordsworth, who offset transcriptions of Wordsworth’s poetry alongside photographs of the original manuscripts. Because the nature of markings on the manuscript are ambiguous, they also present interpretive implications for the text. What affect does it have on the rest of the passage, for example, if part of it is heavily scored out? The deletion may throw into relief the suggestive nature of the surrounding text and urge the reader to consider the social implications of its reception. Why would some text be capitalised or bold on the manuscript if it does not appear this way in the published edition? Is this accidental or does it operate as a textual marker for the author? Such instances also place more focus on the text surrounding a revision and thus invite further close-reading from the manuscript-reader.

Ileana Marin’s work on Charlotte Brontë’s use of excision in the fair copy manuscripts of her major novels Jane Eyre, Shirley and Villette comes closest to a reading of manuscript textuality. Her work on Villette is useful in showing how the aesthetic of the text is rendered within the author’s response to the material manuscript. For example, she recognises a ‘poetics of cancellation’ within the narrative, which is both reflected within and perpetuated by Brontë’s complete removal of text from the manuscript. The interpretive aspect of the manuscript’s materiality is underplayed, however, by the argument that Brontë’s method of

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self-editing was used primarily to ‘conceal’ the ‘relevant characteristics’ she shared with her protagonist, Lucy Snowe.\textsuperscript{63} For Marin, the desire to sustain a masculine authorial identity informs Brontë’s intentions when self-editing, even at the cost of Shirley’s narrative coherence (which she describes as ‘fragmented’) and feminism (‘she practised self-control when it came to the female characters so as to avoid being judged on the basis of the author’s sex’).\textsuperscript{64} While it may be true that Brontë used a pseudonym because she believed that ‘authoresses are liable to be looked upon with prejudice’, the biography of the author should not necessarily impact our interpretation of the text.\textsuperscript{65} In other words, the text should not be seen as enabling an authorial construct but rather, in Brontë’s case, that construct enables the production of the text. Her male authorial persona - contrived in a public, social realm - provided her with a platform from which to establish a discourse around female representation. She describes pseudonymous publication as the ‘sheltering shadow of an incognito’, suggesting how her masculine identity has a dual function, which enables not just the reception of her texts - which is presumably free from a gendered ‘prejudice’ - but a greater sense of artistic freedom when negotiating the ‘luminous cloud’ during the compositional process.\textsuperscript{66}

Marin’s emphasis is solely on excision, which occurs at the point of revision. It is true that Brontë’s use of excision is unusual and provides interesting opportunities for understanding her experience when self-editing. Marin’s study

\textsuperscript{63} Marin (2014), p. 43.
\textsuperscript{64} Marin (2013), pp. 27-28.
privileges the more striking aspects of cancellation; this project will also consider the significance of other markings and revisions on the manuscript and the nuances of negotiating expression at all points of composition. According to Marin, Brontë tends to ruminate on her own autobiographical experience within her fiction, but excisions show how she wished to withdraw her personal ‘investment’ in dealing with the experience of Victorian women: ‘she was aware that writing was the space where she could simultaneously be present and absent, real and fictional, connected and disconnected with her own life and surroundings.’ As I have argued, autobiographical readings tend to undermine the status of the text by diminishing the significant ways that fiction - and the social commentary it can provide - is constructed through form and language. Instead of seeing writing as a figurative ‘space’ in which Brontë implants her own autobiographical experience, this project’s focus is on how prescriptions on gender, and how it is expressed, produce a specific kind of mediation within the text. Instead of Marin’s poetics of erasure, this project will consider revision as a productive part of composition, which facilitates more complex and nuanced meanings rather than silencing them. This form of meaning-production occurs not just at the point of excision, but in the process of the text’s development, extending across composition and revision; the manuscript provides the physical space where expression is negotiated.

**Revising Tradition**

Attending to a female tradition of self-editing implies that there is a fundamental difference in the way that women produce texts. It recalls what poststructuralist

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feminist Hélène Cixous called ‘écriture féminine’ in her seminal essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ which argues that there is a difference in the way that the female self is inscribed in language. Writing from a psychoanalytical point of view, poststructuralist feminism in the 1970s probed the ways in which women construct their consciousness within essentialist discourses about gender. This project is interested in feminine modes of expression but it approaches the text from the other end of production; rather than exploring how the female self is signified within the writing process, I use textual evidence, such as revisions, to understand how representation is mediated in female writing in response to the expectation of publication. I am also interested in the material, conscious ways that women inscribe alternate or double-meanings into their language during revision, while simultaneously registering this self-reflexively in their texts.

The female authors at the centre of this project were conscious of contributing to a tradition of women’s writing, at the same time as positioning themselves against it. Charlotte Brontë used her awareness of a feminine novelistic tradition to explain why she and her sisters adopted pseudonyms when publishing. The pseudonym was not just because of their aversion to publicity but because - even though many female works constructed and enriched the novel as a genre - they were aware of how writing, and its reception, was part of a gendered tradition in the mid-nineteenth-century:

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a

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69 Pauline Nestor argues that there is a relationship between the emergence of the Penny Post and the proliferation of the novel. According to Nestor, letters are ‘a gendered site’ and letter-writing a ‘feminine art’ (p. 20), which is as ‘self-fabricating’ (p. 21) as the novel. Pauline Nestor, ‘New Opportunities for Self-Reflection and Self-Fashioning: Women, Letters and the Novel in Mid-Victorian England,’ Literature and History, 19. 2 (2010): 18-35.
sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because - without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called “feminine” - we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.\textsuperscript{70}

As Nicola Thompson notes, Brontë encoded gender hierarchies into her ‘Biographical Notice’ at the same time as interrogating them; this kind of mixing by working within an oppressive discourse at the same time as subverting it is central to this project. For example, Elizabeth Gaskell portrayed herself as the conventional Victorian wife when publishing as Mrs. Gaskell, but Linda Hughes and Michael Lund claim that this allowed her to access ‘unclaimed spaces’ in the Victorian canon.\textsuperscript{71} Similarly, Brontë plays innocent to the idea that their novels were not written in a ‘feminine style’ - and embraces the ambiguity of her ‘vague impression’ of literary reception - while at the same time admitting that she wanted to avoid the reception that this kind of literature received. She makes her position towards a ‘feminine’ tradition implicit by subsequently alluding to the ‘flattery’ that such literature is met with; not simply because it was penned by an ‘authoress’ but, tacitly, because it lacks the value of male-authored publications at the time.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was aware of a similarly distinct tradition of the poetess at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, which championed a sentimental mode, including those such as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon. Barrett Browning entered a constructive dialogue with the elegies written by Felicia Hemans (addressed to Mary Tighe) and Letitia Landon (addressed to

\textsuperscript{70} ‘Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell’, p. xvii.

Felicia Hemans) with her ‘Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon and Suggested by Her “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans”’ (1835). However, Brandy Ryan explains that this was a ‘critical, rather than connecting, discourse’.\textsuperscript{72} Caley Ehnes has recently conducted an interesting study into the different interpretive frameworks offered by Barrett Browning’s publication of another poem about Landon, ‘L.E.L.’s Last Question’ (1839), in two different periodicals: the \textit{Ladies Pocket Magazine} and \textit{The Athenaeum}. She shows how the manner in which texts were published could influence the way that they were received, ‘the visual and verbal rhetoric of periodical publications shaped the narration surrounding women poets’.\textsuperscript{73} These two different publications provide an example of Barrett Browning’s ‘cross-dwelling’ between the ‘trivialized’ poetry of the \textit{Ladies Pocket Magazine} and the intellectual literary remit of \textit{The Athenaeum}.\textsuperscript{74} Evidently, Barrett Browning attempted to mediate her relationship to a feminine poetic tradition, both in her conception of her own authorial identity and her work. She lamented that ‘England has had many learned women […] and yet where are the poetesses? […] I look everywhere for grandmothers, and see none’.\textsuperscript{75} Barrett Browning deconstructs and reexamines the female poet’s relationship to tradition in her epic-novel poem \textit{Aurora Leigh}.

The ambivalent attitude expressed by these women towards a female tradition was characterised later by George Eliot - another female author who used a


\textsuperscript{73} Caley Ehnes, “‘Her sphere’d soul shall look on them’”: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Pose of the Poetess, and “L.E.L.’s Last Question”,’ \textit{Women’s Writing}, 26.4 (2019): 421-439 (p. 422).

\textsuperscript{74} ibid., p. 423.

pseudonym - in her 1856 essay ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,’ where she criticises and satirises ‘feminine fatuity’.\textsuperscript{76} Eliot considers these kinds of novels to be filled with ‘empty writing’ that superficially engages with novelistic traditions, such as the oracular or Gothic novel.\textsuperscript{77} As amusing as the essay is, it gives off a sense of resentment towards the superficiality of a female tradition and its implications for the more intellectual or political works published by women: ‘And the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women’.\textsuperscript{78} Eliot’s tone is jovial if only to emphasise the seriousness of the implications; if the marketplace continues to publish fiction by women that reinforces a gendered stereotype of frivolity and ‘silliness’, then it leaves no room for other voices who implicitly have something more valuable to say. It is therefore understandable that Brontë’s concern was not necessarily that women would be met with hostility, then, but ‘flattery’. If a novel was published with all the trimmings of femininity, then it would be received from the perspective of ‘personality,’ which in turn provoked a superficial form of flattery. Literature written by women in the mid-nineteenth-century was implicitly read through the lens of reinforcing femininity.

Brontë’s desire to assimilate herself with her male contemporaries extended not only to the construction of her authorial identity - as established by the pseudonym - but the material elements of her published works. Upon publishing the \textit{Poems} by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, Brontë equipped herself for dealing

\textsuperscript{77} ibid., p. 443.
\textsuperscript{78} ibid., p. 454.
with the male realm of the literary marketplace by purchasing *The Author's Printing and Publishing Assistant* (1839). The chief aim of this ‘little Work’ was to ‘afford such a view of the Technical details of Printing and Publishing as shall enable Authors to form their own judgment on all subjects connected with the Publication of their Productions.’\(^7\) The guide was indeed uncommonly enabling; it was not simply aimed at men but addressed itself more broadly to the gender-neutral ‘Author’. Thus, it provided Brontë with guidance that authorised her use of a professional tone when dealing with her then-publishers, Aylott and Jones, and allowed her to dictate the material conditions of her text’s transmission. The manual suggests how the material aesthetic of a book can articulate not only its status but its genre, ‘Pica is the Type usually employed in Printing works of History, Biography, Travels, &c., in the Demy octavo size; Small Pica, in Novels, Romances, &c., in the Post octavo size; and Long Primer, Poetry, in the Foolscap octavo size’\(^8\). Based on this knowledge, Brontë dictated to Aylott and Jones that she would like her work ‘to be printed in one octavo volume, of the same quality of paper and size of type as Moxon’s last edition of Wordsworth.’\(^9\) Her awareness of the material conditions of publishing allowed her to create an affinity between

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\(^8\) ibid., p. 35.

her own work and Wordsworth’s; this does not only tell us about her aesthetic preferences but how she wished her work to be received. The materiality of the printed edition is what Gérard Genette would define as a paratext that informs the reader’s opinion of the work by connecting it to the successful, male poetry that she wished to emulate. The Author’s Printing and Publishing Assistant thus gives us an example of the material ways in which women both engaged in and resisted a feminine tradition.

Reading Revision

Critical studies dating back to the second-wave feminism of the 1980s have established the theoretical foundations of a female tradition and its relationship to gender identity. In her afterword to the recent Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women’s Poetry, Isobel Armstrong traces the trajectory of Victorian women’s studies, which she argues has moved away from a ‘recognition of structural inequity’. This can be seen in the critical history of Aurora Leigh, which was reclaimed by the publication of Cora Kaplan’s Women’s Press edition of the poem in 1978. Until this point the work had fallen into relative obscurity after Barrett

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82 Bradley Deane interestingly points out that the physical quality of Wordsworth’s publications reflected his growing ambivalence towards the marketplace. The superiority of the materials that constituted his books meant they were expensive; thus, Wordsworth could retain a marginal position within the marketplace because relatively few consumers could afford them. He could therefore maintain his Romantic ideal of the ‘mystified genius’ who was ‘doomed to be isolated by greatness and misunderstood by his contemporaries’ by using the material conditions of his publications to bolster this identity. Bradley Deane, The Making of the Victorian Novelist: Anxieties of Authorship in the Mass Market (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 4-5.

83 Genette’s seminal book Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) theorises how the physical properties of a text can contribute to its interpretation. According to Genette, all texts that surround a work, such as blurbs, contents pages, and attributions are ‘paratexts’ that have a social function: ‘they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense; to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book.’ (p. 1)

Browning’s death, but in response to Kaplan’s edition, second wave feminism attempted to explain this lack of interest while reinscribing it into a tradition of women’s literature; Simon Avery describes this response as an ‘ideological battleground’. 85 For example, while they disagree on Barrett Browning’s position towards Aurora Leigh’s ‘mother-want,’ two major articles published in 1983 locate the protagonist’s burgeoning authorship in symbols and fantasies played out in her relationships with other substitute mothers. For example, Virginia Steinmetz considers these surrogate mothers to be ‘negative symbols reinforcing the theme of deprivation and representing the poet’s need to bring obsessive infantile fantasies into light where they could serve rather than dominate her.’ 86 Dolores Rosenblum also works with symbols when arguing that Barrett Browning ‘reclaims an expressive mother/sister face by confronting falsifying masks and by breaking down the silent iconicity of the female face.’ 87 While working within the realm of male/female stereotypes, both critics in many ways construct symbols before interrogating them.

Though it placed Aurora Leigh firmly in the field of thought for women’s poetry, Armstrong rightly points out that to continue approaching the text from what she calls the ‘theme of subjection’ is ‘counterproductive’. 88 Instead, she insists on the female writer’s ‘active negotiation of the symbolic order’ and creation of a ‘workable dialogism,’ which could lead to ‘self-affirmation’. 89 This

89 ibid., p. 269.
stance is crucial to this project, which interrogates how revision provides physical evidence of that ‘active negotiation’. For example, while it may be true that Barrett Browning deconstructs and interrogates female subjectivity, these are not necessarily buried within ‘infantile fantasies’ or ‘symbolic masks’ that the modern critic has to uncover so that readers can decode them. Steinmetz also suggests that the female poet has a choice between a cruel binary of servitude or domination by an oppressive discourse. On the other hand, Nicole Flurh has more recently used Armstrong’s idea of the ‘double poem’ to explore how masks could allow women to ‘address their own experience obliquely, rather than directly’. She uses this to inform her reading of how Augusta Webster could ‘both critique from without and analyze from within’ in her sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter* (1895). Reading from a textual perspective contributes to blurring the distinguishing features of this binary and exposes how authors often worked within and against ‘falsifying masks’ by taking advantage of the interpretive opportunities of the text. This becomes evident in my discussion of *Villette*, where revisions show that Lucy Snowe embraces the incorrect perceptions that other characters have of her. Deletions resist the impulse to elaborate on her self-reflections in order to withhold and maintain control over certain aspects of her identity.

Recently, Brigid Lowe has rightly pointed out that ‘there is something patronising in the concession that though novels may be oppressive, we can make

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92 ibid, p. 61.
something of them despite their best efforts’ (original emphasis).\textsuperscript{93} Lowe suggests that, instead of suspicion, we read from the perspective of sympathy - a key Victorian idea - which means that ‘we can fill in the blanks where we find incoherence teetering on the brink of lucidity.’\textsuperscript{94} Indeed, reading into blanks or silences is something this project explores in its discussion of \textit{Villette}. A material and textual perspective exposes and enhances the ways that women manipulate their ‘style and structure’ to construct double-meanings. My readings demonstrate that this kind of meaning-production does not necessarily denote oppression within the text but contributes to a feminine mode that acknowledges a masculine tradition while working against it. I will not read the Victorian woman writer’s negotiations with language as an impediment, but as rhetorical gestures which engage with forms of oppression rather than subject to them.

Taking a positive stance on the role of materiality in the production of texts by women is a relatively new approach. Up until now, materiality has often featured in different discussions of Victorian women’s fraught relationship to Romanticism, which emphasised the material female form. Elsie Michie argues, for example, that materiality was frequently associated with women in the nineteenth-century, undermining their exploration of unmediated Romantic expression which privileged the ‘spiritual, ideal, or abstract over the material.’\textsuperscript{95} That Michie links this anxiety to a material and somatic experience is interesting as it recalls a relatively recent tradition of criticism that considers the female body

\textsuperscript{94} ibid., p. 12.
to be a site in which oppressive ideals play out, thus impeding expression. In these works, the relationship between expression and materiality emerges as a disruptive one for women whose materiality is the very thing that produces self-consciousness. In light of this, the manuscript itself is surely worth particular note, as it is a material site in which this struggle is potentially registered. Nevertheless, the manuscript provides a more positive perspective as a site in which women can control their relationship to literary traditions and social mores by blurring and playing with the binary of conformity and subversion.

To understand how materiality is a useful mode through which to complicate this binary, I will turn to Armstrong’s definition of the Victorian double poem; ‘a deeply sceptical form’. Through what she describes as the ‘objectification of consciousness,’ Armstrong argues that Victorian poetry self-consciously draws attention ‘to the act of representation, the act of relationship and the mediations of language, different in a psychological and phenomenological world’. If the poem attends to its own cultural status, as well as the way it is constructed, it can ‘introduce the possibility of interrogation and critique,’ not only in terms of transforming genre but in the way that language engages with social power-

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96 Helena Michie’s *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) does indeed approach the text through the ‘theme of subjection’ by arguing that ‘Victorian novels replicate this dis-ease with and within the female body as they replicate the contradiction between its absence and its presence’ (p. 5). More recently, Anna Kurugovoy Silver’s *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) similarly plants dis-ease within the female body, which she argues is the site of ‘Victorian values, ideologies and aesthetics’ (p. 3). For Silver, ‘control over the body’ is a ‘fundamental component of Victorian female gender ideology,’ (p. 11) which is replicated in the behaviour of female protagonists, such as Lucy Snowe in Brontë’s *Villette*. Other recent works that argue the inevitable relationship between the female body and the text are Emma L. E. Rees, ‘Narrating the Victorian Vagina: Charlotte Brontë and the Masturbating Woman’ *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature*, ed. by Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 119-134 and Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran (eds), *Scenes of the Apple: Appetite, Writing, Desire* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).


98 ibid., p. 13.
structures and ideologies.\textsuperscript{99} I am going to analyse the meaning of ‘objectification’ when applied to the manuscripts of prose texts as well as poetry. This project will demonstrate how female self-reflexivity is not only a means through which writers could interrogate the genre in which they were writing but is objectified or materialised through the process of writing itself.

Armstrong’s definition of the double poem as ‘sceptical’ evokes the agency that this kind of self-reflexivity could harness for female poets. In fact, as Armstrong argues, the double poem provided a form in which women could negotiate the prescriptions placed upon them and create the ‘interplay and tension’ that Shires attributes to Barrett Browning.\textsuperscript{100} In addition to drawing attention to the ways in which established poetic forms can exclude feminine experience, women embraced the double poem to provide scope for double meaning. ‘The simpler the surface of the poem,’ Armstrong writes, ‘the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it.’\textsuperscript{101} Locating meaning within ambiguity and duality allowed women to comment on the cultural conditions which influenced their expression. It has to be said that Armstrong’s analysis is not simply related to gender; she identifies how the double poem was embraced by prolific male writers in the Victorian period as well as oppressed classes and races. She claims, however, that double meaning is distinctly related to a female tradition. I will demonstrate that these double-meanings are not necessarily ideologically consistent or even rhetorically similar across mid-Victorian women’s writing, but the tension and interplay produced by this form provides a framework through which to understand their narrative voice.

\textsuperscript{100} Shires, p. 341.
\textsuperscript{101} Armstrong (1993), p. 324.
Using the terms conformity, subversion and double meaning suggests that there are aspects of representation which are suppressed, which requires a distinction between that which is narratable and unnarratable. Feminist narratologist Robyn Warhol’s definition of the term ‘unnarratable’ underpins how this project theorises the material that is taken out from the manuscript. Warhol notes a ‘gendered difference’ in the way metonymy functions in nineteenth-century narration. While she theorises how women narrate ‘unnarratable’ subjects specifically through their use of figurative language, her explanation of the relationship between the surface level of textual meaning and hidden meaning is enhanced by my work on the ways that self-editing contributes to, or exposes, those aspects of narration that are influenced by an awareness of reception. Warhol recognises the multiple ways in which this term can be applied to the text:

I will be using the term “the unnarratable” to mean that which cannot be narrated because it is too tedious or too obvious to say; that which is taboo, in terms of social convention, literary convention, or both; and that which purportedly cannot be put into words because it exceeds or transcends the expressive capacities of language.

Warhol’s attempt to apply the unnarratable as an umbrella term that conflates tedious detail with realms of experience which cannot be represented is too generalised for this project. There are different pressures involved in representing the ‘severe Truth’ (as Brontë puts it) and material that is seemingly irrelevant or mundane. Nevertheless, she identifies a difference between what an author deems interesting to the reader, what one feels is difficult to express and what cannot be expressed because of social mores that govern behaviour. It is reductive - and nevertheless impossible - to guess what authors removed from the manuscript in

103 ibid., p. 79.
most cases and a reading that would attempt to do so would play into that scheme of thought that presents women as unconsciously self-censoring their work. To avoid the kinds of ambiguity within Warhol’s definition, I use the less ideologically-loaded term ‘non-narrated’ to instead suggest that revisions are empowered textual choices. The ‘non-narrated’ allows us to understand the ways that a text engages in Armstrong’s model of ‘active negotiation’ rather than subjection.

Armstrong points out that the female writer’s ‘workable dialogism’ is not ‘a situation of choice but one that chooses her’. The aim of this project is not to eliminate the oppressions that acted upon the female text but to complicate our understanding of how female writers used revision to temper the influence that these oppressions have on their text. The female author may not have had ‘choice’ regarding her social position but they did make textual choices about what they narrated and the way they narrated it.

**Outline of Chapters**

This thesis contributes to the critical discussion of mid-Victorian women’s writing by understanding how they prepared their texts for circulation in the marketplace. Each chapter offers a close-reading of the relationship between a text and its manuscript form. I have intentionally chosen texts from different genres: life writing, prose and poetry to understand and embrace the multiple ways in which revision contributes to the female authorial voice. Throughout the thesis, I use textual criticism as well as the idea of the non-narrated to expose the specific

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ways in which women use double meaning and ambiguity to create alternative narratives and discourses.

**Chapter 1** explores the way that Gaskell edited *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* collaboratively with her husband William Gaskell. Focussing on the fraught circumstances in which the biography was published, I analyse manuscript markings to understand how Gaskell mediated her text for social purposes; both to temper the portraits of characters still living and to maintain distance between herself and Brontë as a subject. The chapter follows recent trends in criticism that have deconstructed Gaskell’s image as the emblem of the Victorian wife and mother, as well as complicating her caretaking relationship to Brontë. Indeed, it embraces the multiple and divergent opinions of critics about Gaskell’s intentions within the biography because the narrative strategy within the *Life* emerges as one that is intentionally ambiguous and inconsistent. This is something that Gaskell worked into the biography during revision.

**Chapter 2** analyses how Brontë’s use of revision - particularly her tendency to cut the manuscript - establishes a narrative mode of silence that allows her protagonist to maintain control of her identity. Generally, revisions in *Villette* do not mediate the unnarratable through ambiguous language; Brontë’s narrative technique is developed to favour the act of non-narration, and silence, altogether. The chapter situates *Villette* within trends of Victorian realist fiction to argue that Lucy Snowe’s narrative embraces prescriptions on female expression to the extreme. Revisions contribute to her reticence throughout the novel but are also gestured to within the narrative, creating a self-reflexive mode that allows Lucy to taunt the reader and provide a commentary on the representation of the female artist.
Chapter 3 investigates what happens when a text’s revisions are not so loaded with social imperatives. In *Aurora Leigh*, revision enables Barrett Browning to establish her challenge to poetic tradition by experimenting with the rhythms and sounds of her blank verse. The chapter explores how Barrett Browning uses revision to refine her challenge to poetic tradition and form a female poetics within the very texture of the verse itself. Revision allows the poet to experiment with hybridising masculine and feminine poetic traditions in order to facilitate the poetic identity of her eponymous female heroine. Finally, this close-reading provides a fresh perspective through which to read the ways in which *Aurora Leigh* transforms feminine poetic tradition.
Fig. 1 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 16v.
CHAPTER ONE

Multiple Hands, Multiple Voices on the Manuscript of The Life of Charlotte Brontë

‘I am in the Hornet’s nest with a vengeance’ is how Elizabeth Gaskell described the reception of her 1857 biography, The Life of Charlotte Brontë, to her subject’s lifelong friend Ellen Nussey.\(^{105}\) It is a fitting image to describe the indignation which met some of the memoir’s portraits of people associated with Charlotte Brontë.\(^{106}\) The fact that Gaskell considered this reaction as ‘vengeance’ indicates how, in the process of writing the memoir, she believed that her personal reputation was tied up and associated with Brontë’s to the point that she felt victimised by the controversy surrounding it. However distressing the memoir’s reception was for Gaskell, though, it was not unexpected. She used the ‘Hornet’s nest’ image to explain how this social awareness influenced her sometimes inconsistent approach to writing the memoir in a letter after its publication:

> Much could not be told of small details which wd have made them understood. I was under a solemn promise to write the Life, - although I shrank from the task; against which I was warned by one who knew all the circumstances well, as ‘certain to pull a hornet’s nest about my ears.’ But it did not seem to me right to shrink from {a duty}\(^{107}\) the work\(^{108}\) as soon as it appeared to me in the light of a duty. To do it at all it was necessary to tell painful truths. (sic)\(^{109}\)

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\(^{105}\) *Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 453.

\(^{106}\) Most famously, Patrick Brontë was unhappy with some of Gaskell’s remarks about his restrictive parenting style, the woman with whom Branwell Brontë had an affair rejected the biographer’s version of events and there were a few who protested against the representation of Carus Wilson and Brontë’s experience of him at Cowan Bridge School (an episode which was notoriously reworked as Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*). For a more extensive description of these events, see Angus Easson’s introduction to his OUP edition of the Life; *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Angus Easson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

\(^{107}\) Text in brackets has been crossed out.

\(^{108}\) \(/ / \) These marks indicate that text has been added above the original line of composition.

The beginning and end of this passage are balanced between different social pressures: the inability to express something that ‘could not be told’ (what Warhol might term ‘unnarratable’) and the unwilling disclosure of ‘painful truths’. The tension between these ideas raises the issue of who or what dictates what ‘could not be told,’ as well as what kinds of ‘small details’ were considered inappropriate for publication. Attending to the revisions that Gaskell and her husband William made to the first edition manuscript of the *Life* goes some way in telling us about what forms of expression were socially acceptable for the female biographer.

This chapter will consider the revisions that Gaskell made in apprehension of ‘the Hornet’s nest;’ particularly those relating to the parts of the memoir that dealt with people still living at the time of publication (such as Brontë’s experiences at Cowan Bridge school), revisions that mitigate Brontë’s representation in response to charges of coarseness against her, and those that tempered the memoir’s commentary on female authorship. Firstly, I will discuss the methodology involved in discerning who is responsible for a text that is collaboratively revised. Then I go on to explore how Gaskell’s style of editing responds to pressures involved with the act of life writing in the mid-nineteenth-century. Thirdly, I argue that Gaskell responds to these pressures by working collaboratively with her husband William Gaskell when revising the memoir’s narrative tone, which negotiates ‘painful truths,’ by strategically fluctuating between authority and ambiguity. I explore how this strategy influences the way that the biography deals with real-life material; especially portraits of those who were still living at the time of publication. Finally, I analyse the manuscript revisions to demonstrate how Gaskell manipulates multiple voices to temper the position on female authorship that emerges from her portrait of Brontë. I argue that these multiple
voices allow Gaskell to control the distance and sympathy between the narrator and subject and thus contrast two distinct models of female authorship.

Linda Peterson’s argument that Gaskell overcomes Brontë’s coarseness in order to incorporate her into a ‘community of exemplary women authors’ recognises the ways in which Gaskell establishes a model of female authorship but underplays Gaskell’s ambivalence towards certain fictional styles and expression. Alternatively, Amanda J. Collins argues that Gaskell’s ‘caretaking’ mission within the biography is laced with ‘rivalry, ambivalence, and literary authority’. Revisions trace Gaskell’s growing ambivalence, or ‘rivalry,’ towards her subject because her socially-centred authorship differed from Brontë’s relatively introspective or cathartic prose. It is the tensions between these two modes of authorship - and Gaskell’s attempt to squeeze Brontë into a more normative ideal of femininity - that are registered on the manuscript’s pages during revision.

In a letter to her publisher, George Smith, Gaskell described her opinion about how the biography ‘ought to be done; distinct and delicate and thoroughly well’. The alliterative pairing seems almost paradoxical and this sense of contrast leads to inconsistencies in Gaskell’s attitude towards her subject, which is reflected in the different critical stances on her intentions. Critics are divided when it comes to Gaskell’s attitude towards Brontë and how it plays out in the biography. For example, Pauline Nestor has described the memoir as ‘an act of

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112 *Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 360.
friendship,’ whereas Deirdre D’Albertis’ seminal article argued that it is ‘a
disguised form of literary competition’.113 Indeed, the ambivalent nature of
Gaskell’s portrait lends itself to multiple readings; its content can, to some extent,
be moulded to suit the proclivities of each critic. Recently, more readings are
embracing the memoir’s duality. Collins identifies ‘a public strategy’ within
Gaskell’s ‘trope of sentimental friendship’; Peterson discerns the conflicting traits
of ‘bonding and competition, attraction and repulsion’.114 Instead of trying to
describe Gaskell’s project as one thing or another, this chapter embraces the
inconsistencies produced by revision because this in itself can tell us about the
experience of female authorship and the factors that influence meaning-
production. Gaskell’s inconsistencies raise questions about what her own attitudes
towards authorship are - should women expose and comment on their own
domestic position within their fiction or should fiction, as she mentions in the
Life, be solely for the ‘use and service of others’?115 Revisions can identify points
of pressure and offer a way of reading how Gaskell negotiated the competing
demands within female authorship.

The Manuscript: Multiple Hands, Collaborative Voices

There is no fair copy of the Life: the manuscript held in the John Rylands Library,
Manchester is the only pre-publication witness (apart from proofs that no longer
exist). The reason for this is that the publishers Smith, Elder were in a hurry to get

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113 Pauline Nestor, ‘Female Friendships in Mid-Victorian England: New Patterns and
Possibilities,’ Literature and History, 17.1 (2008): 36-47 (41).; Deirdre D’Albertis,
“‘Bookmaking out of the Remains of the Dead’: Elizabeth Gaskell’s The Life of Charlotte
114 Collins, p. 144.; Peterson, p. 902.
115 Life, ed. by Jay, p. 259.
the biography out as soon as possible after Brontë’s death; rather cynically, they wanted to capitalise on the public’s remaining interest in the author. Gaskell was therefore in a rush to gather, curate and edit her material, which means that the manuscript of the biography is relatively messy when compared to those of her novels. This collision of circumstances is fortunate for those interested in the genesis of a text because it means that we can trace the development of the biography’s first edition (and, in some cases, the third)\textsuperscript{116} from the very beginning of its composition almost up to publication.

The manuscript consists of 665 pages of original composition and 21 additional pages of revisions for the third edition, which are bound in two volumes. There are 4488 revisions spanning the two volumes of original manuscript (excluding the third edition revisions). In the case of this manuscript, a revision is classed as each instance of crossing out or substitution; this could therefore refer to one word or an entire phrase. In the following sentence, for example, there are two revisions.

The town of Keighley station is on this line of railway, about a quarter of a mile distant from the town of the same name.\textsuperscript{117}

Additionally, there are the two pages of notes and advice that Gaskell wrote when she began composition, including the famous directive, ‘Get as many anecdotes as possible, if you love your reader and want to be read, get anecdotes!’\textsuperscript{118} This collection therefore gives a sense of the biography’s transmission from planning to post-publication, which can be classified into stages: planning, original composition, authorial revision, William Gaskell’s revision, George Smith’s

\textsuperscript{116} There are some revisions for the third edition bound up with the three volumes of manuscript in the John Rylands library but many of them are missing.
\textsuperscript{117} MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 1\textsuperscript{r}.
\textsuperscript{118} ibid., vol. 2, fol. 681\textsuperscript{r}.
reading, publication, and revision for the third edition. Despite these clear categories of text development, the composition and revision of the *Life* did not progress consecutively between each stage. The reason why becomes clear in Gaskell’s correspondence with her friend Anna Jameson in 1856, where she describes a struggle with a task that, unlike her fiction, was more complicated to manage:

> It is a most difficult undertaking. I have constantly to rewrite parts in consequence of gaining some fresh intelligence, which intelligence ought to have found place at some earlier period than the time I am then writing about.\(^{119}\)

The anti-linear style of writing can be seen on the manuscript, which is abnormally messy for Gaskell. The fact that there is no fair-copy of the *Life* means that text is frequently cancelled and moved to later chapters, note paper is often inserted and there are two reminders which signify information still to come:

> [Piece to come in here about Jane Eyre as soon as I have heard from Mr. Smith.]\(^{120}\)

> [“A short account of the last days of dear Anne Brontë” *sic*]\(^{121}\)

Revision is thus a necessary part of the development of the *Life*. It not only enables Gaskell to temper her position towards the memoir’s social commentary but is a practical reality associated with the ‘difficulty’ of gathering ‘fresh intelligence’ about a real-life subject.

Given the nature of the *Life*’s composition straight onto the manuscript, and the visibility of the text’s development, Gaskell was aware that the text’s genesis would be visible. Her correspondence with George Smith shows that she was aware of how, far from being a personal, authorial task, revisions were a

\(^{119}\) *Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 407.

\(^{120}\) MS *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, vol. 2, fol. 347r.

\(^{121}\) ibid., fol. 419r.
permanent part of the manuscript’s physicality, which could be read by her publishers and others (such as the compositors). She was unhappy for George Smith to read the manuscript in an ‘unfinished’ state, for example, and she later goes on to suggest that she wished to conceal revised text from manuscript-readers:

If I had no delicacy of feeling, I have at least a consciousness of what would \or ought to\ interest readers, and I should have certainly scored out, so that no one could have read it through my marks all that related to anyone’s appearance, style of living &c, in whose character as indicated by these things the public were not directly interested.

Gaskell’s comments suggest that her cautiousness about the readability of revisions could be owing to her clear sense of propriety regarding the public/private divide. This is further supported by the hierarchy of revision: some text may be simply scored through while other text is heavily deleted. Thanks to the natural dating of the manuscript, the ink covering many heavy revisions has faded, making them at least partially readable. Not only this but the recent digitisation of the manuscript has helped to lift the appearance of the ink, aiding the manuscript-reader when deciphering cancelled text. Snippets of original composition are suggestive of what Gaskell (or her husband) wanted to remove.

Gaskell’s husband William was the primary reader she envisioned when revising the text. She trusted his collaboration when editing the work, so that he could correct her self-confessedly ‘bad’ English and take the role of a filter, who reflected the values of a nineteenth-century readership. His revisions can be discriminated into three types: those related to grammar, style and cancellations. All of them have a social element; grammatical and stylistic revisions address

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122 Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p. 429.
123 ibid., p. 429.
124 ibid., p. 387.
Gaskell’s educational limitations, or simply her limited time to spend on spelling and punctuation, and cancellations of particular passages are suggestive of what William considered was socially acceptable to publish. The practical aspects of William’s editing are evident on the manuscript, such as where Gaskell compares Maria Brontë’s letters to Patrick Brontë to one of Juliet’s speeches in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (William’s revisions will be shown in bold throughout):

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But
Yet trust me, gentleman, I’ll prove more true
n
That those that have more cunning to be strange.125
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While these are very small amendments made by William, they articulate potentially gendered limitations that affect Gaskell’s accuracy. William could devote the time to perform his editorial duty with rigour whereas, as Angus Easson points out, Gaskell was writing under ‘pressure’ due to the desire to get the biography published quickly and balance her domestic responsibilities.126

Of the revisions, 1578 can be confidently attributed to William Gaskell and 953 can be attributed to Elizabeth Gaskell; these revisions consist of words that have been substituted by either of the authors and are completed in their own hands. Thus, William is responsible for c. 35% of all revisions and Elizabeth is responsible for c. 21%. The rest of the revisions cannot be confidently attributed to one author. Nevertheless, of the substitutions that have been made by both authors, William is responsible for 62% and Elizabeth is responsible for 38%; this proportion is characteristic of the dynamic between the two hands that extends throughout the manuscript. Figure 2 illustrates the involvement of each editor.

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125 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 38r.
126 Easson, p. xxiv.
throughout the text. Tracking revisions in this way shows that, while Gaskell is responsible for the majority of the composition, it is William’s hand that is most prevalent in the text’s revision and its preparation for publication.

Not only this, on folio 16 Gaskell has left a large gap for William to write in an anecdote (a famous one relating to a Haworth family’s nonchalant reaction when their son is bleeding to death). Because of this, Easson describes the text as ‘a work of collaboration both in its many contributors and in the copying and correction done in it physically by Gaskell’s husband William and by her daughters Marianne and Meta’. Marianne and Meta’s engagement with the text is strictly limited to copying but William’s input goes further than revision; he actively engages in the development of the text and preparing it for publication. In a letter to her publisher on 26 December 1856, Gaskell herself describes revision as a collaborative task, ‘I should take out what was undesirable to have published when I read it over with Mr Gaskell’. Nevertheless, the fact that she allowed her husband to physically revise text complicates discussions of authorial intention. William’s revisions may enhance Gaskell’s intentions but he may also have different ideas about ‘what was undesirable to have published’, which becomes evident in his reworking of particularly controversial passages (such as one in which Gaskell describes Emily Brontë as ‘selfish’).

An analysis of the first folio alone illustrates the dynamic between these two hands. There are eighteen revisions, including cancellations. Five of the revisions can be attributed to Gaskell because they provide substitutions in her own hand or,

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127 See Figure 1.
129 Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, p. 429.
130 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 229r.
Fig. 2 Revisions in Volume 1 & 2 of MS Life of Charlotte Brontë
more frequently, occur during composition. These compositional revisions can be claimed as such because they occur on the same line of the text and suggest that Gaskell changed her mind about her expression while she was writing.

William is responsible for twice as many revisions. The majority of them are minor grammatical amendments that do not affect the overall meaning of the text; they can be attributed to him because he substitutes words such as ‘which’ for Gaskell’s ‘that’, or ‘greater’ for Gaskell’s ‘more’, and restructuring her sentences in his own hand. Of the three major revisions, which either construct or disrupt meaning, Gaskell is responsible for two and William is responsible for one. Gaskell’s revisions make her description of the physical developments of the village more specific:

\begin{quote}
and narrow  
large panes and 

The quaint ^ shop^ ing windows of fifty years ago, are giving way to ^ plate-glass. \textit{sic}\textsuperscript{131}
\end{quote}

Gaskell introduces a dichotomy between ‘narrow’ and ‘large,’ which emphasises Keighley’s progression from relative poverty to a flourishing market town and the subsequent expansion of consumerism. The revisions are therefore classed as major because they affect and, in this case, enhance, the text’s meaning. William’s revision also enriches Gaskell’s meaning by making her language more accurate:

\begin{quote}
The number of inhabitants and the importance of Keighley have been \textit{twenty years} 
greatly increased during the last \textit{quarter of the century}\textsuperscript{132}
\end{quote}

Though it may seem a small and even pedantic amendment, William enables Gaskell to construct a specific, factually correct context surrounding the emerging

\textsuperscript{131} MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 1r.

\textsuperscript{132} ibid., fol. 1r.
‘market for worsted manufacturers’ that legitimises her biography from the outset.¹³³

Across the manuscript as a whole, William’s revisions are so extensive that they will be considered as part of the revision-narrative of this text. The manuscript presents a new perspective on how William’s editorial choices supported and encouraged Gaskell when publishing. Indeed, at times it appears that William edits out his authorial involvement with the biography. Even when he does compose his own anecdote, it is mediated through Gaskell’s voice in the published text, ‘I may relate a little adventure which happened to my husband’.¹³⁴ On the manuscript, Gaskell originally frames the story in terms of whether William will give her permission to relate it, ‘I may perhaps be allowed to tell’.¹³⁵ He deletes this phrase and places the autonomy onto Gaskell when providing the reader with examples of ‘roughness’ in Haworth. Later, when quoting from a letter written by Brontë, William’s edits revise Gaskell’s explanation of a reference to her youngest daughter:

\[
\text{which she makes her my}
\]

\[
\text{The reference \^ at the end of this letter is to our youngest little girl,}
\]

\[
\text{between whom and Miss Brontë a strong mutual attraction existed.¹³⁶}
\]

Not only does he make Gaskell’s reference to the letter more specific, the shift from the plural possessive ‘our’ to the singular ‘my’ reworks the collaborative tone. William’s involvement in the narrative voice is no longer implicit; he crafts the text so that Gaskell is the only one sharing this experience, which demonstrates how he is committed to developing Gaskell’s independent authorial

¹³³ MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 1r.
¹³⁴ Life, ed. by Jay, p. 21.
¹³⁵ MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 15r.
¹³⁶ ibid., vol. 2, , fol. 557r.
voice. As the examples I have briefly discussed demonstrate, there are three modes of revision present in the manuscript: those which appear to be social, concerned with style or that deal with female authorship. All of these revisions contribute to a socially-oriented model of female authorship that is empowered by collaboration.

Owing to the circumstances of its composition and its existence in two distinct editions, the process of the Life’s development is key to its meaning. Critics therefore contest which is the authoritative edition. In her Penguin edition, Elisabeth Jay favours the First Edition ‘that initially caused such a furore’ as her copy-text.\textsuperscript{137} On the other hand, Easson’s Oxford University Press edition champions the Third Edition not only because ‘its revisions are authorial’ but as an aesthetic choice as well: ‘[s]he also deleted or softened some of her rhetorical excesses […] and by so doing opened out the possibility of debate, even while standing by her own beliefs and interpretations’,\textsuperscript{138} Presumably it is, as Jay points out, ‘more taste than pursuit of objectivity’ that inclines readers to one version.\textsuperscript{139} Nevertheless, by emphasising the importance of textual variants, both editors recognise the interdependence of one edition upon the other - indeed the Third Edition would lose its significance as an edition if the first had not caused such a ‘furore’. In the following, I will refer to the First Edition for primary use; it is the text that most closely resembles the manuscript and therefore Gaskell’s intentions when publishing. William Gaskell’s contributions enhance the meaning of the First Edition, which is arguably more authoritative than the Third Edition where Gaskell’s intentions were influenced by those who encouraged revisions. Patrick

\textsuperscript{138} Easson, p. xxvii.
\textsuperscript{139} Jay, p. xxxviii.
Brontë, Carus Wilson and Branwell Brontë’s mistress directly influenced the way events and characters are portrayed within the Third Edition of the text.

There are some differences between the manuscript and the First Edition, which has led some editors to dismiss it as a reliable copy-text. A small section of the end of the first volume is missing on the manuscript, for example, as well as the corrected proof copies, which most likely contain authorial amendments that do not exist on the manuscript but made it into the First Edition. Despite this, the manuscript is significant to the development of the biography because it physically demonstrates the ways that ‘consciousness’ of Gaskell’s social position and gender have affected the text’s development.

‘a most difficult thing’: Writing and Revising Biography

Revisions highlight the pressure-points of the narrative and draw attention to language at certain points on the manuscript. They also transform the manuscript into a social signifier, particularly in terms of the memoir’s commentary on female authorship. Gaskell suggests, for example, that her role as biographer included dictating the limits of which information was deemed appropriate for the public. Exposing Brontë’s personal circumstances and mediating the scandalous reception of her novels were very delicate tasks, which were influenced by social codes regarding the act of biography and further complicated by the subject’s gender.

Gaskell’s letters confirm that her social consciousness is produced from a collision of pressures relating to gender and genre: the relatively constricting subject of life writing, compared with fiction, caused her concern not only about the biography’s reception but its style and tone. In a letter to her friend Harriet
Andersen, she compares the relative freedom of writing fiction with the difficulty of writing an accurate biography:

And I never did write a biography, and I don’t exactly know how to set about it; you see you have to be accurate and keep to facts; a most difficult thing for a writer of fiction. And then the style too! that is a bugbear. It must be grander and more correct, I am afraid. But in all matters of style and accuracy I have a capital helper in my husband, who has an admirable knowledge of language, and an almost fastidious taste as to style. I sometimes tell him he does not read books for the subject but for the style.140

The fiction writer not only had ‘to be accurate and keep to facts’ because of the constraints of writing an account of a real-life person, there was a social expectation to be ‘accurate’ and not engage in gossip or rumour about the subject.141 The relationship between ‘style and accuracy’ is therefore a significant one in the memoir to distinguish it from gossip pieces and this influences the way that Gaskell composes and revises the text. To assume a ‘grander and more correct’ style may also not just pertain to the authority of the narrative voice - which will be explored in the following section - but implies that the biographer must adhere to a superior moral code than the writer of fiction. To be ‘grander’ suggests that the biographer must assert a more authoritative tone than a fictional narrator; likewise, there is more pressure on that voice not to leave room for

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141 Indeed Gaskell eventually conceded to the task of writing to temper malicious gossip circulating about Brontë in *Sharpe’s London Magazine*, which conflated the author with her revolutionary protagonist Jane Eyre. Ironically, some critics have suggested that Gaskell herself was part-author of the *Sharpe’s London Magazine* article, entitled “A Few Words About Jane Eyre”. Hall, S. C. (ed.), ‘A Few Words About “Jane Eyre”,’ *Sharpe’s London Magazine*, 6 (Jan 1855), 339-342 in Proquest <www.proquest.com> [accessed November 10th 2019]. Dennis Robinson explains the similarities between a letter Gaskell wrote to her friend Catherine Winkworth and the obituary. He argues against Richard Gilbertson, however, who first suggested the connection, and suggests that Catherine Winkworth was the culprit. Dennis Robinson, ‘Elizabeth Gaskell and “A Few Words About ‘Jane Eyre”’, *Notes and Queries*, 23.9 (1976): 396-8. In any case, Gaskell is certainly connected to the infamous piece, which is not surprising considering how she loved to gossip. In a letter to publisher George Smith, she described gossip as ‘a woman’s pleasure’. *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 424.
incorrect perceptions of the subject. Turning to the discourse surrounding biography in the nineteenth-century can shed some light on what produced Gaskell’s self-awareness when writing and revising the text.

Published in 1883, Margaret Oliphant’s ‘The Ethics of Biography’ captures a longstanding debate in the nineteenth-century about the morality of writing about the dead. Her approach can be characterised by her use of the phrase ‘De mortuis nil nisi bonum’ (‘Of the dead, say nothing but good’). Oliphant criticises the Victorian ‘age’ of biography, which ‘scarcely permits a man to be cold in his grave before it turns forth from his old drawers and wardrobes such relics of his living personality as he may have left there […] as characteristic of his soul’. For Oliphant, the problem with the Victorian biographer was that they seemed to (literally) air the subject’s dirty laundry soon after they were dead without gaining the perspective of history. This, she argued, would influence their character into posterity for the worse; a fate which was not met by ‘the saints and heroes’ of the past. Such was Oliphant’s disapproving attitude towards Thomas Moore’s Letters and Journals of Lord Byron (1830), a memoir that followed the traditional life and letters structure, which she felt was premature and should have dealt with his scandalous life after ‘the fumes of passion had died away’. For some

143 Oliphant, p. 77.
144 ibid., p. 77.
145 The two volume life and letters formula was a common life writing style of great men at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, which is exemplified by James Boswell’s Life of Johnson (1791) and Robert Southey’s Life of Nelson (1831). The genre allowed the biographer to establish the achievements of the subject, as well as give the reader a taste of their personal life through the use of letters. In the case of the Life, Gaskell had to be cautious when using Brontë’s letters because her widower, Arthur Bell Nichols, was unhappy with their publication: ‘Mr Nichols has a strong objection to letters being printed at all; and wished to have all her letters (to Miss Nussey & every one else) burned.’ Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p. 405.
146 Oliphant, p. 91.
readers, the scandalous private life of the artist made it difficult to discuss their public achievements.

Readers had a similar thirst for information about Brontë’s personal circumstances and so the *Life* was published promptly after its subject’s death; Gaskell’s aim was to satisfy her readers and respect moral codes by ‘honour[ing] her as a woman, separate from her character of authoress’.\(^\text{147}\) Indeed, Juliette Atkinson considers Moore’s memoir to have been a model for Gaskell in the way that ‘it both manipulated and shook off scandal’.\(^\text{148}\) Similarly, Gaskell’s focus on the ‘woman’ was an attempt to mitigate Brontë’s reception as an authoress; Gaskell’s strategy presents Brontë’s professional persona as an alter-ego or ‘character’ which she could both assume and distance herself from.

Carol Hanbery Mackay has also explained how gender changed the terms of female life writing. To divulge private information about a woman ‘skirt[ed] the edge of propriety by setting in motion the interplay between public and private’.\(^\text{149}\) Indeed, using Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Personal Recollections* (1841) as an example, Hanbery Mackay suggests that women engaged in writing their own autobiographies to avoid the possibility of others intruding into their personal lives. At the beginning of her autobiography, Tonna expresses a similar sentiment to Oliphant when she criticises the biographer’s tendency to access private journals or letters. Mackay also points out that, for a female biographer, the text can become a kind of ‘surrogate autobiography,’ which may explain

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\(^\text{147}\) *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 347.


Gaskell’s defensive gestures in relation to her own position on female authorship. The *Life* thus becomes ‘a defence of her own bifurcated experience as private woman and public author’. Gaskell did not simply write the biography out of ‘duty’ to her friend, then, but had an additional motive to legitimise her own existence as a professional writer. In light of this, we can read revisions of the *Life* as not only an attempt to defend and temper the reception of its subject, but to establish a parallel defence of its author.

‘distinct and delicate’: The Narrative Strategy of the *Life*

Gaskell’s dual agenda within the biography becomes central to the narrative strategy in the *Life*, which uses multiple voices to mitigate the social pressures of ‘duty’ as well as Gaskell’s own relationship to the text. For example, we can witness it in the relationship between Gaskell’s famous ‘parallel currents’ model of female authorship, which mythologised the doubleness of the mid-Victorian woman writer, and the alternating strategy and tone of the voice which narrates these two ‘currents’. Consequently, Gaskell’s ‘distinct and delicate’ approach portrays the tension between that which ‘could not be told’ and ‘painful truths’. On the one hand, she domesticates Brontë and presents her as a dutiful daughter: ‘no distaste, no suffering ever made her shrink from any course which she believed it her duty to engage in’. On the other hand, she describes Brontë’s authorial role in terms of a more subversive alter-ego: ‘[a]mong these papers there is a list of her words, which I copy, as a curious proof of how early the rage for

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150 Hanbery Mackay, p. 165.
151 ibid., p. 166.
153 ibid., p. 10.
literary composition had seized upon her'. In the first instance, the paralleling of ‘no distaste, no suffering’ makes the domestic obstacles between Brontë and her authorship appear more dramatic; it also equates ‘distaste’ with ‘suffering,’ which suggests that the subject is a martyr who does not distinguish between the desire not to do something and involuntary pain or anguish. Most importantly, it is Gaskell’s narrative voice which provides this portrait of female ‘duty’. There is a marked contrast in the tone of the second description, which characterises ‘literary composition’ in violent terms that ‘seize[s]’ Brontë; she is still an unwilling victim but this time of ‘rage’. Notably, Gaskell denies ownership of this image and attributes it to ‘a list of her words’ (my emphasis) that she has copied for the reader. Gaskell somewhat conceals the interpretive gesture made by the narrative voice by suggesting that the evidence itself is ‘curious’ and, in doing so, distances her own experience of authorship from the one presented here.

Gaskell’s shifting narrative tone can therefore be defined as ‘distinct and delicate,’ which is also a pertinent description of the portrait of Brontë. To be ‘distinct’ is to be visibly individual or unique; to be delicate is to be that which is pleasing, dainty and temperate. It is a delicate voice that deals with difficult subjects. Gaskell’s preoccupation with style, and her husband’s extensive attention to it, is directly related to how we understand this portrait because the tone influences the treatment of material and the ways in which the reader interprets it. What results is a conflicting portrait of Brontë that is at once an unconventional woman and archetype of what would be categorised as the Victorian ‘angel in the house’ in Coventry Patmore’s 1854 narrative poem of the same name.

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154 Life, ed. by Jay, p. 62.
Working collaboratively, the two editors (Gaskell and William) establish the ‘distinct and delicate’ style of the narrative voice by mixing an authoritative voice with an ambiguous one. Gaskell’s agenda may be interpreted differently throughout criticism of her work but the manuscript reveals it to be part of a calculated social strategy for dealing with the content of Brontë’s life. It is within this ‘grand’ and ‘correct’ voice that Gaskell can disguise her ambivalence towards Brontë by making the reader complicit in this interpretation, which is presented as a fact of the subject’s life. Alternatively, the ways that ambiguity and non-narration are framed influence the reader’s interpretation to suit the narrative’s agenda as it changes throughout the text. It is therefore interesting that William’s revisions of style are so extensive; his ‘fastidious’ taste is registered in his equally meticulous editing, especially when painting a picture of the rough climate in which Brontë was raised.

This section will explore how William contributed to the memoir’s ‘grand’ tone by making stylistic revisions; the ways in which he mitigated the social impact of the biography by helping Gaskell to shift between a ‘distinct’ and ‘delicate’ tone will be analysed in the final two sections of this chapter. Witnessing the extent of William’s contributions to the style of the text in the following examples makes it easier to comprehend how he supported Gaskell in developing duality as a narrative strategy. In any case, William’s ‘help’ with language and style may enhance Gaskell’s authorial intention but complicates the extent to which her collaborative mode of authorship allows her to be her ‘own woman’ (to use Brontë’s words). Jenny Uglow claims that Gaskell’s style in the Life is ‘convention-ally yet subversively ‘feminine’’ - this claim takes on a
different meaning if we consider to what extent this style has been influenced by 
William’s editorial decisions.\textsuperscript{155}

William’s revisions to style, however, do not necessarily censor the original text. On folio 4, for example, William’s revisions contribute to the aesthetic effect Gaskell tried to create when describing the oppressive atmosphere of the moors surrounding Haworth. He emphasises the mental and emotional effect of the landscape, which supports her defence of Brontë’s relatively eccentric life and fiction:

> All round the horizon there is this same line of sinuous wave-like hills; the scoops into which they fall only revealing other hills beyond, of similar colour and shape crowned with wild bleak moors, grand from the feeling of being in a pent-up space bounded by some monotonous and illimitable barrier, according to the mood of mind in which the spectator may be.\textsuperscript{156}

Gaskell’s cancellations in this passage are easy to discriminate. They occur during composition and show how she adjusts her language to achieve the feeling of being enclosed, or ‘pent-up’, in the landscape. William’s restructuring of this image serves to emphasise not only the bleakness of the moors but the unhealthy, adverse environment inhabited by Brontë. William’s moors are not oppressive but they are shapes which remove their observer from the physical world and instead ‘suggest’ the ‘idea’ of ‘oppressive desolation’ - a noun phrase that transforms the physically dark and barren moors into a visual and mental experience. The passage therefore shifts away from the materiality of the landscape and instead places emphasis on the latter part of the sentence, where Gaskell transforms the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{155} Jenny Uglow, \textit{Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories} (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 391.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{156} MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 4r.}
\end{footnotes}
physical experience into one which occurs within the ‘mood of mind in which the spectator may be’. Though it may have been Gaskell’s decision to focus on the private life of Brontë’s relationships and character, rather than public achievement, the revision of the manuscript in this way physically demonstrates William contributing to this internalised style of life writing.\textsuperscript{157} It is these tropes that make Uglow argue that the biography is ‘convention-ally and subversively feminine’ but William’s revisions show that this femininity is not only based on Gaskell’s own experiences of being a female author, but also a perceived version of this experience imagined by William.

Gaskell manipulates her confessional, apprehensive tone elsewhere in chapter two to protect her own moral and artistic integrity in divulging information about her subject. She describes the physical and moral isolation of the inhabitants of the West Riding:

Still there are those remaining of this class - dwellers in the lonely houses far away in the upland districts - even at the present day, who sufficiently indicate what strange eccentricity - what wild strength of will - nay, even what unnatural power of crime was fostered by a mode of living in which a man seldom met his fellows, and where public opinion was only a distant and inarticulate echo of some clearer voice sounding behind the sweeping horizon.\textsuperscript{158}

The auxesis used to describe the eccentricity of the local people allows Gaskell to soften her description of the landscape and its inhabitants by building up to it. This makes her tone more confessional, as if she is describing the ‘unnatural power of crime’ both as a duty and against her will, rather than struggling with the appropriate words to express it. Gaskell further emphasises the brutality and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[157] In a letter to Ellen Nussey in 1855, Gaskell stated that her biography of Brontë would focus on her private life as ‘the friend, the daughter, the sister, the wife’ (original emphasis, \textit{Letters of Mrs Gaskell}, p. 375).
\item[158] \textit{Life}, ed. by Jay, p. 23.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
isolation of Brontë’s surrounding neighbourhood by changing the word ‘inhabitants’ to ‘natives’ during composition on folio 10. By making this change, she highlights the relationship between the people and their surroundings - instead of people inhabiting the land, they form and are formed by the landscape. William foregrounds this further: when she refers to ‘their Norse ancestry’, he adds the adjective ‘rough’ to highlight how the moral character of the people is ingrained in their tradition and landscape. This moves them even further from the civility of ‘Cathedral towns’ that seem to lie geographically and morally distant from them. Revision allows Gaskell to extend this gesture and place Brontë outside of a standard discourse of femininity, which explains the coarse aspects of her fiction.

William’s stylistic revisions contribute to presenting Brontë as a victim of her unconventional environment but he also displaces blame from women themselves and onto the society in which they are educated. Take, for example, his treatment of Aunt Branwell:

Miss Branwell was, I believe, a kindly and conscientious woman, with a good deal of character, but with the somewhat narrow ideas natural to one spent nearly all her life in one place. William’s replacement introduces a pessimism that is not depicted by Gaskell’s original phrasing. Instead of ‘living’ her life, Aunt Branwell has ‘spent’ it, suggesting a passive, even wasted life rather than an active and content one. Replacing ‘one’ with ‘the same’ reinforces the monotony of the unmarried Victorian woman confined to a limited provincial space. This is in keeping with

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159 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 10r.
160 ibid., fol. 11r.
161 ibid., fol. 59r.
Aunt Branwell’s ‘distaste’ for the ‘bleak ungenial country and climate’ of Haworth as well as her relatively silent role within the biography.\textsuperscript{162} What seems to be a minute change on the surface actually provides a subtle feminist commentary about Aunt Branwell’s passivity - an experience of many unmarried women in her position during the mid-nineteenth century. The pessimistic rephrasing of the sentence does not indicate William’s (or Gaskell’s) advocacy of such a role but implies that the author is sympathetic towards the limited, narrow range of Aunt Branwell’s experience. Thus, Aunt Branwell’s ‘strong prejudices’ can be forgiven; the implicit question is: how could it be otherwise?\textsuperscript{163} While the \textit{Life} asserts typically gendered domestic roles, representing Brontë as a somewhat unconventional archetype of the ‘angel in the house,’ this commentary also exposes - in its crafted subtleties and silences - how female subjectivity can be lost within these confined spaces.

In a further discussion of Aunt Branwell and her attitude towards the ‘ungenial’ atmosphere of Haworth, both editors revise the text. Incidentally, this leads to difficulty in transcribing the text. One deletion is illegible; it is tempting to guess at what this word could be from the surrounding sentence, but this could prove misleading. Not only this, one of Gaskell’s substitutions has evidently been written in at a later time. The change in the appearance of the ink is useful in showing that the other authorial substitutions were most likely made during (or very soon after) the time of initial composition. The ink used for the later substitution seems to be the same as that used by William Gaskell, suggesting that it was made during an additional authorial revision process. It is easy for this

\textsuperscript{162} \textit{Life}, ed. by Jay, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{163} ibid., p. 49.
insight to be lost in the transcription; this change will therefore be shown in a
different font:

plants
From Penzance where flowers which we in the north call greenhouse-
in great profusion, & even in the winter
flowers grow ^ without any shelter ^ and in great profusion, - where the
if so disposed
soft warm climate allows the inhabitants, ^ to live pretty constantly in the
open air if they are so disposed - it was a great change for a lady
dwell take up her abode
considerably past forty to come and live in a place where neither flowers,
flourish
nor vegetables would grow, and where you might hunt far and wide for a
might be hunted for far & wide
tree of even moderate dimensions ^; where the snow lay long and late on
stretching bleakly and barely far up from
the moors, that surrounded the dwelling which was henceforward to be
often, on autumnal or winter nights seemed
her home; and where ^ the four winds of heaven [illegible word] to meet
and rage together, - tearing round the house as if they were wild beasts
striving to find an entrance.164

Gaskell’s revisions tend to re-work her own composition. She rearranges phrases
in sentences, replaces words that have been repeated (i.e. ‘flowers’ for ‘plants’) and
twice adds additional detail to the description of the atmosphere. William also
reworks the syntax of one sentence, rearranging the placement of phrases so that
the sentence flows more logically. The rest of his revisions change Gaskell’s
language and, at one point, he contributes to the aesthetic effect of the passage by
adding more detail. Gaskell describes the snow as ‘surrounding’ the Parsonage;
William suggests that the house is imprisoned by the snow and emphasises the
adverse conditions of the ‘bleak’ atmosphere. This example demonstrates a
dynamic that has wider implications for the text: it could be argued that William
contributes not only to style but to the act of mythologising Brontë as an isolated
figure who is a product of the wild and harsh landscape that she inhabits.

164 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 59r.
‘great difficulty’: Revision and Social Consciousness

Gaskell uses the word ‘difficult,’ in its various forms, multiple times when describing her experience of writing the *Life*; either in her letters or self-reflexively within the published text. I have so far explained how this difficulty resulted from her position as a fiction writer working within an unfamiliar genre. There were also social pressures of mixing this genre with prescriptions on gender. I have demonstrated how William Gaskell’s collaborative editing on the manuscript went far beyond a social filter, but shaped the style of the narrative voice. This section will focus more on the ‘distinct and delicate’ strategy within the tone of that voice, particularly in relation to the social revisions that deal with real-life people and events. The subsequent section extends this analysis to consider how collaborative revisions mitigate Gaskell’s commentary on female authorship.

Collins argues that ‘writing for Gaskell is ostensibly a social act,’ which characterises how the narration of the *Life* gives the impression that she is fulfilling a duty towards Brontë and her family. The manuscript provides a different perspective of how this ‘social act’ permeates the text down to its very language and punctuation. There were real social pressures associated with writing the memoir, which Gaskell described as a ‘serious task’. Firstly, the fact that some members of Brontë’s family and colleagues were still alive initially deterred her from publishing; she originally claimed that she would only do so if

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165 For example, Gaskell’s use of ‘difficulty’ in the subheading of this section is taken from her introduction of the Cowan Bridge material (*Life*, ed. by Jay, p. 51).
166 Collins, p. 149.
167 *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 349.
‘no one is living whom such a publication would hurt’. Gaskell’s ‘social act’ is loaded with meaning: the memoir is not just about redeeming Brontë’s character but mediating the social impact of her own allegations against others. Additionally, there is a clear social dimension to the way that Gaskell frames her subject to mitigate its impact upon her own authorial personality.

Gaskell’s ‘consciousness’ (to use Brontë’s word) of social pressures when dealing with her ‘living’ subjects is both textually and physically registered on the manuscript-page. For example chapter four, volume one - which deals with Brontë’s experience at Cowan Bridge school - is one of the shortest in the memoir, coming short of just sixteen folios in length, but is one of the most heavily revised. Evidence of Gaskell’s social consciousness is not just limited to heavy revision but is also present within the published text: the interchangeability, for example, between the ‘distinct and delicate’ narrative voice often favours ambiguity and reader interpretation as a means to temper Gaskell’s relationship to the text’s content. She also uses indirect address to narrate her struggle when introducing Cowan Bridge, making the reader aware of her omissions or distortions. Gabriele Helms argues that the presence of indirect address in the Life ‘suggests an alliance of narrator and fictive reader’. The ‘fictive reader’ signifies the types of prejudices through which the author anticipates her text will be received but Gaskell attempts to moderate this by allowing them to observe her act of narration:

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168 Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p. 345.
I am now entering on a part of my subject which I find [illegible word] relating to it. Difficulty in treating, because it seems as if the evidence on each side is so conflicting that it was almost impossible to arrive at the truth. And yet, as Miss Brontë more than once said to me, that she should not have written of Lowood what she did in Jane Eyre, of Lowood if she had thought that the place would have been so immediately identified she told me that she in her account of the Institution but what had not written a word that was not true, of the Cowan’s Bridge Institution at the time when she knew it; but she also said that she had not considered every particular thought it necessary, in a work of fiction, to state impartiality that might be required in a court of justice nor to seek out motives, and make allowances for human failings, as she might have done, if dispassionately analyzing the conduct of those who had the superintendence of the Institution. I believe she herself would have been glad of an opportunity of correcting the over-strong impression which was made upon the public mind by her vivid picture, in Jane Eyre; though even she, suffering her whole life long, both in heart and body, from the consequences of what happened there, might have been apt, to the last, to take her impression belief in facts for the very facts themselves; her absolute conception of truth for the truth.170

Gaskell alludes to the process of narration in a way that seems to metaphorically lay out the ‘conflicting’ evidence for the reader but actually disguises her ambivalence towards Brontë’s representation of the school in Jane Eyre. William’s edits allow her to do so by injecting authority into her voice. He reworks the first sentence to amend Gaskell’s speculative, or delicate, tone about the ‘evidence’ she has against Carus Wilson and makes it more distinct - if the evidence itself ‘seems’ to suggest something and is open to interpretation, then implicitly there could be fictional aspects to Gaskell’s account. Instead, it ‘seems’

170 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 61r.
impossible for Gaskell to arrive at the truth, which to some extent protects her from making an incorrect judgement. William’s further revision of this passage is largely superficial; he restructures sentences and changes some phrases but they are minor revisions that do not have a great impact upon the content or the aesthetic of the passage itself. The fact that he felt the need to attend to this part of the text more than others, making it the second most revised chapter in the whole text (Figure 2), nevertheless suggests that the discussion of Cowan Bridge was a pressure point within the memoir.

Although William ensures that the start of the passage is framed in unambiguous terms, it is significant that the latter part - which relates to Brontë’s ‘impression’ of her experience at the school - does not provide a distinct position and is presented as open for debate. Gaskell acknowledges Brontë’s authorship as something that should be contingent upon the way it will be received by the ‘public mind’. Even so, it is Gaskell’s opinion that Brontë would have ‘corrected’ her representation given the chance. She gives her own response to Brontë’s ‘over-strong impression’, according to her own standards of femininity, which is to ‘correct’ it. Instead of providing evidence of Brontë’s version of events, the desire to ‘correct’ the text is framed as something that she ‘believes’ Brontë wished to do. This gesture allows Gaskell to defend her own authorial reputation and her depiction of the truth because she is aware that, as Helms notes, there is an ‘autobiographical dimension’ to the text.  

One of her few revisions to the passage makes it clear that Brontë’s experience was not just an ‘impression’ but a ‘deep belief’; the change emphasises Brontë’s almost stubborn desire to represent the ‘absolute truth’ (which here seems to hold echoes of the ‘severe Truth’}

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Helms, p. 345.
discussed in her letter to Gaskell), which contrasts with Gaskell’s desire to placate those readers of *Jane Eyre* who recognise Lowood as Cowan Bridge with comparatively ‘dispassionate’ prose.

Interestingly, the printers misread the phrase ‘human failings’ in the manuscript and it was printed as ‘human feelings’ in the First Edition, which suggests that Gaskell did not check the proofs against the manuscript; this was rectified in the Third Edition.172 The change was small but significant. In the First Edition, the purpose of Brontë’s explosive (or coarse) prose in *Jane Eyre* appears as a resentful move to harm the feelings of those who she encountered at Cowan Bridge; in the manuscript and the Third edition, the fault lies with those characters themselves, whose ‘failings’ caused Brontë to suffer. According to Gaskell, Brontë’s fiction is a product of her ‘suffering,’ which consumes both her ‘heart and body.’ This is an example of ‘Gaskell’s trope of catharsis’, which Collins argues is used to function as a ‘contrast’ between Gaskell’s social act of authorship and Brontë’s ‘solipsistic, introspective’ prose.173 On the manuscript, her ambivalent response to Brontë’s representation of Cowan Bridge - which, she implies, is a hasty or rash product of suffering that should be corrected - intentionally creates distance between the author and her subject.

William’s efforts to make Gaskell’s prose more direct extend throughout her discussion of Cowan Bridge. The relationship between Brontë’s experience at the school and her description of Lowood in *Jane Eyre* was a frequent topic of debate after her death. The death of Maria and Elizabeth Brontë have long been considered to result from poor conditions at the school and Brontë’s depiction of

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173 Collins, p. 149.
Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* has been cited as a portrait of her sister Maria. Based on the fraught circumstances of this period of Brontë’s life - and the fact that Carus Wilson was still alive - it is not surprising that, when describing the unhealthy atmosphere of the building, Gaskell’s speculative tone is revised:

altogether, smells would linger about the house, and damp cling to it I should imagine.

The editor who made this revision is not clear - there is no substitution made and styles of crossing out can not be consistently classified as Gaskell’s or William’s. Given the prevalence of William’s revisions upon this folio, however, it is likely that he is responsible for it, which potentially provides another example of how he makes her delicate tone more direct. The poor conditions of the school are no longer a product of Gaskell’s imagination but a fact. Gaskell’s self-confessed aim to ‘libel’ Carus Wilson suggests that this revision was influenced by the social intention acting upon the text at this controversial point. It was necessary for Gaskell to avoid speculation and state the facts so that any allegations against Gaskell’s blending of fact and fiction within the biography could be avoided upon publication.

Due to its frequent reworking, certain passages within the chapter present interpretive issues when they are transcribed. The following passage has been extensively revised by William Gaskell. Further information is signified on the recto of folio 135, for example, and appears on the verso. In order to preserve the

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175 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 64r.
176 Despite Gaskell’s later feelings of victimisation resulting from her treatment of certain people within the memoir, she actually seemed to get carried away with her negative portraits of certain people when she asked George Smith rather complacently, ‘Do you mind the law of libel— I have three people I want to libel…’ *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 418.
readability of the text at this point, I have signified the additional information by indenting it. There are also eight instances in this passage of illegible words. Their presence - or rather absence - present a challenge when transcribing. As we have seen earlier, however, illegible revisions are illegible for a reason - Gaskell intentionally concealed aspects of the text behind her ‘marks’, indicating the social intentions that act upon the revision of this passage. Additionally, William Gaskell writes over Gaskell’s original composition twice. He makes a minor revision from ‘forms’ to ‘formed’ and later changes ‘purposes’ to ‘purpose’. The extent of William’s handwriting on the manuscript-page is a symbolic image of Gaskell’s encouragement of her husband’s command over the text but is lost in the transcription:

\[\text{the school there} \]
\[\text{I can hardly understand how Cowan’s Bridge School came to be so unhealthy, the air round about is so sweet and thyme-scented, when I} \]
\[\text{visited it last summer.} ^{\text{\small\text{(see other side)}}} \]
\[\text{at this day, any one knows that the site of} \]
\[\text{But ^ the site for a building intended for numbers should be} \]
\[\text{chosen with far greater care than that for a private house from} \]
\[\text{owing to the tendency to illness, both infectious & otherwise,} \]
\[\text{produced \underline{the}} \]
\[\text{by a congregation of people in close proximity.}^{177} \]
\[\text{The house is still remaining that \underline{formed} part of that occupied by the school. It is as long, low bow-windowed cottage, now divided into two} \]
\[\text{Leck between dwellings}\]
\[\text{It stands facing the stream, } ^{\text{\small\text{(four illegible words) }}} \text{which and it intervenes a space, about seventy yards deep,} \]
\[\text{seventy [two illegible words], [two illegible words] yards deep.} \]
\[\text{[illegible word] this building [illegible word] to the stream, at right angles with}\]

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177 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 63v.
connected with the stream what now remains of the school house, there was formerly a bobbin mill
where real wooden reels were made out of the [illegible] which grow profusely in such ground as that surrounding Cowan’s bridge. Mr Wilson adapted this bobbin mill for the purposes of the school; there were school-rooms on the lower floor, and dormitories on the incomplete word] upper.\textsuperscript{178}

William’s revisions once more make Gaskell’s descriptions of Cowan Bridge more accurate and distinct. He revises the descriptions of the landscape several times, presumably to legitimise her allegations about Carus Wilson’s neglect of the children’s health. From the numerous revisions, it seems imperative that descriptions of the landscape are factually accurate. It has to be noted that he does not suppress Gaskell’s allegations but provides help to refine them. This can be observed in the final sentence where William revises Wilson’s adaptions of the bobbin mill from a selfless act, for the benefit of plural ‘purposes’ of the school, to ‘his’ own selfish and singular ‘purpose’. Thus, Gaskell’s later claim that it was ‘his spiritual pride, his love of power’ that encouraged Wilson to open the school is part of a more consistent narrative because it takes root earlier on in the chapter.\textsuperscript{179}

So far in the discussions of Cowan Bridge from chapter four, volume one we have witnessed William’s exercise in making Gaskell’s more precise and distinct, which strengthens the ‘evidence’ that she presents against Carus Wilson. This is not the case throughout the entire chapter, however, and certain topics are shrouded in more ambiguous terms. For example, William edits Gaskell’s use of

\textsuperscript{178} MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 63r.
\textsuperscript{179} ibid., vol. 1, fol. 72r.
an anecdote about the sisters’ experience of the school to place emphasis on the 
role of reader interpretation in gleaning its meaning:

among other statements even worse
One of these fellow-pupils of Charlotte and Maria Brontë’s, \^ tells me this
statement is perfectly true and tells me worse that I will not repeat.\textsuperscript{180}

Gaskell’s original composition directly addresses the act of narration and the 
omissions she chooses to make. William’s subtle change of the sentence structure 
emphasises the negativity of the anecdote instead, rather than explicitly refusing 
to provide the reader with more detail. He changes the dynamic between the 
authorial voice and reader from one where information is actively withheld to one 
of disclosure. The reader is encouraged to imagine the ‘statements even worse’ 
rather than being prevented from accessing the information altogether because the 
author does not want to repeat it. The change therefore disguises the way that 
Gaskell censors aspects of the truth to present the version of Brontë she wishes to 
create.

There are also several passages relating to Gaskell’s and Wilson’s conflicting 
religious beliefs that are cancelled. When discussing the ‘low fever’ that broke out 
at Cowan Bridge, which contributed to Maria Brontë’s death, a cancellation 
indicates that Gaskell ruminated on how Wilson’s lack of care towards the 
children were symptomatic of his religious failings:\textsuperscript{181}

The Great god decreed that while our spirits are clothed in flesh the wants 
of our bodies must be attended to, and no attempt to fix strict the\textsuperscript{182}

The fact that Gaskell thought it necessary to remove this text - and, considering 
the sentence is unfinished, appeared to do so during composition - is part of a

\textsuperscript{180} MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 68\textsuperscript{r}.
\textsuperscript{181} ibid., vol. 1, fol. 70\textsuperscript{r}.
\textsuperscript{182} ibid., vol. 1, fol. 70\textsuperscript{r}.
pattern of revisions that mediate the treatment of religious beliefs. This could be because she did not want to invite criticism of her own Unitarian beliefs. The narrator’s voice takes on the tone of a preacher, suggesting that Gaskell felt her position to be superior to Wilson’s. Her tone moves closely towards demonstrating her personal convictions, rather than Brontë’s, and so the deletion distances her from the text. Likewise, in another instance, Gaskell begins to frame her criticism of Carus Wilson in religious terms and writes ‘When Faith disregards’, but cancels the beginning of the sentence before she completes it. These cancellations are suggestive of both the restrictions on what Gaskell could discuss in the biography and her desire to separate herself from criticism associated with controversial aspects of Brontë’s life and her own religious beliefs. If her representation of Wilson appears inconsistent that is because it is. Her attempts to present the truth about Brontë - as it is perceived through her letters and literary works - is often at odds with her attempt to temper Gaskell’s own ‘autobiographical’ attachment to the text.

It is therefore noteworthy that the editors revert to an ambiguous tone when they discuss the relationship between Brontë’s literary works and her experiences with Carus Wilson. Instead of explicitly denouncing Wilson, Gaskell suggests that it is Brontë’s rendering of her experience that has caused irretrievable harm to his reputation. Gaskell acknowledges Wilson’s failings, but William reworks the passage in order to leave his character and behaviour open to interpretation:

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183 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 65c.
She saw but one side, and that the unfavourable one of Mr. Wilson; but many of those who knew him, assure me of the wonderful fidelity with his spiritual pride, his love of power, his ignorance of human nature & consequent want of tenderness which the disagreeable qualities are represented; while, the delineation of these obliterated it seems obliterated, as it were, nearly at the same time, they regret that it should seem to have obliterated as it were all that was noble and conscientious. In his faithful service to his Master His idea of religion and mine would differ widely but I believe him to have been truly faithful to those which he held.

Gaskell does not rework the final sentence at all during composition and the close proximity of William’s revisions to the cancellation suggest that William is responsible for cancelling the phrase ‘His idea of religion and mine’. The deletion contributes to the tone of ambiguity adopted in the memoir when discussing Brontë’s authorship. Instead of delivering her own judgement upon Wilson, which is sympathetically tied up with her own Unitarian beliefs, Gaskell leaves it to the reader to decide whether they judge the ‘unfavourable side’ presented by Brontë or the ‘noble and conscientious’ one perceived by ‘many others’. Brontë is portrayed as a victim to the ‘one side’ of Wilson, and therefore not able to provide a balanced account of what she endured. The revisions here thus transform our understanding of Gaskell’s narrative against Carus Wilson - while she explains the circumstances surrounding Brontë’s experience at Cowan Bridge, we can observe her original ambivalence towards Brontë’s account and her sympathy towards Wilson’s ‘faithful’ religious beliefs.

Ambiguous forms of narration extend beyond Gaskell’s discussion of Carus Wilson to the treatment of Brontë’s family members. How to present the anecdotes that Gaskell discovered about Patrick Brontë, for example, was a
concern not simply because he was still alive but because of how this information might reflect on Gaskell's representation of Charlotte Brontë. These anxieties were not unfounded; chapter three, which discusses Patrick Brontë's parenting style, was one of the most heavily revised chapters in the third edition, mainly because Patrick had highlighted the inaccuracy and unfairness of the anecdotes relating to his treatment of his wife and children. Gaskell's source for the anecdotes, a nurse who had tended Maria Brontë in her last illness, turned out to be unreliable; her abrupt dismissal from the Brontë household meant that she most likely embellished the information she gave out of resentment. The impact of these social intentions, which evidently affect what is published, seems not only to have emerged after the first publication but affected the initial composition and revision of the text. The manuscript suggests that the treatment of Patrick Brontë was already a pressure-point within the narrative - one that was cancelled and substituted in parts by William:

It is true, that he had strong and vehement prejudices, and was obstinate in maintaining them, and that he was not dramatic enough in his perceptions to be aware how miserable others might be in a life that to him was all-points of sufficient. But I do not pretend to be able to harmonise ^ characteristics, and to account for them, and to bring them all into one consistent and intelligible whole. The family with whom I have now to do, shot their roots down deeper than I can [fathom]. I can not measure them; much less is it for me to judge them. I have named these instances of wild the father eccentricity in [Mr. Brontë's] character and intellect, because I hold the knowledge of them to be necessary for a right understanding of his the daughter's life. life of his daughter.\textsuperscript{185}

\textsuperscript{185} MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fols. 50-51r.
It is unclear what the brackets around the words ‘fathom’ and ‘Mr Brontë’s’ indicate here. They could perhaps identify areas of the text that Gaskell wanted her husband to attend to; alternatively, they could be included by William as textual markers and reminders for later. The text was composed and sent off to the publisher as and when each section was completed. The brackets could therefore be used to inform Gaskell not to repeat the same ‘mistakes’ in other parts of the text. Nevertheless, this is speculation; the marks at least draw the manuscript-reader’s attention to certain parts of the text and serve as remnants of the practical circumstances of the text’s composition.

William’s substitution of the word ‘penetrate’ for ‘fathom’ indicates how ambiguity functions subtly within the narrative voice. While similar in meaning, the word ‘fathom’ suggests that Elizabeth had engaged in some form of interpretation or imaginative exercise in relation to the Brontë story. It is a word that, ironically, describes exactly the work that Gaskell did as a biographer; measuring, interpreting, attempting to construct and arrange the puzzle pieces of Brontë’s life. The change to ‘penetrate’, while subtle, instead suggests that Gaskell was working with material that was already there and was forming judgements that were already presented to her. She narrates the ‘eccentric’, violent or coarse aspects of Brontë’s life because she is confronted with them, not because they are a part of the narrative she has created as author.

Similarly, William depersonalises the passage by removing ‘Mr Brontë’s’ name and using the more formal title of ‘the father’. The change may be to clarify Patrick’s relationship to Brontë but also makes the reference to someone who was still alive at the time of publication less specific. This may also explain the removal of the adjective ‘wild’ and ‘character and intellect.’ The deleted text
suggests that there is something innately obscure about Brontë’s father rather than his occasional behaviour. Despite Gaskell’s move to temper her portrait of Patrick before publication, she assigns the characters into a family structure to imply that these eccentricities had a significant impact upon the character-formation of Brontë. Gaskell’s attempt to water-down her extreme (and probably untrue) portrait of Patrick Brontë is counteracted by her textual intentions to present Brontë’s unconventional lifestyle. The subtle changes in language contribute to her discourse of ambiguity that transmits this counter-narrative to the reader.

Coarseness operates explicitly within the *Life* when overtly controversial topics, such as Branwell Brontë’s affair with his employer, are heavily revised and reworked. It is not simply Gaskell’s attempt to temper coarseness but distance herself from it altogether that creates ambivalence:

At this time, the *gifted* young man seemed to have his fate in his own *gifts*; hands; He was full of noble impulses, as well as of extraordinary *powers*; not accustomed to resist temptation, it is true, from any higher motion than strong family affection, but showing so much power of attachment to all about him that they took pleasure in believing that, after a time, he would “right himself,” and have “sown his wild oats,” and that they should have pride and delight in the use he would then make of his splendid talent.¹⁸⁶

The deletion of a direct quotation where the sisters suggest Branwell would improve his behaviour after he had “‘sown his wild oats’” emphasises its coarseness for the manuscript-reader. It suggests that Brontë was aware of - and even sanctioned - Branwell’s promiscuous behaviour as a means to become calmer and more mature, which undermines the innocent image that Gaskell constructs of Brontë elsewhere. Thus the social reality of the manuscript’s

¹⁸⁶ MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 184r.
revision does signify historical modes of female expression and self-censorship; it is not difficult to understand why Gaskell chose to remove the phrase.

There are many further revisions relating to Branwell’s infamous affair with his married employer. Most of them are illegible, which hints at how Gaskell wanted to prevent her publishers from reading through her ‘marks’ in the case of controversial information. She uses indirect address again as a means of non-narration to temper her discussion of the material, ‘The story must be told. If I could, I would have avoided it’. Gaskell makes it clear that she would rather not narrate Branwell Brontë’s story, suggesting that her awareness of the text’s reception overpowers her self-confessed intentions to give a true account of Brontë’s life. However, this case is symptomatic of how revisions do not necessarily substitute ambiguous language for what is non-narrated but the narrative voice draws attention to the very act of non-narration. The reader is still encouraged to speculate about what has been taken out, but Gaskell’s apology for her omissions places the emphasis on the very fact that potentially shocking or upsetting information has been withheld rather than questioning what that information is.

She goes on to claim that she only includes the story because it is ‘so well known’ that it is ‘public property’. The gesture may appear to make her an unreliable biographer but actually allows her to fortify her own authorial identity as a woman conscious of (and unwilling narrator of) the coarse ‘gnawing life-long misery - the degrading habits’ she discusses. It has a double purpose, to explain away some of the coarse aspects of Brontë’s fiction as a product of the ‘long-

187 Life, ed. by Jay, p. 204.
188 ibid., p. 204.
189 ibid., p. 204.
enduring agony’ she suffered at the hands of her brother and to hold Brontë’s life according to what Helms describes as the ‘biographer-persona’s own standards and expectations’.\textsuperscript{190} By applying these multiple modes of narration (and sometimes non-narration), Gaskell can distance herself from an alternative mode of female authorship (sometimes to the point that she would rather not discuss it) and disguise her own self-validation.

Non-narration becomes the means through which Gaskell narrates her subject when she finds it difficult to do so, which extends to her treatment of Charlotte Brontë. Content which seemingly cannot be mitigated by her ‘delicate’ narrative voice is subject to non-narration, a phrase that describes how she negotiates her omission of the unnarratable by gesturing to its absence. For example, she drew extensively from Brontë’s (heavily edited) letters because ‘her language, where it can be used, is so powerful & living, that it would be a shame not to express everything that can be, in her own words.’\textsuperscript{191} Quoting from Brontë’s correspondence was also a way for Gaskell to say something without having to say it herself. Brontë’s ‘living’ and ‘powerful’ writing implicitly has a life and responsibility of its own. Nevertheless, Gaskell does frame letters and anecdotes in such a way that influences their interpretation. This is demonstrated by her self-reflexive explanation of the process through which she constructs the biography:

I will insert two or three of Miss Brontë’s letters to her publishers, in order to show how timidly the idea of success was received by one so unaccustomed to adopt a sanguine view of any subject in which she was individually concerned.\textsuperscript{192}

\textsuperscript{190} Helms, p. 347.
\textsuperscript{191} Letters of Mrs Gaskell, pp. 404-5.
\textsuperscript{192} Life, ed. by Jay, p. 247.
There are two notable things about this sentence. Firstly, Gaskell explains her composition almost as it is happening. The reader feels privy to the biographical act and Gaskell’s seeming transparency means that they can put their faith in her to provide a true account of Brontë’s life. Secondly, by allowing Brontë’s letters to ‘show’ an aspect of her character, Gaskell absolves herself of responsibility when representing them. Her framing of the letter suggests that the reader should use it to interpret Brontë’s timid and modest nature. Alternatively, the ‘two or three’ (which turns out to be six) letters present Brontë as an author who enthusiastically tracks her novel’s progress within reviews. Rather than being timid, she comes across as level-headed and confident that Jane Eyre ‘ought to weather a gust of unfavourable wind,’ which particularly contrasts to Gaskell’s later statement that Brontë regretted writing parts of it.\textsuperscript{193} Gaskell’s framing of the letters appears to be a misinterpretation but is actually part of her strategy. The next section will explore how revisions contribute to this strategy, which fluctuates between narrative modes to mediate Gaskell’s relationship to her subject.

\textit{‘parallel currents’: Female Authorship and Duality}

The stylistic and social revisions that have been discussed so far are all underpinned by a key issue within the \textit{Life}: female authorial identity. Gaskell herself placed duality at the centre of female authorship in her own splitting of Brontë’s life into ‘parallel currents’: ‘her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman.’\textsuperscript{194} This section will examine how revisions temper

\textsuperscript{193} \textit{Life}, ed. by Jay, p. 248.
\textsuperscript{194} ibid., p. 259.
the presentation of Brontë’s life so that Gaskell could domesticate her according to social and biographical standards of the nineteenth-century. It will develop Meghan Burke Hattaway’s claim that the *Life* seeks to ‘reinscribe the public author into the domestic space’ by looking at the way the markings on the manuscript literally contribute to this discourse.\(^{195}\) It will also re-examine the idea of ‘parallel currents’ to suggest that Gaskell constructs a defence of her own authorship within the biography by placing it parallel with her portrait of Brontë. It emerges that Gaskell’s ‘distinct and delicate’ approach is not just reflected in the stylistic fluctuations of the narrative voice. These alternate approaches also reflect Gaskell’s shifting attitude towards her subject; she can be delicate (which, incidentally, is the opposite of ‘coarse’) when dealing with some of the allegations about Brontë’s life and fiction; she can also make her own position on authorship or morality appear distinct from Brontë’s as a means to defend her own position as a female author.

Helms has identified the potential for readers to forge interpretive connections between biographer and subject in her work on life writing. She surveys a body of criticism that traces Gaskell’s self-serving ambition to legitimise the Victorian female author and concludes that, in the *Life*, there is a significant ‘autobiographical dimension of the text’.\(^{196}\) Helms explains that ‘[t]he selection and organisation of material must be done by the biographer, whose perception of the subject is bound to be subjective - a constructed model of the other person. Thus, biographers’ choices have to be autobiographically determined.’\(^{197}\) The

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\(^{195}\) Meghan Burke Hattaway, “‘Such a strong wish for wings”: The *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Fallen Angels*,’ *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 42 (2014): 671-690 (677).

\(^{196}\) Helms, p. 345.

\(^{197}\) ibid., p. 343.
revision-narrative that exists upon the manuscript provides an additional perspective to the ‘biographers’ choices’. Firstly, revisions are revealing about what elements of Brontë’s life and expression were considered coarse by the editor. Secondly, Gaskell clearly did not want her own writing to be tainted and open to criticism. Gaskell herself acknowledged that, after publication, her written memorial would connect her authorship with Brontë’s; in other words, reviews would have ‘a double power to wound’ both biographer and subject.\(^{198}\)

Even though Gaskell had created multiple female protagonists (including the scandalous Ruth) she had not addressed female artistic development in a way that had the potential to reflect on her own professional experience. The themes that the memoir deals with - authorship, female representation and subjectivity - thus made her more self-conscious when writing. Gaskell did revise her fictional texts but there were different social pressures involved in editing the biography. Josie Billington’s work on the manuscript of *Wives and Daughters* argues that Gaskell’s conscious language choices when editing her fictional texts signify that she close-read her own work when revising it.\(^{199}\) She draws attention to ‘seemingly lax revision[s]’ to demonstrate how ‘second thoughts are often less corrections as such than a paradoxically deliberate and careful blurring of her first thoughts.’\(^{200}\)

These revisions, however minute, demonstrably enable Gaskell to refine localised imagery within her texts. This ‘blurring’ can also be witnessed in the manuscript of the *Life*, but substitutions and deletions have an additional social purpose to make Gaskell’s language more ambiguous or direct at different points within the narrative.

\(^{198}\) *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 412.


\(^{200}\) ibid., p. 227.
The way that Gaskell’s ‘distinct and delicate’ approach to the narrative voice extends towards her treatment of Brontë has influenced the reception of the memoir. The differing opinions espoused by critics about the way Brontë is presented also lends itself to this coupling; for example, Collins argues that Gaskell’s Brontë is a ‘pathologized’ victim (suggesting ‘delicate’ femininity), whereas Hattaway describes her more transgressively (and ‘distinctly’) as ‘a woman tragically “falling”’ and in need of the ‘re recuperative discourse of domesticity’.\textsuperscript{201} Manuscript revisions reflect Gaskell’s attempt to downplay aspects of Brontë’s life in order to emphasise the stereotypically feminine aspects of her nature. Accordingly, Gaskell’s construction of the neat ‘parallel currents’ binary is unrealistic when confronted with the evidence of Brontë’s overlapping domestic, intellectual and romantic lives. The manuscript-reader can observe Gaskell’s growing ambivalence towards her subject within the way the text is edited. Attending to the manuscript further complicates Peterson’s argument that the \textit{Life} is ‘as concerned with representations of the mid-Victorian woman writer as much as with the biography of a single author,’ which needs to be refined; the rest of this chapter explores how the \textit{Life} is concerned with bolstering a specifically social model of female authorship. In the case of the \textit{Life}, this social mode includes collaborative editing and a self-reflexive type of hedging to temper the author’s relationship to her subject. For example, in instances where Gaskell was unable to hide unconventional aspects of Brontë’s character, the narrative voice becomes more distant so that she can relinquish any responsibility for alternative ‘currents’ of Brontë’s identity.

\textsuperscript{201} Collins, p. 145; Hattaway, p. 672.
Gaskell’s attempt to negotiate the inconsistencies raised by the parallel narratives of Brontë’s authorial and domestic lives suggests that her use of the ‘distinct and delicate’ binary is not appropriate for dealing with her subject. This is something the biographer acknowledges when she claims the different aspects of Brontë’s life are ‘not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled’.202 For example, Gaskell made a lot of words illegible during revision, which indicates her decision to keep certain passages about Brontë private. While the inability to read illegible passages is frustrating for the manuscript-reader, the pattern of illegibility produces an additional narrative that complicates the relationship between Gaskell’s subject and her own authorial status. John Bryant’s idea of the ‘revision text’ is useful here because it allows us to trace Gaskell’s changing intentions throughout composition, and how this affects the aesthetic of the text itself.203

Gaskell’s struggle with introducing her subject at the start of chapter two initiates the ‘readable paths’ of revision that articulate the complex relationship between her subject and her own experience of authorship:

right
For a full understanding
of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Brontë
With the view of giving an account of [three illegible words] it has204

It is difficult to read the cancelled portions of text from this part of manuscript-page. The illegible words have not just been crossed through once but struck through several times, hinting that there was an additional effort to cancel what

203 Bryant, p. 1044.
204 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 10r.
was written. Nevertheless, the location of the illegible words suggests that Gaskell’s struggle was concerned with which type of narrative she would offer. It is not just William who reworks this sentence, as is evident from his heavy revision, but Gaskell herself found it difficult to introduce her subject during the composition process. It is telling, for example, that she differentiates between an ‘account’ and an ‘understanding’ of Brontë’s life. An ‘account’ suggests a relatively formal statement of facts, which certainly does not describe the interpretive measures that the author takes when forming her narrative. Gaskell’s version of ‘writing truly’ was, implicitly, not just about presenting the facts and evidence to the reader but socially reforming Brontë’s character by domesticating her for the reader.

Whatever the illegible words say, it is clear that she then decided to give a ‘life’ of her subject, perhaps bearing in mind the letter she wrote to George Smith where she describes how she wanted Charlotte Brontë to be known ‘separate from her character of authoress’. She urges the reader to gain an ‘understanding’ of Brontë, which demonstrates not only how she wishes them to sympathise with Brontë’s life but that she suggests there is a part of her character which requires their compassion. By emphasising the reality of Brontë’s ‘life’, ‘Currer Bell’ becomes the fictive alter-ego, a ‘character’, through which Gaskell can mitigate Brontë’s professional career. Her choice of terminology here maintains the

205 This manuscript-page was submitted to the Multi-Spectral Imaging team at the John Rylands Library, Manchester. This process can uncover multiple layers of ink, particularly on palimpsestic texts. The page was processed to attempt to (somewhat blasphemously) read beneath Gaskell’s ‘marks’ and access deleted text. However, because Gaskell and William potentially used the same type of ink when editing, these layers cannot be differentiated. This passage is also particularly saturated with ink since it has been crossed out with both a wavy line and straight horizontal lines that ensure it cannot be read through.


207 *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 347.
narrative distance between Brontë’s domestic reality and professional authorship that Gaskell negotiates throughout the memoir. Not only this, Gaskell relies on the potential for multiple meanings or ‘understanding’ to disguise her ambivalence towards certain aspects of Brontë’s character.

Gaskell’s priority is to feminise and domesticate Brontë, a strategy that comes into play when she edits her letters to an extent that their meaning is obscured. In a letter to her close friend Ellen Nussey, Brontë conveys her tendency to think on ‘love and marriage’ but, when she quotes from the letter in the memoir, Gaskell deletes a large section so that the letter contrastingly suggests that Brontë had a firm resolve against the idea altogether:

> Our letters are assuming an odd tone. We write of little else but love and marriage and, verily, I have a sort of presentiment that you will be married before you are many years older. I do not wish you to reciprocate the compliment because I am tolerably well convinced that I shall never marry at all. 208

Gaskell manipulates the tone so that Brontë does not receive her fitness for ‘love and marriage’ as a ‘compliment,’ but rather dismisses it. That Gaskell should edit the letter in this way is, on the surface, confusing. If it was her self-confessed desire that ‘the world’ should ‘honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer’, then surely Brontë’s desire for the domestically-oriented institution of marriage would speak to this end? 209 After all, it was Mrs. Gaskell who marketed herself using her status as wife and mother. The deletion demonstrates Gaskell making a subtle distinction between her own model of femininity - which is tied up with domestic roles and duties - and Brontë’s desire for romance. The fact that she conceals the reality of Brontë’s romantic feelings - and notably her awareness

209 *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 345.
of them - raises the transgressive nature of mid-Victorian female sexuality. This revision is thus an, albeit ambivalent, act of ‘protection’ (to use Hattaway’s term) that displaces any autobiographical connection between Brontë and the romantic encounters within her fiction.\textsuperscript{210} Romance is indeed written out of Brontë’s life - an act that culminates in Gaskell’s infamous concealment of Brontë’s unrequited feelings for her Belgian tutor Constantín Héger. Tellingly, Gaskell did not want to edit The Professor (a novel thought to be based on Brontë’s experience in Brussels and which Gaskell described as ‘disfigured by more coarseness’) or have it posthumously published alongside her biography because it ‘would to a certain degree seem like my sanctioning it’.\textsuperscript{211} Though Gaskell was willing to offer a self-serving level of ‘protection’ to Brontë as part of her act of ‘duty writing,’ she did not want to commit herself to the production of any literature associated with Brontë’s fictional style.\textsuperscript{212}

This is what makes Gaskell’s own convictions about gender and authorship, as well as her intentions towards Brontë, so difficult to pin down. It is clear that she wished to feminise her subject but according to a different standard of femininity based on her own image as maternal protector of both her family and her fictional subjects. Folio 9 supports this complex reading of Gaskell’s gender politics, where a small amendment that she makes after initial composition emphasises the lack of feminine influence in Brontë’s life:

\begin{quote}
But one more of that generation - the last of that nursery of six little children - was yet to follow, before the survivor, the childless and widowed father, found his rest.\textsuperscript{213}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{210} Hattaway, p. 683.
\textsuperscript{211} Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p. 401.
\textsuperscript{212} ibid., p. 412.
\textsuperscript{213} MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 9r.
On the manuscript, the fact that Gaskell describes the Brontë children as ‘motherless’ takes on greater import - it is significant enough for Gaskell to retrace her initial composition and add the detail. The fact that it stands apart from the rest of the sentence emphasises the impact of the children’s domestic position for the manuscript’s reader. Gaskell’s self-professed aim in the *Life* was to recover her subject from charges of ‘coarseness’ by divulging details of her personal life: ‘the more she was known the more people would honour her as a woman’.\(^\text{214}\)

Despite the constant presence of her Aunt Branwell throughout her childhood, Gaskell emphasises here the lack of maternal influence within Brontë’s upbringing, something she echoes later in the biography when she describes how ‘the daughters grew up out of childhood into girlhood bereft, in a singular manner, of all such society as would have been natural to their age, sex, and station.’\(^\text{215}\) It has a dual function, both to generate feelings of pity and sympathy for the Brontë children and also mitigate the impact of Brontë’s controversial fiction by situating her outside of the standard discourse of femininity. It is significant that Brontë is ‘bereft’ of the correct form of ‘society’ rather than simply a motherless child. It suggests what parts of Brontë’s life Gaskell assigns value: she considers her act of ‘duty writing’ as a means to hold Brontë according to her own social standards. The manuscript draws attention to this subtle indicator of Gaskell’s strategy in the *Life* - she complicates Brontë’s gendered and domestic status as part of her narrative strategy to foreground her femininity while disguising her more ambivalent attempt to suggest that that version of femininity is not adequate.

\(^{214}\) *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 347.

\(^{215}\) *Life*, ed. by Jay, p. 44.
Gaskell’s ambivalent act of ‘protection’ witnessed in these two examples foreshadows the tone of her response to Harriet Martineau’s criticism of *Villette*. Martineau, an advocate for women’s rights, criticised the novel because ‘[a]ll the female characters, in all their thoughts and lives, are full of one thing, or are regarded by the reader in the light of that one thought - love.’\(^{216}\) For Martineau, Brontë’s preoccupation with love undermines her feminism. Alternatively, the manuscript shows us that it was the very presence of love that Gaskell found transgressive. In a seemingly inconsistent move, Gaskell goes on to expose Brontë’s impropriety and implicitly forges a connection between love and coarseness, claiming that Brontë’s troubling preoccupation with love ‘went deeper than any merely artistic fault’\(^{217}\). That Gaskell intentionally wanted to suggest that coarseness could be rooted within the more emotive, self-conscious aspects of the text (in this case the portrait of female experience in *Villette*) is confirmed when she finds this a ‘fitting place’ to ‘state how utterly unconscious [Brontë] was of what was, by some, esteemed coarse in her writings.’\(^{218}\) Gaskell’s construction of Brontë’s authorship as ‘unconscious’ through these inconsistent moments of displacement and blame has a political purpose: to excuse those seemingly coarse aspects of the text and to distance coarseness from Gaskell’s own writing, which on the manuscript, presents itself to be a process of decidedly conscious decision-making.

In order to label Brontë’s model of authorship as one which is conceived outside of an awareness of the niceties of social convention, Gaskell suggests that her personal life (one filled with emotional suffering, domestic duties but certainly

\(^{216}\) *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, p. 72.

\(^{217}\) *Life*, ed. by Jay, p. 400.

\(^{218}\) ibid., p. 400.
no romance) overpowers - and thus seeps into - her role as author. It is, in the end, Brontë’s inability to ‘reconcile’ the two roles of ‘author’ and ‘woman’ that results in coarseness within her fiction.\(^{219}\) It is thus that Gaskell can present the fiction as a cathartic outlet for the violent reality of the Brontë sisters’ daily life. She claims that the novels were ‘wrung out of them’ because they were coerced into ‘obeying the stern dictates of their consciences’.\(^{220}\) Gaskell admires the power of Brontë’s work without necessarily wanting to embrace it herself. While this visceral description may seem to be part of a strategy that presents Brontë as a victim and thus ‘protects’ her from blame, the reality of Gaskell’s approach - which is disguised as inconsistency - is more self-serving. Brontë’s status as a victim does not render her free from judgment. In the text, Gaskell asks the reader to withhold judgement, reminding them that ‘[a]s to mistakes, they stand now, - as authors, as well as women, - before the judgment seat of God.’\(^{221}\) Gaskell’s agenda may seem inconsistent at these two points because it probably is. It was only during revision that Gaskell produced the distance between herself and her subject, which at times is at odds with her original composition. Gaskell originally made herself and the reader complicit in the ‘mistakes’ made by the Brontë sisters by adding, ‘and well is it for us all that He is more merciful than some’.\(^{222}\) By removing the sympathetic alignment between author and subject, Gaskell places her own fiction in another ‘parallel current’ and therefore ensures it is not implicated in allegations of coarseness.

\(^{219}\) *Life*, ed. by Jay, p. 259.

\(^{220}\) ibid., p. 259.

\(^{221}\) ibid., p. 260.

\(^{222}\) MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 2, fol. 359r.
While Gaskell’s revisions suggest that she champions a collaborative mode as the moral form of ‘duty writing’, Brontë is ironically not afforded the same level of intentionality and is presented as suffering for her art. The image of accidental genius has thankfully been dispelled by recent feminist criticism of the Brontës; on the manuscript we can see how Gaskell’s authorial decisions contributed to the construction of this myth, which was necessary for her own feminist project. Gaskell produces a letter of Brontë to Ellen Nussey, in which she discusses her response to Sir Walter Scott’s *Kenilworth*. She marvels at the young Charlotte’s perceptive nature but originally expressed how she is more impressed with the quality of her writing and ability to construct an argument:

> **noteworthy**
> Common-place as this extract may seem, it is too the notable ^ on two or three accounts; in the first place, instead of discussing the plot or story, she analyzes the character of Vancey. Moreover, she knowing nothing of the world, both from her youth & her isolated [illegible]tion, has yet been so accustomed to hear “human nature” distrusted, as to [illegible] receive the notion of intense and artful villainy without surprize. And, lastly, the form of expression has already become concentrated and condensed; a quality for which her style was, in after years remarkable and from which, doubtless, arose the idea which Mr Thackeray once entertained that she must be a good natural scholar.

Gaskell explains her choices as biographer to the reader. Additionally, her hedging technique provides an interpretation of the extract in order to influence the meaning that the reader gleans from it. It is ‘noteworthy’ to Gaskell because it demonstrates Brontë’s intuitive sense of character rather than her abilities as a ‘natural scholar’. However, hidden within this explanation is an act of non-

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223 For example, see Sandro Jung’s ‘Currer Bell, Charlotte Brontë and the Construction of Authorial Identity,’ *Brontë Studies*, 39.4 (2014): 292-306 which argues that there is an ‘authorship function’ to Brontë’s conduct in professional circumstances and the construction of an authorial identity within her texts.

224 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fols. 122-3r.
narration. Significantly, the deletion on the manuscript shows that Gaskell’s use of this material is not to illustrate Brontë’s academic prowess but to (rather paradoxically) supplement the narrative in which Brontë’s character and fiction is influenced by the ‘artful villainy’ of those around her. Given the nature of how Gaskell constructs Charlotte’s lack of labour when writing her fiction, the fact that she would want to remove an illusion to Brontë straining over her ‘form of expression’ and tracing its progress is not surprising. ‘[C]oncentrated and condensed’ are not words a reader of the *Life* would recognise as consistent with Gaskell’s portrait of Brontë’s overwrought prose. That a man - and such a prominent one as novelist William Thackeray - should identify the intellectual nature of Brontë’s form of expression and argument would undermine the model of authorship that Gaskell had imposed upon her. The version of Brontë conceived by Thackeray is one whose transgressions were intentional subversions rather than mistakes. To embrace this image would be to dispel the, albeit ambivalent, ‘protection’ which forms such an important part of Gaskell’s agenda within the biography. Her narration therefore shifts the focus away from the professional aspects of Brontë’s character that she considers non-narratable in her own narrative purpose (her deletion changes the meaning of this paragraph to focus on Brontë’s sensitive nature rather than her conscious authorial practice).

There are two models of female authorship in conflict on the manuscript of the *Life*, then: that of catharsis and emotional eruption against that of social duty. Despite this, the theme of ‘consciousness’ is one that plays out in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. For example, while Brontë’s fictional representations are presented as spontaneous products of her suffering, Gaskell writes about her language use as something thoroughly considered. On the surface
she paints an image of a female genius, one that is ‘receptive’ to a higher creative power. This representation has ambivalent consequences, though, which perpetuate the image of Brontë’s masculine or coarse authorial alter-ego, and contrast with the collaborative and contingent mode of authorship present on Gaskell’s manuscript:

Any one who has studied her writings - whether in print, or in her letters - enjoyed the rare privilege of listening to her talk-must ever had the singular felicity to her choice of words. She herself, noticed the singular felicity to her choice of words. She herself, in writing her books, was solicitous on this point. One word was the truthful mirror of her thoughts; no others, however apparently identical in meaning, would do. She had that strong practical regard for the enforced simple holy truth of expression, which Mr Trench has set as a duty too often neglected. She would wait patiently, searching for the right term, until it had presented itself to her. It might be provincial, it might be derived from Latin; so that it was the accurately representative her idea, style she did not mind when it came, but this care makes her writing present the finish of a piece of mosaic. Each component part, however small, has been dropped into the right place. She was receptive so as to learn. She never wrote down a sentence until she was clearly understood what she wanted to say, she had deliberately selected the words, and arranged them in their right order.225

In the text, this passage appears as an admiring account of female genius; the cancelled word ‘receptive’ signifies Gaskell’s construction of Brontë’s authorship as a gift from a higher power. On the manuscript, William’s possession of the passage invites a more ambivalent interpretation: Brontë’s authorial confidence is unattainable for Gaskell because of the social intentions that govern her expression within her own prose but more significantly in the editorship of her

husband. The style of the handwriting and marks that delete text are consistent with William’s. The aesthetic of the manuscript therefore forces the reader to question whether this passage is indeed the ‘truthful mirror’ of Gaskell’s thoughts, or a version of those thoughts to which her husband has contributed. William’s ironic substitution of the phrase ‘identical in meaning’ into Gaskell’s, now illegible, prose indicates how authorship is a collaborative, social gesture for Gaskell; the Life suggests that Brontë’s ‘solicitous’ and ‘deliberate’ style of authorship are to some extent ‘coarse’ or masculine.

Gaskell’s claim that ‘[s]he never wrote down a sentence until she clearly understood what she wanted to say, had deliberately chosen the words’ suggests that Brontë’s experience may influence the subject of her text but, implicitly, she is responsible for the clear and deliberate meaning she creates. While Gaskell paints an admiring portrait of her colleague, she also creates distance between the narrative voice and the subject, which suggests that she is not complicit in this kind of authorship. The ambiguity here does two things simultaneously: it celebrates the power of Brontë’s authorship while, to some extent, condemns her lack of social ‘consciousness’. Gaskell suggests that ‘the simple holy truth of expression’ is not easily attainable for a female author whose language is easily substituted and whose meaning is produced through ambiguity. The revision narrative articulated by the manuscript suggests that Gaskell embraces the ‘luminous cloud’ in the Life - one that is constructed by her own self-editing and her husband’s revision - and in doing so explicitly resists Brontë’s model of female authorship to locate herself within a specifically feminine social discourse.

However, the story is not that simple. In fact, Gaskell seems to toy with the nature of Brontë’s authorship - and whether it is conscious or not - to suit her
purpose as it changes throughout the memoir. Brontë’s struggles with ‘consciousness’ that she describes within her letter to Gaskell are sometimes reframed in the biography, where her authorship is presented as an ‘unconscious’ product of her suffering. This can be witnessed when Gaskell literally uses the word ‘unconscious’ to explain the relationship between Brontë’s life and her fiction. When discussing the similarity between Maria Brontë and the treatment of Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*, Gaskell describes how some readers identified the author from her own childhood experiences:

> when Miss Scatcherd was held up to opprobrium, they also recognised an *unconsciously* avenging sister of the sufferer as the writer of *Jane Eyre*.\(^226\)

Gaskell’s later addition of the adverb ‘unconsciously’ draws attention to how she constructs the trope of catharsis and eruption mentioned by Collins within Brontë’s model of authorship. The revision transforms Brontë from a deliberately vengeful writer with a social agenda to a woman whose suffering taints the outlet of her expression. Her fiction is, implicitly, an accident or even mistake - just like her representation of Cowan Bridge. Here, Gaskell’s authorial intentions are linked to her social intentions to construct a ‘luminous cloud’ between Brontë’s fiction and her authorship. In the case of Brontë, Gaskell equates her life with her fiction not only to remove authorial agency but also to suggest that Brontë’s life experiences were as unconventional - and worthy of sympathy - as that of the characters within her novels.

Brontë has also been equated with her protagonists in scholarship of her work. For example, Ileana Marin reads Brontë’s revisions of *Villette* as a means to temper her biographical attachment to the text, which she claims became clear to

\(^{226}\) MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 68r.
her once she prepared the novel for publication.\textsuperscript{227} Marin suggests that Lucy Snowe becomes an outlet for Brontë to fulfil her personal fantasies and express her growing frustrations about the publishing industry. The autobiographical style and first-person narration of Brontë’s novels does self-reflexively explore female authorship and might lend itself to biographical readings, whether they are critically productive or not. It is not surprising, then, that Gaskell sometimes makes the contrasting decision to distance Brontë from her protagonists, especially since it was her fictional representation of women that led to allegations of coarseness. While this is inconsistent with her approach at other times in the memoir (such as her discussion of Lowood School in \textit{Jane Eyre}), it seems necessary to suit Gaskell’s redemptive social purpose.

Tellingly, Gaskell creates distance between Brontë and Lucy Snowe, the protagonist of \textit{Villette}, when dealing with her religious beliefs. Brontë was a staunch Protestant but, during the time she spent in Brussels, was driven to take confession in a Catholic Church during an episode of depression. This episode is reworked in \textit{Villette} during a similar time of depression for its narrator. Brontë herself edited her treatment of the ‘Popish Superstition’ on the manuscript of \textit{Villette}, where she excised parts of her description of the seductiveness of ‘all that was tender and comforting and gentle’ about the Priest that attended Lucy Snowe. She suggestively replaced excised text with the ambiguous claim ‘I know not how it would have ended,’ which implies that Lucy Snowe was susceptible to influence and hints towards what kind of non-narrated influences those were.\textsuperscript{228} By contrast, Gaskell’s treatment of this episode in the biography removes the potential for a

\textsuperscript{227} Marin (2014), pp. 42-53.

\textsuperscript{228} Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 269r.
counter-commentary, which is revealing about her own values concerning female behaviour. Not only this, we have already seen the consequences of Gaskell’s anxiety about discussing religion, which might have invited criticism about her own controversial Unitarianism:

> Her strong feeling against the Roman Catholics was considered as hatred against the Roman Catholics, and yet I imagine that part of it’s vehemence arose from the fact that I [sic] she was aware of her one susceptibility to some of the influences employed by it’s professors, but did not consider that they were such as ought to prevail against the exercise of free will and [sic] reason on the highest points that can concern a human being. Something of her feeling too appears in the following letter.\(^{229}\)

It is unclear whether this deletion is made by Gaskell or William. The fact that William makes a substitution could suggest that he is responsible, but there is no way of knowing. Originally, Gaskell does draw a close parallel between the episode in *Villette* and Brontë’s own ‘susceptibility’ to the ‘influences’ of Catholicism. This information would not only be controversial because of the popular prejudice against Roman Catholicism in most of Britain at the time but, if Brontë was similarly influenced in the same way as Lucy Snowe, then Gaskell implicitly drew a relationship between the unconventional, even coarse, subjectivity of the character and Brontë. Angus Easson brought this deletion to the attention of the Brontë Society in 1974 and observed the multiple ramifications for both Gaskell and Brontë if this passage was published. He also describes its conflation of Brontë with Lucy Snowe and argues that the passage would have exposed the inconsistencies in Gaskell’s portrait, ‘[i]t would hardly do…to suggest that the daughter of an Anglican clergyman could be so tempted.’\(^{230}\) Not only would the passage go against the image of Brontë’s devout (and domestic)

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\(^{229}\) MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 241r.

Protestantism, which Gaskell emphasises as part of her femininity, ‘it would hardly do’ because it would also be socially transgressive for Brontë to be ‘tempted’. According to Easson, ‘there were dangers even in opinion,’ which explains how Gaskell’s awareness of the text’s reception influences its development on the manuscript.

These types of self-censorship also occur in the biography’s treatment of Emily Brontë. Gaskell is consistently critical of Emily Brontë, perhaps because her fiction and behaviour is considered to be the most masculine or ‘coarse’ of all the Brontë sisters. For example, contemporary reviews described how ‘coarseness’ was the ‘prominent characteristic’ of *Wuthering Heights*; it was considered ‘too coarse or disagreeable to be attractive,’ or, to put it simply, ‘coarse and loathsome’. Gaskell therefore mediates Brontë’s relationship to her sister and thus the relationship between their fiction. She does this by constructing a distinct dichotomy, or ‘parallel currents’, in Constantin Héger’s opinion of them as students, which William promptly tempers with substitutions:

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But in M Heger’s she appeared egotistical and selfish, compared to Charlotte, who was always unselfish; (this is M. Héger’s testimony,) and

the Charlotte’s of the elder sister
[two illegible words] her younger sister she
in her anxiety ^ to make [5 x illegible words] contented, ^ allowed her to
Emily her to
^ exercise a kind of unconscious tyranny over her.232
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William’s most striking edit - perhaps in the entire manuscript - is his substitution of ‘exacting’ for Gaskell’s original description of Emily as ‘selfish’. It could be considered as an act of censorship because it mitigates the impact of Gaskell’s

232 MS Life of Charlotte Brontë, vol. 1, fol. 229r.
allegation; it also has textual consequences because it disrupts the clear dichotomy she constructs between Emily who is ‘selfish’ and Charlotte who is ‘unselfish’. William’s revision makes the meaning within this dichotomy more ambiguous; ‘exacting’ focuses on Emily’s demanding and conscientious attitude, whereas to call a woman ‘selfish’ could reflect backwards onto Gaskell herself. What does it mean for a middle-class woman in the nineteenth-century to be ‘selfish’? Particularly for those who prioritise intellectual matters (which Gaskell herself could be accused of as a published author), Gaskell’s use of ‘selfish’ in this context suggests that they sacrifice aspects of their femininity to do so. Emily’s ‘tyranny’ is ‘unconscious’ because it allows Gaskell to maintain an image of Brontë’s passive suffering at the hands of others around her. Implicitly, Emily takes advantage of Charlotte’s maternal attempt to appease her.

The word ‘selfish’ crops up on the manuscript again when Gaskell describes Emily Brontë’s behaviour during her final illness. While it is impossible to identify the editor responsible for its deletion, the fact that it is once again removed from the text suggests that there is something socially suggestive about the word:

She made no complaint; she would not endure questioning; she rejected sympathy and help. Her conduct was the very essence of stern selfishness. [...] Yet they dared not notice what they observed, with pangs of suffering deeper than even exceeding hers.234

Gaskell’s interpretation is removed and the reader is left to decode Emily’s behaviour for themselves. There may be multiple reasons why the deletion is made, all that are tied up with Gaskell’s social ‘consciousness’: Gaskell did not

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233 This connection is reinforced later when Gaskell includes M. Héger’s opinion that Emily ‘should have been a man’ because of her ‘powerful reason’ (Life, ed. by Jay, p. 166).

want to openly offend Patrick Brontë by accusing his daughter of selfishness, or, Gaskell did not want to publicly pass judgement on another woman in such a way. Most importantly, the tone Gaskell takes in her treatment of Emily at these two points explicitly goes against the maternal, ‘protective’ tone that she enacts throughout most of the biography. On the other hand, William’s later substitution more ambiguously hints at this counter-narrative. The word ‘exceeding’ does suggest that Emily lacks the emotion of her sisters but William’s deletion suggests that we cannot psychoanalyse Emily or guess the scale of her emotions. Nevertheless, he places the focus on Charlotte and Anne and, in doing so, suggests that their affections emerge from ‘deeper’ within and are therefore more intense than Emily’s. It paints a relatively superficial portrait of Emily, whose stubbornness and ‘coarse’ intellect outweighs her domestic character and familial relationships. The implication for Charlotte is that she is surrounded - and possibly influenced - by her family, which may explain away some of the coarse aspects of her own fiction.

Gaskell’s attitude towards the Brontë sisters’ fiction therefore comes out in the way that she manipulates this information to suit her own narrative purpose. She certainly did not consider *Wuthering Heights* to be an appropriate text to compare with Charlotte’s own novels, which is clear in further edits of Brontë’s letters. In one letter concerning the re-publication of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, for example, something Brontë was deeply involved in, Gaskell edits out a passage that illustrates not only Brontë’s connection to the novel’s content but her professionalism and knowledge of the publishing industry when dealing with its physical properties:
What the probable quantity of new matter will be, I cannot say exactly, but I think it will not exceed thirty or at the most forty pages. Since it is so inconsiderable, would it not be better to place the title thus: ‘Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey by E. and A. Bell. With a notice of the authors by Currer Bell, and a selection from their literary remains’? 

Brontë’s influence upon the practical aspects of the publication goes against the image of unconscious genius that Gaskell perpetuates in the biography. Her knowledge of the amount of pages taken up by type and her suggestions concerning the title hint that Brontë was experienced in publishing and confident in making business decisions herself. This confidence may have emerged from reading *The Author’s Printing and Publishing Assistant*. Gaskell deletes Brontë’s professional tone from the letter dealing with *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*. It is, implicitly, one thing for Brontë to adopt a kind of faux-professionalism, which contributes to her image of isolated-yet-earnest-authoress, but it goes against Gaskell’s portrait of Brontë for her to write with such confidence and experience about a novel considered ‘loathsome’ by its contemporaries.

Collaborative revisions, substitutions and self-censorships on the manuscript of the *Life* mean that the manuscript-reader can trace how Gaskell’s awareness of the social constraints surrounding the female writer has material consequences for the biography. The field of criticism which explores Gaskell’s intentions in the biography is not always in agreement. Attending to the text’s development suggests that the numerous ways in which the memoir is read are not just characterisations of academic opinions but feature as an important part of the way that female identity is constructed through ‘parallel currents’ in the text. This ambivalence can be read within Gaskell’s attempt to creative a normative female

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community of authors when she uses an extract from *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning as her epigraph:

O my God
Thou hast knowledge, only Thou,
How dreary ’tis for women to sit still
On winter nights by solitary fires
And hear the nations praising them far off.\(^{236}\)

For Gaskell, this passage paints the perfect picture of a domesticated Brontë, imprisoned by social duty to her family on the ‘solitary’ moors of Haworth, isolated from the sanctifying roar of the ‘nations’. Gaskell can concede that this stillness is ‘dreary’ but, according to the *Life*, it is the central condition for providing an apologia for the ‘coarse’ aspects of Brontë’s fiction. However, there is another irony to Gaskell’s use of these lines. As is often the case when quoting poetry, this small snippet does not characterise the whole meaning. As we will see, embedded within *Aurora Leigh*’s künstlerroman is a rebellious counter-narrative that embraces masculine literary power (that same kind of power that Gaskell tries to dismiss). The multiple scansions of the fourth line (solit’ry, so-li-tar-y, fires, fi’res) can either conform to iambic pentameter or fall short of it. Barrett Browning’s message here is pertinent to the treatment of the female author in the *Life*: one can conform to a normative structure of femininity, but the reality will ultimately fall short of its representation. Similarly, inconsistencies result in the *Life* because Brontë’s life does not fit into the model Gaskell attempts to squeeze it into, but it resists, falls short, and exceeds at different points.

Fig. 3 Add MS 43482 ‘Villette’, fol. 21r.
CHAPTER TWO
Villette and the Rhetoric of Silence

Setting out on her lone journey to the fictional port of ‘Boue-Marine,’ in the hope of securing a new life for herself, the autodiegetic narrator of Charlotte Brontë’s Villette looks out upon the ‘wide dream-land’ of Europe and reads into the landscape a biblical symbol of ‘hope’. Immediately after, however, Lucy Snowe interrupts her own narration to reflect on the arbitrariness of this detail and, ultimately, to expose the fictional nature of her autobiography:

Cancel the whole of that, if you please, reader - or rather let it stand, and draw thence a moral - an alliterative, text-hand copy -
“Day-dreams are delusions of the demon.”

Becoming excessively sick, I faltered down into the cabin.238

Lucy exposes the mutable nature of her narrative to the point that she allows the reader to decide whether her apparently incorrect perception of the journey to Europe is necessary. She disrupts the reader’s expectations of an autobiographical narrator who will construct a unitary, authoritative text; a narrator who generally does not appear aware of how memory can mediate their perspective within the narrative. This is symptomatic of how self-reflexivity functions at both a fictional and textual level in Villette. In other words, while Lucy Snowe and Charlotte Brontë should not be conflated, Brontë hints at the issue of composition through her protagonist’s narrative voice. For example, Lucy makes a powerful suggestion that even if the reader ‘pleases’ to optimistically search for the happy part of her story, it is as futile as maxims written out in ‘text-hand copy’. The reader can abide by these ‘alliterative’ maxims in a superficial way, but they ultimately fall short against experience.

238 ibid., p. 57.
The way that *Villette* narrates its own composition illustrates how Armstrong’s poetic theory of ‘double meaning’ can also be applied to prose texts. Brontë regularly seizes moments of self-reflexivity and reader inclusion as an opportunity not only to comment on the extent to which Lucy imprints her subjectivity into the text but also to gesture to the epistemological development of the narrative, including the way revision becomes a fictional means for Lucy to take control of her own identity. There is, in other words, a link between the text’s material development and the way it is narrated. The duality of *Villette* has been recognised by others: Laura E. Ciolkowski describes its narration as ‘a double operation,’ which ‘forges a subject marked by the misbehaviour of Victorian fictions of sex or self.’ Using revisions as textual evidence, this chapter will build on Ciolkowski to demonstrate the ways in which Brontë does not only expose superficial female identity but undermines it by making the reader complicit in Lucy’s alternative identity formation.

Consider how Lucy encourages the reader to physically delete (or ‘cancel’) her text and how the maxims that juxtapose the realism of her story are conceived in terms of large, formal script. Lucy implies that her textual manuscript, which is reworked and revised, would be relatively messy compared to the large, clean handwriting one would find in a Victorian copy-book filled with such maxims for schoolchildren. This textual manuscript that Lucy uses to frame her narrative within *Villette* closely resembles, and even interacts with, the physical status of the fair-copy manuscript Brontë prepared for the text’s publication. Covered with

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241 Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten explain this reference to ‘text-hand copy’ in their edition of *Villette* for Oxford University Press, p. 502.
crossings out and fragmented by excisions, major revisions on the manuscript occur almost exclusively at suggestive parts of the text; most often when Lucy reflects on the act of representing female subjectivity. The material and self-reflexive revisions involved in the text’s development suggest that the novel’s antagonism (its intentional evasions and criticisms of the terms in which mid-Victorian women could express themselves) stems from the female writer deliberately mediating her authorship through the process of editing.

There is, however, an irony to the reader’s active role evoked by Brontë. If we are to take Lucy’s advice and ‘[c]ancel the whole of that’ then the reader is left without her impression of Europe and sense of foreboding. We have nothing but silence. And it is silence because, by introducing the detail and then virtually removing it, Brontë makes us feel and experience the absence of this insight into Lucy’s psyche. Brontë takes advantage of this silence throughout Villette; indeed, it becomes a rhetorical mode and method of revision through which she develops the identity for Lucy that runs counter to social norms within the mid-nineteenth-century. There is a potential within self-reflexivity to evoke the absent and - as becomes the case in Villette - create meaning within that ambiguity.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Gaskell’s collaborative mode of editing produced multiple voices that mitigate biographical material in different ways, which places conflicting portraits of the female author alongside one another. This chapter will draw connections between Brontë’s mode of editing (particularly her use of excision) on the manuscript of Villette and the protagonist’s silences within the novel to argue that silence becomes a productive rhetorical mode through which Lucy Snowe can represent, or hint at, her identity. Both authors use ambiguity to produce meaning but, unlike Gaskell, Brontë seems to embrace the
suggestive or even subversive counter-narratives that are encouraged within silence.

The chapter begins by analysing the physical appearance of the manuscript and its relationship to silences within the novel. Using examples of revisions from the manuscript, this section theorises how silence can be productive for the female protagonist. The second section explores the dialogic relationship between manuscript and text further by analysing Lucy’s self-reflexive narrative style. This affects not only the events she chooses to narrate within her autobiography but informs her commentary on the act of writing itself. The text is a fictional autobiography of its autodiegetic narrator; it is also a text about the act of writing an autobiography. The final two sections will consider what is at stake for the female autobiographical text in *Villette* in light of prescriptions on behaviour and expression. Revision becomes central to Lucy Snowe’s identity formation. Her sense of self, and the way it is inscribed in her subjective reflections, is engendered by her revision of the multiple portraits of women that she examines throughout the novel. The third section demonstrates how Brontë identifies a pattern of artificiality within both the way the female artist is received and portrayed within art. In the final section I will analyse how, in order to counter these artificial portraits, Lucy embraces revision and silence to balance ‘wholesome truths’ about her experience with withholdings or silence. This may have lead to readings that consider her to be evasive,242 but is a necessary part of providing a satisfactory portrait of female experience in the mid-nineteenth-century.

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242 ‘Evasion’ is the term frequently used by critics to describe Snowe’s secretive behaviour; it was arguably established by Gilbert and Gubar in their reading of the novel in their seminal *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
The Manuscript and Text: Productive Silences

Silence is not oppressive for Lucy Snowe nor, as the manuscript of the novel would suggest, for Brontë, but a productive space where meaning is developed. This section will analyse the markings and cuttings on the manuscript to understand how Brontë established meaning within silence during the novel’s revision. Reflecting on the silence she shares with M. Paul (the unconventional and rather unlikeable tutor she falls in love with), Lucy describes it as something tangible with different textures and propensities for interpretation: ‘Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings’. The fact that silence ‘breathes’ for Lucy captures its fertility and signifying quality. Thus, it would be reductive to read Brontë’s excisions on the manuscript of Villette as evidence of self-censorship only. These cuttings, which always occur at moments of emotional or representational pressure within the novel, open up the manuscript-page, creating literal gaps and physical manifestations of silence. Often, as is befitting of the interactive relationship between this novel and its composition, these physical silences on the manuscript result in Lucy’s ambiguities or silences in the novel; either towards other characters or the reader. The appearance of the manuscript and its relation to the aesthetic effect of the novel informs us about how Brontë experimented with the autobiographical form and negotiated her representation of an unconventional female subject.

The manuscript is particularly messy, indicating a struggle with expression. When writing to her life-long friend Ellen Nussey about Villette’s development,
she adopted Nussey’s term and referred to writing it as ‘[m]y labours’ [original emphasis]:

Cornhill is silent too: there has been bitter disappointment there at my having no work ready for this season. Ellen we must not rely upon our fellow-creatures - only on ourselves - and on Him who is above both us and they. My labours as you call them stand in abeyance and I cannot hurry them - I must take my own time - however long that time may be.244

The fact that she personifies her text as ‘labours’ which can autonomously resist her and ‘stand in abeyance’, indicates that composition was not something that could be readily summoned by Brontë. This provides evidence that Elizabeth Gaskell’s interpretation of her as ‘wait[ing] patiently, searching for the right term, until it presented itself to her’ was derived from Brontë’s own account in her correspondence.245 Gaskell’s description of Brontë’s manuscripts as ‘a piece of mosaic,’ striking for their neatness because ‘she never wrote down a sentence until she clearly understood what she wanted to say,’ creates an image of unmediated female creative genius, however; one that does not play out upon the manuscript of *Villette*.246 The physical status of the fair-copy provides an additional perspective on the term ‘labours;’ the ‘deliberateness’ that Gaskell praised actually seems to apply to revisions - and taking text out - rather than slotting sentences into a mosaic. Interestingly Brontë’s use of excision upon the fair copy (physically cutting out words) increased from one instance in *Jane Eyre* to twenty-eight in *Shirley* and seventy-one in *Villette*, suggesting that revision increasingly featured in the development of the text for publication. It is not a coincidence that this increasing pattern of cutting, and silencing, tends towards the novel that was described by Harriet Martineau as ‘the strangest, the most astonishing’ of Brontë’s

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244 *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, iii, p. 57.
246 ibid., p. 234.
novels. Her increasingly extensive editing reflects how the female autobiographical narrative becomes less about confession and self-assertion, as in *Jane Eyre*, and more about authority and self-possession.

My argument that Brontë adopted silence as a rhetoric in the production of meaning within her text - and not simply a specific practice for deleting text - is evidenced by her series of protocols for revising *Villette*: some text is lightly crossed out (a large X is used to delete a small paragraph in one instance), some text is rendered illegible by heavy scoring, sometimes sections are completely cut off the ends of pages and there are seventy-one physical gaps left in the manuscript-pages where she has excised material.

Excisions vary in size; some reveal large portions of text on the following folio, some are only millimetres thick. For example, the last four lines of volume two appear on a small scrap of paper, which has been cut on the top and bottom. There are three more of these ‘scraps,’ one which is bound at the back of the manuscript but actually belongs to the famous passage in which M. Paul describes the astrological affinity he shares with Lucy. The fair-copy is therefore not neat, but suggests that the text has gone through three clear stages of revision before resulting in its current state on the fair-copy manuscript: early draft passages, which were written on writing-paper that perhaps could have been revised multiple times, the initial act of fair-copying and an additional process of revision upon that same manuscript witness. On a large portion of the manuscript, for example, the protagonist is referred to as ‘Lucy Frost’; Brontë revised this to ‘Lucy Snowe’ after she had completed a significant amount of copying from draft

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pages. Not only this: interlinear cancellations suggest that Brontë carried on composing the text as she was copying. On folio 93 of volume one, she changes the flow of a sentence half-way through copying it:

I saw quite well that they all held the same on a moment’s calculation about estimated me at the same fractional value.249

If one reads the sentence in its ‘original’ sense (i.e. without the cancellation), it does not make sense, which indicates how the text was being composed right up until its publication. The fair-copy is written predominantly in Charlotte Brontë’s hand, with the exception of compositors’ names and other markings resulting from its preparation for the first edition, so it can be assumed that Brontë was the sole editor when revising. There are, on average, twenty-four lines of script per each loose-leaf folio, which were originally numbered consecutively, but split into three volumes at a later date. The fairly consistent nature of Brontë’s hand means that one is able to predict the amount of text that has been excised during revision. The manuscript’s reader can make the same inference as that from the manuscript of the Life: Brontë was aware that her editors may read through some of her cancellations, prompting her to remove the text altogether to ensure she maintained control over the novel’s development.

The ‘bitter disappointment’ that Brontë interpreted from her publishing house’s silence was, after all, a misunderstanding. However, the letter to Ellen Nussey indicates the beginning of a period of ambivalence between Brontë and her editors; she referred to W. S. Williams’ feedback on Villette as ‘strictures’ and reminded George Smith that, even though she welcomed his criticism, she was not

249 Add MS 43480 ‘Villette’, fol. 93r.
‘likely to alter anything’.\textsuperscript{250} It is tempting to provide an autobiographical reading of the manuscript, one in which Brontë attempted to tease and undermine her editors through the use of excision. Though the manuscript would have been seen by compositors during the printing stage, Brontë limited its readership to a select group of people. She wrote to W. S. Williams, ‘I trust the work will be seen in M. S. by no one except Mr. Smith and yourself.’\textsuperscript{251} Her request to keep it within the hands of the editors may have been a professional decision to withhold information about the novel before publication, but excisions suggest another impulse to conceal aspects of the text’s revision. I do not intend to invest too heavily in Brontë’s personal relationship and intentions with her publishers but believe that the manuscript and the novel itself provides a narrative about the struggle with representing female subjectivity and autonomy under the surveillance of mid-Victorian society.\textsuperscript{252}

The physical appearance of revisions suggests there is more to it than these biographical readings. Of particular interest are the single words intricately cut out on folios eighteen, twenty and twenty-one of volume three. They are so small they appear to be littered like confetti over the manuscript-page. And like confetti, they attract attention by making certain pieces of the text glimmer with meaning, opening up the possibility for alternative interpretations. The location of excisions (which, because of the violent nature of cutting as an editing practice, imply that

\textsuperscript{250} Letters of Charlotte Brontë, iii, p. 80; p. 75.

\textsuperscript{251} ibid., p. 80.

\textsuperscript{252} Kelly J. Mays claims that Charles Edward Mudie, the founder of Mudie’s Circulating Library, held a particularly censorious role in deciding what books became popular in the nineteenth-century. She explains that ‘Mudie’s patronage, like a reviewer’s praise, ultimately depended as much on moral qualities as on literary ones’. Some authors found the prospect of Mudie’s censorship restrictive because it affected the extent to which they could represent unconventional or devious behaviour. Kelly J. Mays, ‘The Publishing World’ in A Companion to the Victorian Novel, ed. by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Malden, Mass: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), pp. 11-30 (p. 15).
there is something potentially incriminating about the original text) are suggestive. Though it is fruitless to speculate about what text was removed, analysis of surrounding text can produce patterns of excision, or revision-narratives, which suggest that certain language or topics cause more pressure within the development of the novel than others. Often, excisions rework the text in such a way that makes Lucy’s meaning more ambiguous or evasive. It is at these points that the manuscript-reader need not speculate about what was deleted, but rather observe the points at which the reader enters into the active dynamic of silent meaning-production.

Various works have been published on the relationship between silence and women’s representation. In an interview with Edward Foster for *Talisman* magazine in 1990, Susan Howe suggested that silence is an integral part of the female archive: ‘If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself.’ The most noteworthy part of this interview is Howe’s suggestion that archives signify how female subjectivity was produced by gaps and silences in the nineteenth-century against the dominant discourse of gender. If one ‘finds’ oneself within the gaps and silences, then the

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253 Of particular note is Amy Christine Billone’s *Little Songs: Women, Silence and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (USA: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), which examines the tension between the strict sonnet form and female poetical agency in the nineteenth-century. She argues that women manipulate a productive relationship between muteness and voice and that ‘their gestures of assertion were ultimately accomplished through rhetorical constructions that insisted in the stifling of assertion’ (p. 156). André Lardinois and Laura McClure’s edited collection *Making Silence Speak: Women’s Voices in Greek Literature and Society* (USA: Princeton University Press, 2001) also examines how silence can be a productive method of reclaiming female identity. It explores how female voices are created and imitated within both male and female-authored Greek texts. In a gesture akin to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s search for literary ‘grandmothers’ Janet L. Beizer’s *Thinking Through the Mothers: Reimagining Women’s Biographies* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009) argues that we can read feminist biography as a means to exhume or reinscribe our mother’s stories. Beizer suggests that modern readers have to acknowledge that many of our mother’s stories are missing or silent.

whole idea of gaps and silences bears a different meaning when discussing the female archive. Gaps and silences: physical and metaphorical empty spaces, repressed desire, lack of sight, lack of sound; this lack and emptiness becomes a more fertile space in the female archive; a metaphorical realm of relative freedom where meaning is produced.

On the manuscript of Villette, ‘different meanings’ are produced within the physical gaps resulting from Brontë’s excisions; indeed one could argue that Brontë relies on the ambiguous nature of silences to develop Lucy’s narrative. Excision was not a widespread editing practice in the mid-nineteenth-century, but it is telling that this technique was also adopted by an experimental poet: Emily Dickinson. Marta Werner, having extensively examined the ‘multiple or contingent orders’ of meaning within Dickinson’s manuscripts, suggests that ‘scissoring’ is a characteristically female mode of editing:

> Scissoring may be the inscription of a crossing - into extragrammatical spaces, into the open space of the feminine in which ravage rhymes with ravish: to fill with strong emotion, especially joy, rapture, or ecstasy, to seize and to carry off by force, violent removal [...] In the end the force that forbids may also emancipate: “‘No’ is the wildest word we consign to Language”’

‘extragrammatical,’ ‘the open space,’ ‘to fill with strong emotion’; Werner describes the potentially empty spaces left from scissoring as a form of textuality in itself. While Dickinson’s ‘scissoring’ generally rearranges the text, rather than deleting it, Werner theorises this mode of editing in a way that is pertinent to the manuscript of Villette: what might be interpreted as a ‘violent’ act of negation upon the female manuscript actually liberates meaning-production.

255 Werner, p. 31.
As the term ‘extra-grammatical’ suggests, this kind of meaning-production has to occur outside of the semantic and syntactic structures of language. It depends on the reader adopting a dialogic role; one that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘actively answers and reacts’ to the text. Bakhtin places emphasis on the reception of the text and its conversation with the ‘socio-ideological consciousness’ that the reader cannot separate from their interpretation. Thus, according to Bakhtin, the text ‘cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.’

Indeed, as we can see in reviews of *Villette*, Lucy’s behaviour and Brontë’s exploration of themes ranging from female professionalism to Catholicism made it difficult for readers to separate their reception of the book from their own historical moment and social position. This ‘socio-ideological consciousness’ is of course significant for our understanding of the ways that Brontë dealt with these ideas - and the ways she anticipated they would be received - through editing. However, I would like to extend Bakhtin’s theory to consider the dynamic of interpretation in those ‘extra-grammatical’ moments of silence or ambiguousness in a way that will facilitate understanding of Brontë’s mode of meaning-production. The ways in which Brontë relies on this

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257 ibid., p. 276.

258 An unsigned reviewer in *The Examiner* found ‘coarseness’ in Lucy Snowe’s ‘hardness and cold self-possession,’ while Harriet Martineau was uncomfortable with how Brontë ‘goes out of her way to express a passionate hatred of Romanism’ in the novel. Allott, p. 179; p. 174.

259 Bakhtin’s ‘Discourse in the Novel’ has been used numerous times in studies of nineteenth-century literature to understand the way that genre functions, and thus how authors were transforming and challenging convention. In her essay ‘Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: ‘The Princess’ and *Aurora Leigh*,” *Victorian Poetry* 25.2 (1987): 101-127, Marjorie Stone uses Bakhtin’s dialogic description of genre as a means to explain the ways that *Aurora Leigh* hybridises and revolutionises the novel and epic poetry. Elsewhere, and more recently, Dallas Liddle analyses the way that meaning and genre, connected terms in Bakhtin’s essay, to some extent resist translation and are constantly mediated. He uses this idea to explore acts of reading and how journalism informed literary practice in the mid-Victorian period. *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009).
dynamism to produce meaning is best illustrated by a comparison between modes of addressing the reader in realist fiction.

It is no surprise that Bakhtin’s dialogism informs many readings of Victorian realist fiction, which often addresses the text’s textuality.260 Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, for example, begins in this way: ‘Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.’261 David Copperfield hands his fate over to the text itself and by doing so locates the reader’s position very clearly: by addressing the materiality of the reader’s experience with the ‘pages’ of the book, Dickens is placing them in the active role; it is the reader who will pass final judgement and interpret the character of David Copperfield. Bakhtin insists on the primacy of the reader and this dynamic - which mirrors the process of a spoken conversation - as the root of textual discourse:

In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding only comes to fruition in the response.262

Bakhtin separates ‘understanding’ from authorial intention; once the text has been received by a public audience, its meaning is subject to ‘the response’. Bakhtin’s term may lend itself to a reading through the lens of reader-response. However, as

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260 A very interesting essay published by Jonathan Farina argues that there is something self-reflexive in Dickens’ (among others) persistent use of ‘as if’ to represent objects through simile but also as a means of self-reflection among his characters. According to Farina, ‘[t]he conditional simile characterizes Victorian feeling as virtual experience irreducible to words.’ Jonathan Farina, ‘Dickens’s ‘As If”: Analogy and Victorian Virtual Reality,’ *Victorian Studies*, 53.3 (2011): 427-435 (430).


262 Bakhtin, p. 282.
Patricia Harkin points out, there is a difference between ‘reception studies,’ which focusses on the text’s reception by a particular class of readers, and reader-response, which considers the phenomenological or psychoanalytical response of a generalised group of readers to a text. On the other hand, revisions on the manuscript of *Villette* engage readers in acts of interpretation to fill out gaps in the narrative, which suggests that Bakhtin’s theory can be read from a purely textual point of view. What we see in these self-reflexive moments is the author making the reader aware of their responsive role. As will become clear, the ways in which Brontë edits her text takes advantage of the reader’s response as the ‘activating principle’ to produce meaning and, in doing so, attempts to condition their interpretation.

This act is also entwined with another common trope of addressing the reader directly. Although narrated in the third person, George Eliot’s first novel *Adam Bede* begins with a similar reference to the text as a construction. ‘This is what I undertake to do for you, reader,’ she writes, ‘With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge…’ [my emphasis]. She adopts the personal pronoun ‘you’ to engage the reader in an active relationship with the narrator, an act she extends with phrases such as ‘you see’ and ‘allowing you to discern’ to produce a specific image of her characters. If we compare Eliot’s direct address to the reader with Gaskell’s third person evocation of ‘the reader,’ in the *Life*, the ‘activating principle’ of reading appears to be more fraught:

263 Patricia Harkin, ‘The Reception of Reader-Response Theory,’ *College Composition and Communication*, 56.3 (2005), 410-425 (411).
265 ibid., p. 6.
The reader, who has even faintly pictured to himself her life at this time, - the solitary days, - the waking, watching nights, - may imagine to what a sensitive pitch her nerves were strung, and how such a state was sure to affect her health. [my emphasis]

As discussed in chapter one, Gaskell relies on the reader’s ability to interpret double meanings to produce a particular narrative about Brontë. Unlike Eliot, Gaskell is not specifically addressing and directing details towards the reader, rather she is presenting information about Brontë that she leaves open to interpretation. The reader has to meet her half way; they are not just aware of their position as the interpreter, they have to actively engage with Gaskell’s prose to derive her meaning. In doing so, she separates her own authorial identity from that of her subject.

Brontë’s reliance on the active role of the reader in the development of the text recalls the satirical tone of narration used by William Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* (1847). In this novel, Thackeray plays with the reader’s awareness of the conventions of the three-decker novel, including its marriage-plot. Some critics argue that the novel exposes the predictable plot lines of many novels published in the mid-nineteenth-century, which followed a kind of formula in order to gain popularity. By drawing attention to his act of narration, Thackeray relies on the reader’s expectations for certain plot-lines to be fulfilled:

I know that the tune I am piping is a very mild one (although there are some terrific chapters coming presently), and must beg the good-natured reader to remember that we are only discoursing at present about a stockbroker’s family in Russell Square, who are taking walks, or luncheon, or dinner, or talking and making love as people do in common life, and without a single passionate and wonderful incident to mark the progress of

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267 Mays gives an interesting account of the way that the material circumstances of the publishing world influenced the production of fiction in the nineteenth-century. She gives Trollope and Dickens as examples of authors with rags-to-riches stories of literary fame that inspired many other would-be novel-writers. (p. 15)
their loves. The argument stands thus - Osborne, in love with Amelia, has asked an old friend to dinner and to Vauxhall - Jos Sedley is in love with Rebecca. Will he marry her? That is the great subject now in hand. Thackeray implies that the reader has certain expectations about the narrative that he is not currently fulfilling. There is a contrast between the ‘mild’ tune that he is taking, the details of which are required for him to establish the ‘argument’ in the ‘terrific chapters’ upcoming. He is confronting the reader with their own expectations to expose the predictability of realist novels that follow conventional plot-lines (such as the bildungsroman or marriage-plot), while focusing their attention on the importance of less consequential details, such as ‘taking walks, or luncheon, or dinner’.

In *Villette*, Brontë’s address to the reader similarly asks them to confront conventions of genre but requires them to take one step further and fill out some of the non narrated aspects of her narrative. It is for this reason that Heidi Pennington argues that, while reader inclusion is a common trope of Victorian fictional autobiography that ‘simultaneously evoke[s] readerly investment in the real-feeling identity of that main character,’ Lucy Snowe displays ‘extreme methods of reader inclusion’.

For example, when Lucy invites the reader to ‘Cancel the whole of that’, she not only suggests that some parts of her narrative are interchangeable but claims that the ‘moral’ for removing this episode is that “Day-dreams are delusions of the demon.” What kinds of delusions these are and why they are produced by demons is left for the reader to interpret for themselves. Unlike Thackeray, who uses self-reflexivity to confront the reader’s

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expectations of genre, Brontë uses it (along with silence) to make the reader complicit in a counter-commentary in which female subjective experience is signalled but not necessarily expressed.

Luann McCracken Fletcher has discussed silence’s productivity in *Villette*, arguing that Lucy Snowe’s identity-formation relies on the assumption that ‘we as readers share the burden of interpretation with her.’ According to Fletcher, Lucy makes the reader ‘actively seek to fill in the unsupplied motivations’ and ‘cryptic references’. She is correct to recognise the collaborative nature of meaning-production in *Villette*; my reading of the manuscript takes this even further and indicates that, at times, Lucy does not simply ‘share’ but pushes the responsibility of interpretation onto the reader. McCracken Fletcher’s use of the word ‘burden’ suggests that Lucy’s meaning relates to something she wants to express but cannot; in other words, she is hinting at the *unnarratable*. The deliberateness of silences produced on the manuscript give the impression, however, that even if Lucy could narrate something considered indecent then she would still withhold it.

Brontë thus takes Bakhtin’s ‘activating principle’ even further and, by doing so, she creates ‘extragrammatical spaces’ where meaning can be produced; a study of her editing shows that Lucy’s silences are *produced* to create opportunities for the reader to adopt the active role in interpretation. It is not just at the point of reception that meaning is produced and even obscured by the socio-ideological consciousness of reader (after the holistic act of reading), as Bakhtin would suggest, but in *Villette* the reader becomes an agent in the activation of Lucy’s

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narrative. In an often quoted passage, for example, Lucy examines how different characters within the novel have misinterpreted her. Ironically, however, she then proceeds to use silence to evade the reader’s ability to comprehend the truth about her character; an action that reflects Brontë’s treatment of the passage on the manuscript. Despite the antagonism that many critics have picked up on, in which Lucy resists and deceives the reader (Ruth Robbins accuses her of ‘disguise and dissimulation’), Kristen Pond has argued more recently that silence in Villette ‘can be a productive and positive rhetorical tool’. Lucy’s omission introduces an ‘aesthetics of open-endedness’ to the text that allows the reader to project onto her another identity that does not conform or fit into the limiting roles she finds assigned to her:

contradiction
What variety of character we sometimes find ascribed to us according to the eye with which we are viewed! Mde Beck esteemed me learned and cynical; Miss Fanshawe - caustic, ironic and sarcastic; Mr Home - a model-teacher, the essence of the sedate and discreet; somewhat conventional perhaps, too strict, limited and scrupulous, but still the pink and pattern of governess-correctness; whilst another person - Professor Paul Emanuel to wit - never lost an opportunity of intimating his opinion that mine was rather a fiery and rash nature - adventurous, indocile and audacious. I smiled at them all. If any one knew me - it was little Paulina Mary. [c. eight-and-a-half lines excised] [page break] [five lines excised - ‘stoop’ left behind]

The ‘aesthetics of open-endedness’ or ‘open space of the feminine’ that Werner alludes to is a strictly metaphorical space in terms of the text, one that is not

273 Werner, p. 2.
274 Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 239r.
275 ibid., fol. 240r.
necessarily productive for attending to female expression (how can we claim authorial intention, for example, on ‘spaces’ or realms of meaning that do not physically exist?). On the manuscript, however, the idea of ‘openness’ as a productive mode of meaning-production holds more weight. In this instance, Lucy may remain silently satisfied and smiling about her ‘silence’ when she does not elaborate on how ‘little Paulina Mary’ perceives her character, but Brontë’s excision creates a literal opening on the manuscript, which reflects a relationship ‘between message and medium’ and suggests this openness is a deliberate, even productive, mode of narration for Lucy. Brontë’s substitution of ‘contradiction’ for ‘variety’ closes down any freedom or enjoyment Lucy may experience in the different roles assigned to her by other characters. Her rejection of these models (and extremities) of female-identity - including the ‘conventional’ unmarried woman, teacher, or at the other extreme, the unpredictable, ‘fiery,’ potentially immoral woman - suggests that, in this physical space on the manuscript, Brontë initially elaborated and allowed Lucy to describe herself in her own terms. By removing the text, she removes the possibility for Lucy to be judged and compared to these codes of female behaviour, thus liberating the possibility for her to express herself in terms outside of the dominant discourse. That the reader can activate this understanding of Lucy’s alternative identity develops into one of the most constructive modes of narration offered by *Villette*. It makes the reader complicit in this counter-commentary, thus strengthening their perception of what is non-narrated in female representation.

The manuscript of *Villette* allows us to trace the development of the text and understand how Brontë constructed the often subversive mode of female-

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276 Werner, p. 4.
representation within the novel. This type of revision is in its nature subversive because, as Werner explains, it articulates a ‘new space of knowledge’ that allows the author ‘to inscribe herself otherwise than within the dominant discourse of the day’. In the case of *Villette*, it is not so much Brontë who is inscribing, but an act of projection from both the manuscript-reader and, because the cuts produce self-reflexive silence or evasion within the narrative, the reader of the text. In this novel, we can see Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism functioning beyond the reception of the text to the production of the narrative. The potential for the manuscript-reader to project meaning into the gaps on the manuscript is explained by Werner when she acknowledges that cuts can ‘open up blanks in our own commentary’ of the narrative, at which point ‘reading approaches the experience of writing’.

It is through this act that Yopie Prins explains how a female rhetoric (in terms of the lyric) is constantly in formation:

> A gendered perspective on lyric would not have to depend on the invention of a “she” who speaks her own name - say, Sappho - but could be discovered unpredictably elsewhere, in the Sapphic signature that circulates at the specific moment of its reception.

All of these critics theorise the reader’s involvement in reading the archive as a personal act of their ‘own commentary,’ ‘writing’ or ‘signature;’ reading is an inscription or projection of oneself upon the text. Take, for example, the reader’s ‘activating’ role in producing Lucy’s alternative identity in the passage discussed. These actions highlight the importance - and critical purchase - of the critic’s interpretation of archival material. Therefore, this chapter’s analysis is not invested in Brontë’s intention so much as what the manuscript can tell us as a

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277 Werner, p. 13.
278 ibid., p. 33.
physical object that is part of the text itself. The visual dimension of the manuscript is not available to the general reader; perhaps it is one of the ‘perpetual ironies’ of the archive that the physical evidence supporting the formation of a counter-discourse is silenced by lack of access. Once the physical status of the manuscript is explored in more detail, these subversions begin to emerge more clearly, thus encouraging alternative interpretations of the novel itself. In the case of Villette, the appearance, location and metaphorical nature of the markings and revisions on the manuscript are inseparable from the form of control that Lucy Snowe exerts over the development of her own ‘autobiography’ in the text.

Narrating the Fictional/Textual Autobiography

Brontë’s use of revision to create silence within the narrative is tied up with the representation of the female subject in Villette. Having established how silence can function as a productive narrative mode, this section will explore how Lucy’s autobiographical narrative embraces a ‘relationship between message and medium,’ to use Werner’s words, which is dialogical.280 In other words, the text registers its awareness of how it has been written and revised because this allows Brontë to address some of the non-narrated aspects of Lucy’s autobiography. In as much as Villette narrates the life of its female subject, the text also narrates its own autobiography by gesturing to the textual acts that inform the subject's representation.

This section will focus on the aspects of plot that Lucy chooses to narrate in her autobiography and how she reflects on the act of writing itself. The extent to

280 Werner, p. 4.
which she captures her subjective experience is a part of Brontë’s ongoing experimentation with female self-representation throughout the novel and will be explored in more depth in the final section of this chapter. What is non-narrated is sometimes difficult to pin down and categorise. Brontë’s revisions suggest that there are several issues of female representation at stake for Lucy Snowe: social position, self-possession, romantic feelings and repression, bodily experiences, Reason and Imagination, and universal emotions such as despair. Reading from the perspective of the manuscript shifts the focus onto the way that Brontë constructs her subject’s subjectivity by gesturing to her silences and allowing the reader to speculate about what meanings could fill them. This begins with the obscurity of Lucy Snowe’s childhood and extends to her commentary on the act of writing itself.

Though recent literary criticism of Villette has exposed the nature of what is unnarratable for Brontë’s autodiegetic narrator, I present an alternative interpretation of the novel that reclassifies the idea of ‘evasion’. Critics acknowledge Snowe’s deliberate secrecy but the symptomatic readings that the novel has been subjected to assume two ideas that this chapter takes issue with: firstly, that Snowe withholds information that the reader is entitled to, as is suggested by Mary Jacobus’ claim that ‘Lucy lies to us’.\footnote{Mary Jacobus, Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 42.} Jacobus rather overstates the case; withholding information is not lying, though it does break the implicit contract of trust between the reader and autobiographical narrator. For example, when Snowe initially keeps quiet about her recognition of Dr. John as her childhood friend and god-brother Graham Bretton, she acknowledges that ‘an
idea new, sudden, and startling, riveted [her] attention’. Although the reader’s curiosity is frustrated, Snowe does not mislead them as to what the ‘idea’ is but simply does not tell them. Secondly, I contest whether Brontë is relatively unconscious of aspects of Snowe’s narration that are repressed, such as her narcissism or sexual desire, which is a school of thought pursued by Ileana Marin in her biographical reading of Brontë’s manuscript-revisions.

To claim that Brontë’s excisions unconsciously register an interiorised gender ideology suggests that that ideology is effective; on the other hand, the deliberate markings on the manuscript indicate the types of resistance that have been teased out by feminist criticism of the novel. Thus, when Lucy Snowe describes herself as ‘by nature a cypher,’ one can interpret her tone - and the mysteries and ambiguities that are produced by this identity - as more productive than critics have argued up to this point.

One of the key mysteries regarding the character of Lucy Snowe is produced by her subversion of the act of autobiography when she obscures her childhood. In doing so, Brontë resists a connection between the professional bildungsroman and female autobiography. This omission has been noted by many critics as one of the novel’s evasions; Lucie Armitt argues that childhood ‘haunts’ the text - through both Paulina and Lucy - and the multiple spectral manifestations throughout the novel signify Lucy’s consequent repression or ‘shadowing’ of self. Armitt argues that motherlessness seeps into every aspect of the text; Lucy’s desire to reclaim her role as a child sparks off a chain of causality that results in her lone

282 Villette, p. 98.
284 Villette, p. 356.
inhabitance of a ‘doll’s house’.\textsuperscript{286} I would argue to the contrary: Lucy’s lack of a past undermines her narrative’s sense of determinism. Unlike contemporary novels, such as Emily Brontë’s \textit{Wuthering Heights}, Dickens’ \textit{Oliver Twist} or \textit{David Copperfield}, or even Brontë’s own \textit{Jane Eyre}, where causal links are established between the childhood and the circumstances of the protagonist’s narrative and character development, Brontë uses this evasion as a narrative device because it transforms Lucy’s autobiography into a formative space where her identity and narrative is contingent; not informed by preconceptions established within her childhood. Armitt’s interpretation of \textit{Villette} as a novel which ‘treats childhood as an uncanny and indeterminate space of identification’ is therefore true but this does not necessarily mean that Lucy seeks to reclaim that childhood.\textsuperscript{287}

As well as an act of evasion, the erasure of Lucy’s past should be read as an act of ambivalence towards her readership. Lucy does not need to rely on the patronage of her family members - like Ginevra Fanshawe - or allow her life to be dictated by domestic roles - like Paulina Home (pun intended). Her reluctance to deal with her past and allow it to function as a formative element of her character-formation provides the means for her self-made future. The manuscript reveals that Brontë produced, or at least emphasised, this ambiguity during revision. The lack of a normal childhood - and especially the lack of the mother figure - is not uncommon in Brontë’s novels. In \textit{Villette}, however, the refusal of the protagonist to elaborate on the obscure detail she provides about childhood experiments with the reader’s expectation of disclosure within autobiographical narratives.

\textsuperscript{286} Armitt, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{287} ibid., p. 218.
The way that Brontë reworks Lucy’s treatment of her childhood on the manuscript signifies how the text was intentionally obscured. The remaining original text, which is crossed out and not excised, serves as a reminder that evasion is used as a narrative device and not a product of Brontë’s flawed storytelling or struggle with expression. Both major revisions in the first chapter rework Lucy’s representation of the past. The first occurs within the very first paragraph in which Lucy ruminates on her Godmother’s heritage:

My Godmother lived in a handsome house in the clean and ancient town of Bretton. Her husband’s family had been residents there for generations and bore indeed the name of their birthplace - Bretton of Bretton - whether some remote ancestor had been a personage of sufficient importance to leave his name to his neighbourhood—\textit{I know not}.\footnote{MS 43480 \textit{‘Villette’}, fol. 1r.}

Brontë’s revision creates a subtle shift, which changes Dr Bretton’s delusion to Lucy’s ignorance. In the revised text, the reader gets the sense that Lucy could seek out this information if she wanted to, but considers it to be unnecessary. The declarative ‘\textit{I know not}’ indicates to the reader that they are at the mercy of Lucy’s impulse to disclose or conceal information. It provides another example of Brontë crafting the authoritative narrative voice, which is able to manipulate the power-dynamic between narrator and reader. Though Lucy has often been considered to be an unreliable narrator because she does not offer herself up
completely for the reader’s consumption, attending to the manuscript exposes how Brontë is empowering Lucy to remain in control of what she wishes to reveal.

Lucy’s evasive past does not function simply to establish power over the reader (this dynamic fluctuates throughout the novel), but the manuscript presents multiple examples of how her ambiguous past is necessary for her character formation. For example, her lack of familial affection often allows her to maintain a cool, unemotional identity when it suits her:

…my Godmother having come in person to claim me of the kinsfolk with whom was at that time fixed my permanent residence. (I do not call it home; Bretton seemed to me the better home of the two) I believe she then plainly saw events coming whose very shadow I scarce guessed, yet of faint sufficed to which the suspicion alone imparted unsettled sadness and made me glad to change scene and society.

The fact that Lucy Snowe originally acknowledged the lack of emotional connection that one expects from ‘home’ with her ‘permanent residence’ suggests that she herself was the victim of emotional suffering. However, Brontë’s addition

289 Mary Jacobus not only argued that ‘Lucy lies to us’ (p. 62) but that her narrative ‘calls itself into question by forcing us to misread it’ (p. 43). Helena Michie considers Lucy’s silences to be part of ‘a strategy of repression’ that also denotes ‘power’ (Michie, 1987, p. 118). More recently, Siân Griffiths argues that, because Lucy Snowe is ‘intensely private’, she is only a ‘semi-reliable’ narrator (pp. 50-51). Siân Griffiths, ‘Dissolving Pearls: Charlotte Brontë’s Textual Hieroglyphics,’ Women’s Writing, 14 (2007): 49-69. Likewise, Eleanor Salotto describes the female narrative within Villette as ‘uncanny’ because ‘identity rests on a series of representations which one inhabits’ (p. 53). Eleanor Salotto ‘Villette and the Perversions of Feminine Identity’ in Gender Reconstructions: Pornography and Perversions in Literature and Culture, ed. by Cindy Carlson, Robert L. Mazzola (New York: Routledge, 2016). Jessica Brent acknowledges Lucy Snowe’s unreliability but does not agree that she is a deceptive narrator; she argues that this reading ‘overlooks and flattens out the narrative’s complex formal and psychological structure’ (p. 98). Jessica Brent, ‘Haunting Pictures, Missing Letters: Visual Displacement and Narrative Elision in Villette’, NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, 37. 1/2 (2003): 86-111. Similarly, Beth Togerson thinks that Lucy’s evasiveness is a consequence of her psychological state; she argues that the novel grows from ‘repression and self-control to a fuller, richer existence of emotional connection with others’ (p. 62). Beth Togerson, Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire and the Constraints of Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Approaching the novel from a textual point of view suggests that Brontë makes Lucy Snowe conscious and in control of her evasions, which challenges the idea that her narrative is disrupted by her fragmented sense of self.

290 MS 43480 ‘Villette’, fol. 3v.
of the adjective ‘faint’ later on in the paragraph suggests that the deletion is also part of her endeavour to obscure any illusion to Lucy’s past. It is an interesting addition because it also hints at a potential scandal or marital discord that Lucy may not have understood as a child, or does not want to develop. Brontë provides glimpses of information, then, at the same time as withholding its detail. This dynamic runs throughout the text and serves here as a reminder that while Lucy can (and does) gratify the reader’s thirst for information by recalling hazy memories from her past, the fragmentariness that this produces is part of her rhetoric of self-representation.

Lucy’s silence about her childhood is an example of how silence creates a meaningful foundation from she can build her identity. Ivan Kreilkamp has also noticed how Lucy’s lack of speech within the novel is liberating for her, ‘But is silence always powerlessness, speech always power? Is it possible that Lucy Snowe might choose not to speak for reasons of her own?’ He is right to question Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that ‘Lucy’s evasions as a narrator indicate how far she (and all women) have come from silent submission and also how far all must yet go in finding a voice.’ Although they identify the subversive nature of such a portrait and the self-reflexive ways in which it exposes ideological constraints on women’s writing, Gilbert and Gubar underplay how Brontë intentionally manipulates Lucy’s voice. It is not just a defensive gesture of self-censorship. On the contrary, its ambivalence is emphasised by the manuscript’s markings and excisions. What may appear to be examples of mediating ‘silent submission’ can be read as performances that intentionally disrupt narrative and

292 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 419.
gender norms. Kreilkamp has recognised this interruption, claiming that through the ‘aggressive force of passivity,’ Brontë forged a new paradigm of depersonalised female authorship.\textsuperscript{293} His analysis is rooted within the oral tradition of the Victorian storyteller, but I would argue that it is not simply Lucy’s vocal silence, but the ambiguity within her narrative that produces a sense of power over the reader. Kreilkamp reads Brontë as writing for a mass audience and in a sense suggests that Brontë composed her texts in order to obtain a wider readership. While I would agree that the text is written with a readership in mind, \textit{Villette} is more antagonistic than this. Kreilkamp argues that Lucy claims power in the narrative at the price of a ‘powerful sense of loss’ in terms of her selfhood, however I argue that female identity in the mid-Victorian period does not have to be explicitly represented but is produced within narrative silences.\textsuperscript{294}

Forging self within silence comes from a tradition of female narratives written in this way; in the previous century, Mary Wollstonecraft, writing about a woman who overcomes physical and emotional repression in \textit{The Wrongs of Woman}, identified this culture of speculation as an exciting and liberating trope of female story-telling. Describing the stories her warden would tell her in the asylum in which her husband has imprisoned her, the protagonist Maria explains ‘the stories she told were the more interesting, for perpetually leaving room to conjecture something extraordinary.’\textsuperscript{295} Maria enjoys stories that allow her to use her imagination and flesh out the narrative with something unconventional - details that are perhaps unmentionable by her warden. A similar rhetoric is adopted by

\textsuperscript{293} Kreilkamp, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{294} ibid., p. 144.
\textsuperscript{295} Mary Wollstonecraft, \textit{Mary} and \textit{The Wrongs of Woman}, ed. by Gary Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 84.
Brontë in *Villette*; the tension that is produced between withholding and providing narrative detail is a powerful rhetorical tool through which Brontë experiments with her protagonist’s ability to express herself.

This tension between withholding and providing information emerges visually on the manuscript; the dichotomy between these two ideas is transformed into an image that the manuscript-reader can interpret in a rare emotional outburst, when Lucy describes her feelings of nostalgia:

> Oh my childhood! Oh lost affection!

Upon revision, Brontë decided that Lucy’s exclamatory longing for her childhood was enough. The revision creates an image on the manuscript of the level of disclosure Brontë permits Lucy to voice. The desire for affection tells the reader not only that parts of Lucy’s childhood were happy, but makes it explicit that affection is what she is longing for in Madame Beck’s pensionnat. Later on in the passage, Lucy juxtaposes her emotional outburst with the claim that ‘it was better to be stoical.’ In doing so, she reminds the reader of the control she harbours over her own ‘stoical’ image and the extent of her narrative. Brontë can allow the reader to have a taste of Lucy’s life before the novel, but this image demonstrates the limits of her emotional relationship to the text. Though Lucy’s emotional outpourings are necessary at certain stages, Brontë’s desire to separate her current identity from her childhood becomes clear. Later when Lucy describes her ‘miserable longings,’ Brontë removes the additional information that she originally provided; that Lucy was longing ‘for a home’.

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296 MS 43480 ‘Villette’, fol. 179r.
298 MS 43480 ‘Villette’, fol. 3r.
structure that previously informed her own sense of self, this implicitly undermines Brontë’s project within *Villette*: to produce an individualistic female identity that is able to negotiate the social and familial structures that may inform the production and representation of her subjectivity.

This is also the case in chapter four, where Brontë replaces world ‘family’, which implies emotional connections, with ‘kindred’, which suggests simply biological ties.\(^299\) This evasiveness is not simply antagonistic, it is part of her ironic commentary on the expectations of authorship. Like Mrs Bretton’s ‘suspicions’, Lucy’s past is forced to become a figment of the reader’s imagination. In a similar way to her mutable reflections on the European landscape, Brontë implies that these impressions can be as violent and painful as the reader likes but they are ultimately unnecessary to the bildungsroman at hand. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë expressed her frustration at the expectation for mid-century women to mediate their emotional responses when her protagonist resists her role as ‘a machine without feelings’.\(^300\) Writing in response to the contemporary feedback that labelled such emotional outbursts as ‘coarse’, Brontë’s solution was to mediate the representation of Lucy’s emotion to the point of the reader’s frustration.

Beth Newman has written on the struggle between concealment and display within *Villette* and concludes that ‘writing is represented in *Villette* as a form of aggression, whether because it withholds or because it serves as a form of aggressive display.’\(^301\) For Newman, the text enacts a struggle between Lucy’s

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299 MS 43480 ‘Villette’, fol. 51r.
attempt to fulfil her exhibitionist desires, or an oppressive act that undermines her subjectivity. It is a reading that interprets the narrative as a means through which Lucy’s sense of self is constantly in development (or, as Ryan Crider describes it, the ‘fragmentation’ within Villette ‘reflects Lucy’s shifting sense of self’). This ‘fragmentation’ is in tension with Lucy’s act of retrospection, which is established in Chapter V, where her account is presented as a construction of the memories by an older self: ‘I speak of a time gone by: my hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now at last, white under a white cap, like snow beneath snow.’ Consequently, Lucy’s autobiography could be considered as an holistic construct; the transition from the violent ‘frosts of time’ and the ensuing character-struggle those memories involve to the cool, calm ‘snow beneath snow’ indicates Lucy’s ability to rationalise and unify her character-development. Consider the ghost of the nun: what is experienced by the reader as a recurring gothic haunting turns out to be manipulated by Lucy, who already knows it to be a farce. The ‘fragmentations’ of the narrative might not necessarily result from Lucy’s fragmented sense of self but are produced by her non-narration, which enact Brontë’s experimentation with female representation outside of a dominant narrative of femininity.

In addition to the omission of her childhood, there are only three excisions that occur before Lucy becomes the focus of her own narrative at the beginning of chapter V, all relating to the young Paulina’s emotional displays regarding Graham Bretton. They form a revision-narrative of suppressed female desire, which Lucy celebrates as an aspect of Paulina’s femininity later in the novel: ““Paulina, that

303 Villette, p. 45.
gentle hoar-frost of yours, surrounding so much pure, fine flame, is a priceless privilege of nature.” Newman’s argument reminds us, however, that Lucy is not capable of suppressing her emotions in this way; the alliterative descriptions of Paulina’s ‘fine flame’ and ‘priceless privilege’ place her in a pattern of idealised female behaviour - an ‘alliterative, text-hand copy’ of femininity, to use Lucy’s phrase. As we know from the narrator’s attitude to these kinds of textual constructs, she places her own experience in opposition to this; her manuscript, and by extension her behaviour and emotional experience, are more chaotic.

Once Lucy Snowe becomes the focus of the narrative, excisions come to signify far more than suppressing emotion or desire. For example, at the very beginning of Chapter V, entitled ‘Turning a New Leaf,’ the manuscript and the text interact in such a way that suggests excision and silence itself holds meaning in Lucy’s autobiography. The very title is self-reflexive, referring to Lucy’s own fictional experience of writing her story - she is literally turning a page (or leaf) in her own life story to begin a new strand of the narrative. On the manuscript, Brontë herself did not ‘turn a new leaf’ - she began the chapter half-way down the manuscript-page - but she did physically interact with it in a similar way. A large excision of just over five lines occurs directly under the chapter title, followed by the first line of the chapter, ‘My mistress being dead…’. The rest of the manuscript-page is relatively clean; the physical appearance of this large gap suggests that Brontë changed her mind about how to start the chapter and either re-wrote it or cut it down. Nevertheless, the location of the excision is suggestive

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304 *Villette*, p. 376.
305 Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 64r.
and fills the gap with meaning, which impacts our understanding of the autobiographical mode at this point in the novel.

The death of Miss Marchmont - the ‘woman of fortune’ and ‘rheumatic cripple’ who Lucy cares for as a means to make money - marks the moment of Lucy’s spontaneous decision to travel abroad for work. This voyage also marks the point at which ‘the narrator steps into the part of heroine’, as *The Athenaeum* put it in 1853, and thus the beginning of this chapter establishes her new mode of narration. No longer describing her self in terms of obscurity or by projecting herself onto another character (i.e. Paulina), Lucy embarks on her own self-representation, albeit in the cautious manner she adopts within the first few chapters of the novel. In the next few lines after the excision, she compares herself to a ‘placeless person in debt’. Lucy embraces obscurity to construct her own narrative; ‘placeless’ and with no sense of monetary value, she experiences a sense of isolation, though she is bound to society, which allows the formation of her unconventional subjectivity. The reader’s inability to locate any distinct identity for Lucy - based on heritage or social position - is what makes the location and form of revision at this point in the manuscript suggestive. It could be coincidental, but it is actually one in a pattern of excisions that enact the metaphor of Lucy’s productive silences. They can be interpreted as Brontë’s construction of a female autobiographical mode on her terms, not according to tradition; one that includes silences, but silences that facilitate rather than prevent interpretation.

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306 *Villette*, p. 36.


308 *Villette*, p. 43.
The way that gaps and silences provide Brontë with the means to control what is narrated in her protagonist’s life is not just limited to excisions but plays out in how she restructures her language to command authority for the narrative voice. Authority is key for framing Lucy’s silences so that they purposely gesture to that which is non-narrated in her self-representation, rather than apologising to the reader for a lack of disclosure. We can witness this authority when Lucy arrives in London on the first stage of her journey to Villette and characteristically addresses the reader to draw attention to her act of narration:

My reader, I know, is one who would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first impressions; and it is well, inasmuch as I had neither time nor mood to cherish such; arriving as I did late, on a dark, raw, and rainy evening, in a Babylon and a wilderness of which the vastness and the strangeness tried to the utmost any powers of clear thought and steady self-possession with which, in the absence of more brilliant faculties, Nature might have gifted me.\(^{309}\)

Not only does Lucy attempt to condition the reader’s expectations of the narrative - one which is embedded in mundanity and contingency rather than comparatively ‘poetic’ or sensational aspects of fiction - she alludes to the fact that she is only comfortable elaborating on her impressions when she is ‘gifted’ with ‘self-possession’. Brontë challenges the reader’s expectations of autobiography; not only does she make them aware of how the narrative is an invention - the details of which could be changed at any moment - her representation of female experience is contingent on the ‘mood’ and ‘powers of clear thought’ of the narrator herself.

Consulting this passage on the manuscript emphasises the importance of ‘self-possession’ to the female narrative voice in the novel. Brontë originally began this

\(^{309}\) *Villette*, p. 45.
passage in a conversational style, but changed the form of address to make Lucy’s
tone more decisive and self-commanding:

Ask not now, reader, for an elaborate. My reader - I know - is one who
would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first
impressions…\(^{310}\)

In the original version, the narrative appears to be controlled by the reader; Lucy
is providing information according to the reader’s expectations. When she is
unable to do so, she apologetically seeks the reader’s pardon, albeit by telling
them not to ask. It is somewhat ironic that the female narrator - even though she is
ultimately composing and publishing the narrative - remains under the control of
the reader’s impressions. During revision, however, Brontë reverses this power
dynamic. Lucy conditions the reader to measure the narrative on her terms, rather
than against their expectations. The ‘poetic first impressions’ she could invent for
the reader’s benefit are implicitly not crucial to her character development, so she
simply does not provide them. The way Brontë reworks the tone of narration in
this sentence - as well as Lucy’s continual self-reflexive allusions to the way her
voice has been constructed - suggests that she is declaratively setting the agenda
of her narration, with little room for the reader’s expectations.

Brontë exposes the irony of the female autobiographical narrative by
suggesting that Lucy Snowe reveals what information she wants when she wants.
It is the fact that she draws attention to this defensive gesture, and owns it as an
element of her narration, which reverses the power-dynamic between the female
narrator and reader. When Lucy spies M. Paul (who she thought had departed on a
ship to the West Indies) in the park during a Labassecourean festival, she again

\(^{310}\) Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 69r.
draws the reader’s attention to what information she will *not* provide them; a gesture that is made more decisive on the manuscript by Brontë’s revision:

> I know not. Ask first

> Was I glad? A huge load left me. Was it a fact to warrant joy? Perhaps so but what were the circumstances attendant on this respite? How far did this delay concern me?\(^{311}\)

Lucy will ask questions - and provoke the reader’s curiosity - but she will not answer them. Furthermore, originally Brontë allowed her to (ambiguously) confirm the reader’s knowledge that Lucy is happy. M. Paul will stay in Villette. However, upon revision, Brontë makes clear that Lucy maintains authority over what information is released to the reader. Again, she attempts to condition the reader’s response, instructing them to ask questions that do not relate to Lucy’s emotional response to the scene but the practical details of M. Paul’s presence. This forms a pattern of silences regarding Lucy’s romantic feelings; a theme which is beyond the scope of this chapter.\(^{312}\) Brontë reveals just enough information to excite the reader’s curiosity, only to take advantage of that curiosity to remind them of what is actually at stake in the novel. The ambiguous ending is perhaps the most pertinent example of that: Brontë understood that many readers would want to find out the fate of M. Paul, but she refused to give it

\(^{311}\) Add MS 43482 ‘Villette’, fol. 247r.

\(^{312}\) The revision-narrative concerning Brontë’s experimentations with the romance-plot are explored in my article, ‘Different kinds of silence: Revisions of *Villette* and the ‘Reader’s Romance’’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 25.3 (2020): 443-457.
to them. Why? Because it is not Lucy’s romantic relationships that define her success at the end of the novel, it is her self-conviction. Brontë thus experiments - albeit in an antagonistic manner - with the reader’s expectations to provide satisfying conclusions to the novel.

‘Reader, I married him’ has now become one of the most famous lines in nineteenth-century literature: many readers will be familiar with the direct, confessional relationship Brontë developed between her protagonist and readers in *Jane Eyre*. In *Villette*, she ironises this dynamic to the point that Lucy antagonistically anticipates, and rejects, the reader’s impression of her. The manuscript-reader can witness another example of Lucy’s declarative tone in her address to the reader when describing her ‘sorrowful indifference to existence’ during ‘The Long Vacation’:

Religious reader - you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist, and you stern sage; you - stoic, will frown, you - cynic, sneer - you - epicure - laugh. Well - each and all - take 
& laugh
I accept the sermon, frown and sneer”; perhaps you are all right, and perhaps in circumstances like me - you would have been - like me - wrong.
it your own way. Take it also my way: I cannot alter. The first month was indeed a long black heavy month to me.

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313 The ending of the novel provides the most obvious example of how Brontë resisted the impulse to wrap up the narrative in the conventional style of a marriage plot. Instead, she ambiguously wrote:

Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (*Villette*, p. 496)

Despite Brontë’s strong implication that M. Paul dies in a shipwreck - she writes that ‘the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work’ (p. 495) - some readers still clung, however tenuously, to the possibility of his conjugal union with Snowe. It reveals a lot about what parts of the narrative many Victorian readers were interested in; not Snowe’s empowered independence and self-conviction at the end of the novel, but the status of her love life. (see Brontë’s letter to George Smith on the subject in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, iii, p. 142).

314 *Jane Eyre*, p. 448.

315 *Villette*, p. 156.

316 Add MS 43482 ‘Villette’, fol. 259r.
‘Take it also my way’; this phrase is declarative in its own right and shows the evolution of this independent female voice. Nevertheless, Brontë changed Lucy’s response from a tone of compromise, almost apologising for her idiosyncrasy, to an antagonistic refusal of the reader’s (whichever kind of reader that may be) reaction. In the OUP edition of Villette, the punctuation in this passage has been standardised. In fact, none of the dashes that make this passage so moving on the manuscript survive. The dashes that appear on the manuscript make Lucy’s address more chaotic and emotional - both physically and metaphorically - and place emphasis on the final word of the substituted sentence: ‘wrong’. The strength and decisiveness (in its sound when reading and physical location on the manuscript) of that ‘wrong’ is striking; it is a defensive, stern response from Lucy against her own anticipation of how the reader will react to her narrative. Thus, in the same sense that Lucy has been labelled as an ‘unreliable’ narrator by many critics, I would argue that it is the anticipation of the unreliable reader that produces the narrative antagonism - and fills those defensive silences - in Villette.

The way that Brontë edits the narrative voice makes the terms of the reader’s role clear: it is Lucy who maintains power over what is discussed in the autobiography. The reader’s ‘activating’ role in meaning-production only occurs when Lucy invites them to do so and in order to maintain this dynamic, Brontë makes the reader aware of the relationship between Lucy’s life and the materiality of her text. For example, when describing her feelings of loneliness, she does so in terms of her lack of written correspondence: ‘[f]ollowing that eventful evening at the theatre, came for me seven weeks as bare as seven sheets of blank paper: no word was written on one of them; not a visit, not a token.’317 Similarly, when

317 Villette, p. 267.
rejecting her romantic feelings for Dr John, she literally buries the letters that signify them: ‘I meant also to bury a grief…I thrust it deep in’. The language is laced in Lucy’s suppressed sexual desire; physical experiences and relationships are akin to narrative and textuality for Lucy. When this is refused her, she instead takes to describing her emotional turmoil during that period - an act that situated Brontë’s novel outside of the remit of the realist form in the mid-nineteenth century and led *The Athenaeum* to criticise it:

> The confidential and intimate minuteness of its imaginary writer’s confessions - the fragmentary way in which they stop, to be resumed at some later period, or to be eked out by collateral disclosures, - while they give to *Villette* the semblance of a real record, render its scenes more than ordinarily unmanageable.

The anonymous reviewer for *The Athenaeum* voices the frustration that readers of the novel can experience because of the ways it flouts the most common conventions of the novel form in the mid-nineteenth-century to provide linear plot-lines. And they grasp the root of this frustration: in her endeavour to represent female subjectivity in a convincing way, Brontë adopts a fragmentary style of writing (something that will be explored later). Not only this, the balance (or imbalance) between fragments and ‘collateral disclosures’ are intentional; implicit in Lucy’s contradictions is that her narrative is ‘more than ordinarily unmanageable’ because of the contrast between the normative female narrative (such as the one played out by Paulina) and her own experience.

Waiting for a letter from Dr John, Lucy exposes her dependence on textuality by comparing herself to an animal ‘upon the verge of famine’; she describes how she prides the letters she does receive ‘like the blood in my veins’.

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318 *Villette*, p. 296.
319 *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, p. 188.
320 *Villette*, p. 268; p. 247.
moves on from the use of similes to self-reflexivity in order to dramatise the struggle she experiences to express her emotions, while maintaining control of her narrative. In other words, she exposes the very fragmentariness of her ‘collateral disclosures’ that The Athanaeum considered to be an inconsistency in the form of the novel. Brontë’s revisions on the manuscript illustrate how she enhanced the visibility of these inconsistencies:

Oh! to speak truth - and drop that tone of a false philosophy which long to sustain - out-wears Nature’s endurance - I underwent in those long seven miserable defections weeks bitter fears and pains, strange inward trials, mortal swoonings away of Hope; intolerable encroachments of Despair.321

Lucy Snowe reminds the reader of her narrative control by implying that her narrative at times only touches the surface of her experience. The ‘false calm’ that dictates her appearance to other characters in the novel seemingly masks the reality of her turbulent emotions, which she exposes only to make her silences elsewhere in the novel more present. Brontë’s original use of ‘philosophy’ suggests that Lucy’s tone up to this point has been in keeping with a set of ideals about how she should behave. The change to ‘calm’ indicates how the narrative is doing more than this, however; by this point, the reader is aware of the idiosyncrasies that place Lucy outside of a normative female narrative (the ways in which she compares herself to Paulina are enough to establish this). Brontë is suggesting instead that Lucy’s conformity to female repression is only a narrative guise; she is exposing how Lucy’s cold exterior and narrative voice in times of turmoil, such as her claim that she ‘stood still, gazed, and considered’ when observing Paulina’s excitement at reuniting with her father, are actually masking a

321 Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 178r.
more turbulent reality beneath.\textsuperscript{322} She is drawing attention to the silences she is producing within the narrative, which in itself provides the commentary on the ‘false philosophy’ of female behaviour. It is at moments such as this that the reader reflects on Lucy’s narrative voice up to this point and what it might be hiding.

Brontë’s second deletion in this passage interestingly links it to another passage she reworks later in the chapter. She removes Lucy’s physical reaction to ‘Despair’ - her ‘mortal swoonings’ - and internalises her reaction instead. Brontë removes the suffering from Lucy’s ‘mortal,’ gendered, socialised body and refers instead to an internalised, seemingly un-gendered, state of depression. Lucy originally had a similar physical experience later on in the chapter when she finally does receive a letter but does not recognise the handwriting:

\begin{quote}
on the contrary, an autograph, for the moment, deemed unknown - a pale female scrawl, instead of a firm masculine character. I just dropped into my chair—faint from head to foot. I ^ thought Fate was too hard upon me, and I said audibly “This is cruel.”\textsuperscript{323}
\end{quote}

On both occasions, Brontë removes Lucy’s physical, feminised reaction in which she turns faint in her despair - ‘hysterical’ women were often portrayed in the nineteenth-century as swooning or fainting when they experienced intense

\textsuperscript{322} \textit{Villette}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{323} Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 185r.
emotion.\footnote{For instance, Jane Austen satirises this performance of female emotion in \textit{Persuasion} (1818) through the behaviour of the Musgrove sisters. In \textit{Martin Chuzzlewit}, ed. by Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), Dickens also pokes fun at the character of Mrs Gamp, who ‘performed swoons of different sorts’ (p. 740); swooning features more sincerely in \textit{Bleak House} when Lady Dedlock is reminded of her illegitimate child and affair with ‘Nemo’ - even then, swooning appears to evoke illicit female behaviour. The child Jane Eyre faints when overwrought with desperate emotion in the Red Room, ‘I suppose I had a species of fit: unconsciousness closed the scene’ (p. 18). For visual representations of female hysteria, famous examples include \textit{Abandoned} by James Tissot (1882) and \textit{A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière} by Pierre Aristide André Brouillet (1887). Interestingly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning transforms the idea of swooning at the beginning of \textit{Aurora Leigh} to mark the spiritual awakening of the female poet; this will be explored further in chapter three.} For example, Lucy swoons earlier in the novel in the famous scene outside the Catholic church, within which she took confession. This example appears to mark her transgressive behaviour as a Protestant who is seduced by the idea of confession: ‘To take this step could not make me more wretched than I was; it might soothe me.’\footnote{\textit{Villette}, p. 161.} Elsewhere in the novel - such as when she is confronted by the fake spectre of the nun - Lucy resists swooning: ‘Be the spectacle what it might, I could afford neither consternation, scream, nor swoon. Besides, I was not overcome. Tempered by late incident, my nerves disdained hysteria.’\footnote{ibid., p. 470.} Outside of the church, hysteria seems necessary for Brontë to comment on the insidiousness of Roman Catholicism - to the point that it overcomes the senses and sends Lucy into a state of unconsciousness. When presented with the nun, however, Brontë’s use of the word ‘disdained’ carries her distaste for overwhelmed female emotion; describing it as ‘hysteria’ would implicitly gender this behaviour for the nineteenth-century reader.

The revisions that we see in the quoted passages remove the gendered, performative dimension of Lucy’s suffering to place emphasis on her internal experience. This has three effects: Brontë removes the association of Lucy with feminised, hysterical behaviour which, (secondly) places emphasis on a universal
subjective experience of despair; internalising her experience (thirdly) makes it easier for Lucy to conceal or ‘temper’ these feelings. As in the case of the sighting of the nun, Lucy can present a tone of ‘false calm’ if she wishes to, though outbursts such as the ones she experiences when waiting for her letters make the reader aware that information has potentially been concealed from them elsewhere in the novel.

These implicit omissions are not the only thing that rouse the reader’s attention. Brontë dramatises the difficulty of narrating these subjective experiences while maintaining a sympathetic readership. She makes an excision on the manuscript that produces a silence within the narrative - but not without making the reader aware of her omission:

The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement. They see the long-buried prisoner disinterred and underwent agony, and then sunk to palsy - [c. one-and-a-half examination, too abstract for popular comprehension.

lines excised]327

The manuscript suggests that Brontë originally went on to elaborate on the reality of Lucy’s poor emotional state for the reader. However, she more antagonistically implies that she expects the reader to be unable to comprehend this experience. Not only does it invoke the reader’s curiosity when reading the text to understand the ‘intricacies’ of Lucy’s despair, but it reinforces the narrator’s power over the reader. Implicitly, Lucy cannot trust the reader to take her seriously; in this case, she will withhold her commentary. To make the reader aware of the omission, however, allows her to establish the idea that female suffering is not taken

327 Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 189r.
seriously. She is almost getting her own back: “if you will not take me seriously, then I will tease you by suggesting that I am withholding something from you”. She distances herself from the reader; they are no longer a confidential companion privy to her autobiography, they are grouped into a ‘popular’ readership who will, implicitly, interpret her story in a superficial way.

Brontë suggests that this theme of pretence - which seems necessary for the female narrator to maintain control over the way she is represented and received by her imaginary reader - has creative implications for the author. She dramatises this on several occasions throughout *Villette* through an allegorical struggle between Reason and Imagination. Reason - an ironically unreasonable character - internalises Lucy’s impulse *not* to write, express and publish; on the other hand, Imagination (or Fancy) appears as a sanctuary for Lucy, a relief from the schematic narrative imposed by Reason. Brontë’s introduction of these two characters - and her reworking of the passage on the manuscript - is worth quoting at length because the reader can observe the points at which she creates intentional silences; silences that do not simply conceal expression (a style of writing that Reason would encourage) but play into Brontë’s rendering of female imagination as something we can describe as ‘extra-grammatical’:

“But” I again broke in “Where the bodily presence is weak and the speech written language contemptible - surely there cannot be error in making a letter the medium of better utterance than faltering lips can achieve - ?

Reason only answered “At your peril you cherish that idea suffer its influence to animate any writing of yours!”

“But if I feel - may I never express?”

“Never!” declared Reason.

I groaned under her bitter sternness. Never - never - oh hard word! This not Hag - this Reason would never let me look up or smile or hope: she could not rest unless I were altogether crushed, cowed, broken-in and broken-down. According to her I was born only to work for a piece of bread, to
await the pains of death, and steadily through all life to despond. Reason might be right, yet no wonder we are glad at times to defy her, to rush from under her rod and give a truant hour to Fancy her soft, bright Foe, our sweet Help - our divine Hope. [c. four words excised] We shall and must break bounds at intervals despite the terrible revenge that awaits our return. Reason is vindictive as a devil; for me - she was always envenomed as a step-mother; if I have obeyed her - it has chiefly been with the obedience of fear not of love; long ago I should have died of her ill-usage, her savage, ceaseless blows her stint, her chill, her barren board and icy bed ^ but for that [c. five words excised] who held my secret and sworn allegiance.328

For the reader of the published text, Snowe gives a truant hour to ‘Imagination’ rather than ‘Fancy’; the fact that Brontë made this distinction at a later stage emphasises the different cultural capital of these two ideas, which was previously discussed by Coleridge.329 Coleridge describes the ‘passive’ ‘counterfeiter’ Fancy, which simply reproduces what it comprehends, and it is telling that Brontë aspires to the transformative, creative power of Imagination that he considers superior.330 Brontë makes a broader claim for female authorship by extending the scope of Lucy’s struggle from letter-writing to ‘written language’ more generally. In doing so, this passage self-reflexively hints at a specifically gendered experience of composition.

Lucy is struggling with a gendered expectation to ‘steadily through all life to despond’. It implies that her subjectivity chafes against a tendency for women to be viewed as passive characters in the nineteenth-century (a trope that female-authored literature, from Jane Austen’s *Emma* to Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, often counters). The commas, dashes and visual stresses within the following sentence create a kind of rhythm that does indeed ‘rush’ towards Fancy

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328 Add MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fols. 112-3.
329 Villette, p. 229.

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and away from the restrictive language of Reason. Even though Brontë builds this energy, however, the manuscript makes her silences about Imagination more noticeable. The physical excisions show that Brontë removed text on both of the occasions in which she potentially elaborated on the freedoms of imaginative power. It is only Reason that we learn about. The details of her allegiance to Imagination are indeed ‘secret and sworn,’ even if the reader is made aware of the ‘truant hour’ in which Lucy indulges this aspect of her creativity. Brontë’s non-narration hints towards the presence of something but relies on gesturing to its absence to characterise the female creative process. Her excisions on the manuscript - which distinguish these parts of the passage from others that are simply crossed out - open up the space in which meaning is produced for the female author. If it is an ‘error’ for a woman to exercise her Imagination, and one that must be ‘revenged’, then Brontë reclaims the practice by using silence to suggest something that the ‘faltering lips’ of female expression struggle against.

For it cannot be ignored that Brontë genders the struggle against Reason by comparing her to a ‘step-mother’. It is a figure that anticipates Woolf’s ‘The Angel in the House’, the ‘phantom’ who ‘used to come between me and my paper’.331 Reason is equally phantom-like, a step-mother who is implicitly infertile: she starves her illegitimate offspring and censors progress and expression through ‘fear’. The turn within Brontë’s final sentence, ‘but for that kinder power’ implicitly creates a comparison between Reason, the step-mother, and Imagination, the fertile producer of ‘divine Hope’. Where Woolf is able to kill the phantom which haunts her own creative impulse (‘I turned upon her and

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caught her by the throat’), Brontë uses her powers of evasion to produce meaning in those ‘extra-grammatical’ silences that she produces on the manuscript. She relies on the reader to ‘activate,’ to use Bakhtin’s terminology, and infer the dichotomy that she linguistically constructs between Reason and Imagination, which allows her to produce meaning without committing it to ‘written language’.

To complicate matters even further, however, the binary that Brontë constructs between Reason and Imagination does not necessarily play out in the way that the reader might expect. In fact, Brontë makes reference to the physicality of the manuscript within the narrative to hint at the necessity for Reason to produce Lucy’s evasive antagonisms. Upon replying to a letter from Dr John, Reason returns to supervise the response. Brontë then launches an ironic criticism of female sexuality that ends with Lucy’s self-censorship; a physical process which mimics the material attributes of the manuscript:

To begin with - Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her in the ink bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread our paper, dipped ^ an eager in ink purple and perfumed as mine — and, with deep enjoyment, poured out what our sincere heart. one really When we had done; when two sheets were covered with the active language of a strongly adherent affection, a rooted and [illegible word]

I disdain with the utmost scorn every sneaking suspicion of gratitude (once for all - in this parenthesis - I deny - I thrust aside the base idea of, what are called - “warmer feelings”; women do not entertain these “warmer feelings” where from the commencement, through the whole progress of an acquaintance - they have never once been cheated of the conviction that to do so would be to commit a mortal absurdity; nobody ever launches into Love unless her or he has seen or dreamt the rising of Hope’s star above the deep] but when I had given expression to a closely-clinging and deeply honouring attachment - an attachment that wanted to attract to itself and take into its own lot all that was painful in the destiny of its object, that would, if it could, have absorbed and conducted away all

332 Woolf, p. 141.
Lucy’s original response to Dr John is ‘active;’ it is almost too energetic, rushing forward in intense emotion; ‘pouring out’ in an unmediated - and seemingly passionate - manner. One gets the sense of Lucy’s ‘sincere’ feelings towards Dr John, which are implicitly realised in the process of writing: alliterations such as ‘adherent affection’ and ‘closely-clinging’ indicate the kinds of poetic and romantic feelings Lucy describes in her prose. But, of course, the reader does not have access to this letter: we engage in that ‘activating’ role again to infer what she could have written, to interpret the extent of her ‘rooted and active gratitude’.

This kind of effusive language by which Lucy Snowe describes her first letter means that Brontë’s rejection of ‘warmer feelings’ is ironic. The revision she made in this sentence indicates how she made her commentary more hyperbolic. She grounds her commentary in the physical, ‘mortal’ female body: it is, implicitly, not for women to decide on matters of ‘Love’. Indeed, she removes the pronoun ‘her’ to place emphasis on the male. Brontë’s irony explains exactly why Lucy does not divulge the content of her first letter to Dr John; it is implied that, if she were to do so, she would not be taken seriously or the reader would regard her with ‘absurdity’.

The energy within this passage reaches its climax when Reason returns to regain control of Lucy’s emotional outpouring. The monosyllabic words build up the tension within the final sentence; one that coincidentally (or deliberately)
describes just the kind of physical interaction with the text that one can observe on
the manuscript of *Villette*. One can therefore read passages such as this as Brontë’s
self-reflexive commentary on the composition of the novel itself. Her final
declarative sentence ‘[s]he did right’ achieves its effect from its placement at the
end of this climactic physical rendering of the letter. It could be interpreted as
bitter: Lucy conceding that female emotion should be repressed (according to the
ways in which it could potentially be received). It could also be interpreted as
antagonistic; if Lucy runs the risk of being called ‘absurd’ then she will revise her
expression altogether into a ‘terse, curt missive of a page’. It is this double-
meaning that Brontë takes advantage of in the production of the narrative voice,
allowing Lucy to produce a counter-narrative within her evasions to negotiate her
own representation alongside the normative narrative of femininity. The following
section will analyse Brontë’s survey of other female artists and subjects within
*Villette* to understand what this normative narrative could be. Once this has been
explored, the final section will develop my argument that, working against the
superficial portraits of women she is confronted with, fragmentariness allows
Lucy to embrace the ‘wholesome truths’ of her subjectivity while maintaining
control of her representation.

‘doll,’ ‘angel’ or ‘fiend’: Revising Models of Female Representation in *Villette*
I have so far demonstrated how Brontë uses silence and self-reflexivity as the
terms of Lucy Snowe’s autobiographical act within *Villette*, which allows her to
allude to unconventional aspects of the protagonist’s narrative. The success of this
silence is somewhat predicated on portraits of other female figures within the
novel that Lucy contrasts herself against. This section will examine what is at
stake for the female subject in *Villette* when subject to Brontë’s unconventional mode of representation, namely the way in which she polarises female experience. Brontë surveys different modes of female representation, as well as the agency of the female artist, to legitimise Lucy’s silences and evasions. They do so by suggesting that it is necessary to balance the artificial representation of women within Victorian society and their comparatively tumultuous subjective experience.

Brontë critiques multiple portraits of women in the novel. In addition to her protagonist’s autobiography, paintings and correspondence are considered alongside the behaviour of women in the public eye as equally contributing to a particular mode of narration concerning the female subject. Characterised by her internal dialogues between Imagination and Reason, Brontë conceives of the female narrative as ambivalent, sometimes paradoxical; the struggle between expression and reservation, opulence and restraint. While Anne Mellor considers this ‘principle of polarity’ to be a feat of masculine Romanticism, signifying the unitary male subject which has ‘a strong sense of its own ego boundaries,’ Brontë adopts the symbol of polarity to instigate a female identity crisis that Lucy Snowe assays to produce a mode of narration - or sense of self - that is at once unitary, self-reflexive and cryptic.334

Earlier in the chapter, I demonstrated how Brontë dramatises this mediation in the character of Reason, the internalised voice Lucy describes as a ‘hag,’ who continually tempers the metaphorical space between Lucy’s ability ‘to feel’ and her desire ‘to express’.335 While it appears that Lucy’s internalised sense of

335 *Villette*, p. 229.
Reason produces a self-censoring impulse, Brontë’s survey of various female subjects that Lucy encounters suggests that the woman’s ability to withhold expression at certain points produces a more constructive autobiographical narrative (allowing them to transcend the tropes of female expression that are displayed elsewhere within the novel). Thus, Brontë transforms the symbol of Imagination and Reason into a productive paradox, which allows the female subject in *Villette* to construct her own ego. The sense of the ego’s ‘boundaries’ is consequently less tied up with binaries such as ‘the self’ and ‘other,’ but in *Villette*, the ‘self’ and ‘other’ are frequently interplaying.

Brontë considers this struggle to be a particularly gendered paradox. This is registered through her survey of various art forms (a number of which are produced by men). Before exploring how Brontë produces this commentary self-reflexively on the manuscript of *Villette*, it is useful to turn to a conversation between the female protagonists of her previous novel, *Shirley*, in which the eponymous heroine reflects on the production and consumption of women in male-authored literature and how it precludes the reality of female experience:

“If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in a true light; they misapprehend them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend. Then to hear them fall into extasies with each other’s creations, worshipping the heroine of such a poem - a novel - drama, thinking it fine - divine! Fine and divine it may be, but often quite artificial - false as the rose in my best bonnet there. If I spoke all I think on this point; if I gave my real opinion of some first-rate female characters in first-rate works, where should I be? Dead under a cairn of avenging stones in half an hour.”

“Shirley, you chatter so, I cannot fasten you: be still. And after all, authors’ heroines are almost as good as authoresses’ heroes.”

“Not at all: women read men more truly than men read women. I’ll prove that in a magazine paper some day when I’ve time; only it will never be
inserted: it will be ‘declined with thanks,’ and left for me at the publisher’s.”

Not only does Brontë suggest there is a crude binary into which ‘men’ place female identity (one that is devoid of life, a mere picture of femininity as a ‘doll’ and ‘angel’, or one that defies norms of all human behaviour as a ‘fiend’), she suggests how women perpetuate this ‘illusion’ in social performances and withholding of speech. Shirley herself acknowledges how she buys into these constructions when displaying herself in society and depends on the artificial beauty of a ‘false rose’ in her ‘best bonnet’; like the rose, her public identity is a pretence. While it may seem that this artifice ameliorates the reality of her character, the fact that the rose is ‘false’ develops the idea that public female identity is ‘a queer thing,’ something devoid of life that tricks the eyes by imitation.

Brontë exposes how female public identity, while at the same time as being ‘improved’ by artifice, is also something uncanny that can rupture the sense of reality in female subjectivity. The fact that men praise ‘each other’s creations’ creates a continuous cycle in which this reality is perpetually precluded and Brontë suggests that masculine privilege pervades society to such an extent that it prevents women from offering a ‘real opinion’. Implicit is that the majority of readers within the marketplace - including women - would not wish this illusion to be dispelled. Brontë thus characterises an attitude here which she would continue to explore in *Villette*. She uses publishing as an example in this passage to demonstrate how the identity of ‘woman’ is produced through the power-structures operating within society. As well as the practical struggle to subvert this

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‘illusion’ (depending on whether a publisher will accept a text), Brontë indicates the internalised anxiety for women to publish their ‘real opinion’, in fear of being attacked in an almost biblical manner with ‘avenging stones’. Perhaps this is the kind of ‘terrible revenge’ that Lucy anticipates is awaiting her after indulging her creative impulse.337

Villette’s deliberate subtext, in which Lucy surveys and repudiates the male-enforced paradox of ‘half doll, half angel’ and ‘fiend’ is also recognised by Griffiths, who notes the ‘encrypted critiques’ within Brontë’s commentary on paintings of women.338 Griffiths encourages a closer reading of Brontë’s ironic tone when, perusing an art gallery, she describes ‘The Cleopatra’, a figure that intrigues Lucy due to its corpulence and decadence. Griffiths argues that Brontë’s description of Cleopatra’s ‘affluence of flesh’ and ‘half-reclined’ position does not suggest that Lucy is repulsed by her, as has often been argued, but instead that she admires a ‘figure whose role transgresses Victorian ideas of femininity.’339 While this offers an empowering reading, Lucy’s description of the painting as ‘on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap’ rather undermines Griffiths’ recognition of inspirational feminist models for Lucy who, she argues, uses them to develop her own role as autobiographer throughout the novel’s development.340

Instead, Lucy’s critique picks fault with the artist who seemingly misunderstands how women should be represented, resulting in an image that is so far from the truth to be almost worthless ‘claptrap’:

She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to

337 Villette, p. 229.
338 Griffiths, p. 51.
340 Villette, p. 200.
do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material - seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery - she managed to make inefficient raiment.\textsuperscript{341}

It is worth noting that Lucy addresses her critique to the subject of the painting: Cleopatra herself. Imagining that the model of the painting could choose the position in which she is placed and the garments in which she is clothed, she condemns the figure for her passivity and submitting to the male gaze of the painter. As Griffiths points out, Lucy’s tone is of course ironic. She creates an intentional contrast between the depiction of the figure and her own quotidian reflections on the practicalities of her appearance. Thus, she implies multiple meanings from her critique: how the artist’s depiction of femininity does not capture the reality of Lucy’s experience as a woman, how the female subject’s silence and struggle to reject these norms perpetuates that discourse and how a critical double-standard will place blame on the female subject’s behaviour, rather than the misconceptions of the artist.

Emma Rees’ work on Brontë’s treatment of the sexual female body is useful for understanding Lucy’s ambivalent reaction: she argues that the disjuncture between the materiality of ‘women’s actual bodies’ and the ‘image of passive femininity’ engenders a struggle within the female subject ‘to make sense of its identity’.\textsuperscript{342} The female figure represented by the male artist is admired by a mostly male crowd of spectators (probably, as Shirley would imagine them, falling ‘into extasies with each other’s creations’) but deconstructs Lucy’s sense of her own gender identity. Thus, Monsieur Paul’s description of Lucy gazing at

\textsuperscript{341} Villette, p. 200.
\textsuperscript{342} Rees, p. 130.
the picture with the ‘self-possession of a garçon’ is loaded with meaning, both in
terms of her repudiation of the image of woman and how she internalises a
masculine double critical standard regarding the depiction of women.343

The way Brontë compares Lucy’s reaction to ‘The Cleopatra’ - and the
paradoxical way in which the female subject is received - to a passionate
performance from the actress ‘Vashti’ suggests that, unlike Griffiths’ impression
of these two figures as inspirational models for Lucy, they enact two extremities
against which she measures the representation of her own subjectivity. Brontë
contradictorily describes Vashti’s performance as both ‘a marvellous sight: a
mighty revelation’ and ‘a spectacle low, horrible, immoral’.344 Lucy evidently
admires the performance; one gets the sense from her impassioned response that
the ‘mighty revelation’ is also something she internalises and makes her reflect on
her own experience. However, the contradictory sense she has of Vashti as
something ‘immoral’ confirms that Lucy, too, measures her performance against
the standards by which it will be received.

The OED’s definition of the word ‘spectacle’ is useful for understanding the
conflict Lucy experiences in her reaction to the actress: ‘A person or thing
exhibited to, or set before, the public gaze as an object either (a) of curiosity or
contempt, or (b) of marvel or admiration.’345 Brontë’s description of the
performance as a ‘spectacle’ emphasises the public nature of the experience; the
definition of the word ‘spectacle’ reveals the ways in which a performance will be
received by a collective ‘public gaze,’ rather than the individual’s response to it.

343 Villette, p. 201.
344 ibid., p. 258.
186057?rskey=8UguHN&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid [accessed 11 June 2018].
Thus, Brontë’s description of how Vashti’s performance suggests that ‘what hurts becomes immediately embodied’ gives a sense of Lucy’s ambivalent response.\textsuperscript{346} She is inspired by the ways in which Vashti’s expression is ‘unmediated,’ but also finds the nature of the ‘spectacle’ paralysing for her own representational act.\textsuperscript{347} Brontë suggestively claims that the ability to spontaneously translate feeling into expression results in Vashti transcending materiality to become ‘[s]carcely a substance herself’.\textsuperscript{348} Elsewhere, Brontë makes use of the idea of ‘substance’ to suggest it is the very idea of materiality that produces Lucy Snowe’s alternative narrative mode: in Lucy ‘Spirit and Substance, were hard to re-unite: they greeted each other, not in an embrace, but a racking sort of struggle.’\textsuperscript{349}

The manuscript - and the self-reflexive mode mirrored within the text - provides an illustration of how the female artist ponders over the text and its material form. Revisions (and their textual implications) provide the counter-commentary of this ‘racking sort of struggle,’ unlike Vashti’s performance which is relatively spontaneous and ephemeral. These two contrasting modes are illustrated in Brontë’s excision of the Vashti passage; one that is difficult to transcribe because of the way she has squeezed a substitution below the cutting:

Fallen, insurgent, banished - she remembers the Heaven where she rebelled: Heaven’s light following her [\textbf{c. seven words excised}] forlorn remoteness.\textsuperscript{350}

\begin{flushright}
exile: pierces its confines, and discloses their
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{346} Villette, p. 158.
\textsuperscript{347} ibid., p. 158.
\textsuperscript{348} ibid., p. 258.
\textsuperscript{349} ibid., p. 164.
\textsuperscript{350} MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 162r.
The punctuation of this passage mirrors the emotional impulsiveness of Vashti’s performance. It jars and jolts between commas, dashes and semi-colons. However, there is another jolt on the manuscript-page produced by Brontë’s cutting, which disrupts Lucy’s recounting of the experience. The seven words that are cut out of the manuscript are replaced with seven more, leaving little textual evidence of how Brontë’s mode of editing reworked this passage. Nevertheless, its occurrence at such a suggestive point (in which Lucy reworks various forms of female artistry) highlights the contrast between Vashti’s emotional outpouring and Lucy’s narrative control.

Brontë uses Vashti’s performance as an opportunity to further criticise the male artist of ‘The Cleopatra’ and implies that the struggle for the female subject is located within a tangible embodiment of their gender: consider, for example, how the representation of Vashti contrasts to the exceedingly somatic depiction of Cleopatra as a ‘commodity of bulk.‘

Where was the artist of the Cleopatra? Let him come and sit down and study this different vision. Let him seek here the mighty brawn, the muscle, the abounding blood, the full-fed flesh he worshipped: let all materialists draw nigh and look on.

Brontë extends her criticism towards ‘materialists’ who implicitly force a distinction between the image of woman and her, inevitably disappointing, reality. The artist who gazes at the object, woman, does not penetrate beyond the ‘full-fled flesh’ and thus denies the ‘revelations’ of her interiority. By making the reader conscious of the materiality of both the text and the female subject, Brontë is extending her commentary from Shirley on the tendency for fiction to represent female subjectivity in artificial ways and thus experiments with ways that her

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351 Villette, p. 199.
352 Ibid., p. 258.
protagonist can express herself, while mitigating how she will be received by a mid-Victorian readership.

For example, when going on to describe Graham’s reaction to Vashti (which implicitly confirms the opinion of the ‘garçon’) Lucy’s description of his gaze as ‘critical’ and ‘callous,’ and Brontë’s reworking of the passage upon the manuscript, places emphasis on the alternative commentary produced within this passage that protests against his ‘branding judgement’:

such a strange smile went wandering round his lips - a smile so critical - [c. three words excised] so almost callous - I suppose that for natures of that order his sympathies were very callous -. In a few terse phrases he told me his opinion of and feeling towards the actress: he judged her as a woman not an artiste: it was a branding judgment.353

Brontë does not substitute the excised text with any other comments on Graham’s reaction to the actress. Instead, the excision aesthetically enacts a kind of silent protest, hinting that Lucy provides an equally callous ‘judgement’ on the ‘garçon’ who disapproves of the female ‘artiste’. Incidentally, Brontë’s choice of the word ‘artiste’ here emphasises performance; her critique on representation more generally hints that the role of ‘artiste’ is reserved not just for the actress, but for any woman artist who has to work within the confines of ideologies that govern their expression, to subvert them through performances and evasions. The clause that follows is given particular emphasis by its placement at the end of the sentence and Brontë’s word choice again seems to deliberately take advantage of the opportunity for double-meanings. The OED defines ‘branding’ as ‘[t]o mark or stamp with infamy, stigmatize,’ which hints at how, as a woman, Vashti’s reputation will inevitably bear the marks of how her performance is received by

353 MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 165r.
the public.\textsuperscript{354} However, ‘branding’ also evokes connotations of slavery: the ownership of bodies and oppression of the individual. Brontë’s use of the word in this sentence therefore suggests that, because of the social stigma attached to female performance, women - and their subjectivity - become enslaved by the male gaze. In the early parts of her narrative, Lucy herself is described as ‘a giant slave under the sway of good sense’ because she finds it painful to restrain her emotions from the ‘sense of disdain or ridicule’ from the onlooker.\textsuperscript{355} By drawing attention to what is at stake for the female artist, Brontë is engaging or ‘activating’ the reader in the narrative, inviting them to make interpretive links between the treatment of the artist here and the self-reflexive gestures embedded within 	extit{Villette}.

M. Paul frequently takes on the role of onlooker and is unsettled by Lucy’s masculine behaviour when observing ‘\textit{that} picture’ of ‘The Cleopatra,’ which results in his attempt to divert her attention away from it to four portraits of ‘La Vie D’\textit{une} Femme’.\textsuperscript{356} The portraits of conventional female roles, (a ‘jeune-fille,’ ‘mariée,’ ‘jeune mère’ and ‘veuve’),\textsuperscript{357} actively celebrate ideological female identities which, as Beth Newman argues, ‘chafes against […] [Lucy’s] experience of self’.\textsuperscript{358} This sense of conflict or ‘chafing’ is present upon the manuscript, where a very small excision suggests that Brontë wished to conceal Lucy’s original opinion of the ‘style’ of the paintings:

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{355} Villette, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{356} ibid., p. 201.
\textsuperscript{357} ‘young-girl,’ ‘married,’ ‘young mother’ and ‘widow’.
\textsuperscript{358} Newman, p. 25.
\end{footnotesize}
They were painted rather in [two words excised] style - flat, dead, pale and formal. [...] All these four “Anges” were grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! Insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers.\textsuperscript{359}

The proximity of the adjective ‘remarkable’ to the excision insists on the possibility of another adjective, perhaps one that would incriminate Lucy as a female character who rejects these female roles. This reading is not a subtext, however, as we can see from the rest of the passage that Lucy does not hold back in attacking these ideals of femininity with her frustrated epithets. What is suggested, on the other hand, is that there is something worse that Lucy could have said about these paintings, something that not only criticises the subjects of the painting, but the painter - it is, after all, the ‘style’ that she is criticising. Brontë does not explicitly describe the painter as male but the fact that Monsieur Paul deems these figures more appropriate for Lucy to study - and Lucy’s mocking tone towards them - suggests that the paintings are produced by the ‘garçon’. Again, she criticises the female subject; the excision suggests that silence becomes her strongest mode of criticism. It is a rhetorical gesture that, again, shifts the narrator-reader power dynamic, empowering the reader to ‘activate’ Lucy’s meaning within this passage. The manuscript-reader can project their commentary into the gap on the page; similarly, the reader of the text can project whatever their interpretation onto the adjective ‘remarkable,’ which can hold many different meanings. Thus, the art becomes the means of Brontë’s criticism, not the gender of the artist; she simply exposes that the ways in which such art is received tends to pass judgment on the female subject.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{359} MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 65r.}
'wholesome truths': Mediating Artifice Through Control

A survey of the tensions shared between the female artist and subject in Villette illustrates the modes of representation against which Brontë constructs the female autobiographical subject. The numerous revisions and excisions that occur suggestively at times when Lucy reflects on her self can therefore be argued to illustrate Brontë negotiating those models of female representation to create a female subject that maintains her public image, while still reflecting her subjective experience. As I have demonstrated, Brontë’s struggle with representation appears to concern the theme of artificiality. For Brontë, artificiality seems to be a given when it comes to representing the female subject; indeed, Lucy Snowe’s narrative could itself be labeled artificial because her evasions demonstrate how she constructs her representation according to how she desires the reader to view her. Nevertheless, I would argue that Brontë’s preference for silence, rather than mediating her choice of words, demonstrates how she attempts to create a female narrative which balances artifice with ‘collateral disclosures’ (to use The Athenaeum’s words). If Brontë could not (or would not) divulge some aspects of Lucy’s interiority - thereby creating an artificial narrative - then those that are offered to the reader are not artificial in the sense that they do not mask the truth of Lucy’s experience. On the contrary, they offer snippets of subjectivity, which allow Lucy’s narrative to transcend the shallow depictions of ‘The Cleopatra’ and ‘La Vie D’une Femme,’ while exerting a level of control that she does not observe in Vashti’s performance.

To illustrate how Brontë establishes Lucy’s subjectivity within artificiality in Villette, it is worth turning to her depiction of young girls who accompany the Labassecourean King and Queen to a concert. The girls are dressed in their finest
clothes, which make them appear beautiful and heavenly. In the same way that Shirley draws attention to the artificiality of her best bonnet, Lucy makes the reader aware of how this exterior appearance masks a far different reality beneath:

Young heads simply braided, and fair forms (I was going to write sylph forms, but that would have been quite untrue - several of these “jeunes filles” who had not numbered more than 15 or 17 years boasted shapes as robust and solid as those that of a stout Englishwoman of five and twenty] - fair forms robed in white or pale rose or heavenly blue suggested thoughts of Heaven and Angels. […]

Also during three months I had had one of them for my vis à vis at laple, and the quantity of household bread, butter and stewed fruit - she would habitually consume at “second déjeuner” was a world’s wonder - to be exceeded only by the fact of actually pocketing slices she could not eat. There be truths: wholesome truths - too.360

The girls are directly compared to a painting from ‘La Vie D’une Femme;’ they are acting out a role of the young girl (one that is nevertheless undermined by their physical shape). Thus, Brontë’s deletion of the word ‘heavenly’ may have been to avoid the repetition of the word, but also places emphasis on the simile: they appear to be heavenly and placidly submit to this image - it is an appearance rather than a truth. The excision contributes to this meaning; it creates a literal gap and silence on the page, suggesting that one could elaborate on the image of woman that the ‘[y]oung heads’ and ‘fair forms’ present, but they ultimately lack character. The language Brontë uses to describe them is limited to their ‘head’ or ‘forms;’ it precludes any sense of their interiority. Lucy’s self-reflexive description of the authorial decisions that go into her act of writing draws the reader’s attention to how the text itself can be considered as an artifice: ‘I was going to write sylph forms, but that would have been quite untrue’. Brontë makes Lucy’s mode of narration (and non-narration) transparent, even if it is at times evasive.

360 MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 87v.
The women appear like ‘sylphs’ or ‘Angels’ but they have a physical and private reality that undermines their ethereal presence; a reality that Lucy goes on to expose. She focusses on the tangible presence of the women she observes - they are no longer images of spiritual femininity with, implicitly, no character or ‘substance’ (to use the terms in which Vashti is described), but the ‘wholesome truth’ is that they take delight in eating (an act that emphasises both their gluttonous personalities and bodily instincts; qualities a reader would not associate with the ‘sylph,’ a sublime feminine spirit). These truths may not be beautiful but they are ‘wholesome’ in that they are more faithful to female experience than a myth or an artifice.

When dealing with the way that Lucy represents herself, Brontë negotiates the artificiality of her evasions and the outpourings of Lucy’s interiority. If ‘The Cleopatra’ and Vashti do not act as inspirational models which inform Lucy’s own representation of herself, they provide examples of how, as Jessica Brent puts its, ‘the self is destabilised in the eyes of others’ - particularly those who impose their own ideological narratives onto the female body.361 According to Brent, narrative provides a means through which the self can be reconstructed but Lucy’s evasions demonstrate that she in fact ‘loses control over her story’.362 However, Brent’s argument implicitly takes for granted the fact that ‘the self’ is defined in a way that is similar to a masculine Romantic model, such as Mellor’s idea that the male self is ‘bounded, unitary, complete, and instrumental’.363 While it does appear that Lucy’s outpourings or evasions are inconsistent, I offer an alternative reading that inconsistency does not necessarily mean the conception of self is fragmented. On

361 Brent, p. 89.
362 ibid., p. 93.
363 Mellor, p. 175.
the contrary, inconsistent outpourings reveal the ‘wholesome truth’ of Lucy’s narrative, but evasions demonstrate her control of its development. If the reader is made aware of Lucy’s ability to express, then they are also made conscious of how and when this expression has been withheld.

Similarly, excisions on the manuscript occur at suggestive moments (on many occasions, they fall alongside deletions which are simply crossed out), which hints that physical gaps and silences deliberately occur at particular places and became a part of Villette’s aesthetic when Brontë was preparing it for publication. Take, for instance, the famous passage in which Lucy experiences the uncanny feeling of looking upon herself as a stranger in the mirror:

we suddenly encountered another party approaching from the opposite direction. I just now see that group as it flashed upon me for one moment. A handsome middle-aged lady in dark velvet; a gentleman who might be her son - the best face, the finest figure - I thought - I had ever seen; a third person in a pink dress and black lace mantle - [c. two and a half lines excised]

the third person as well as the other two I noted them all ^ and for the fraction of a moment - believed them all strangers - thus receiving an impartial impression of their appearance. But the impression was hardly felt and not fixed, before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror filling a compartment between two pillars - dispelled it: the party was our own party. Thus for the first and - perhaps - only time in my life - I enjoyed the “giftie” of seeing myself as other see me. [two lines excised]

It brought No doubt No need to dwell on the result. There was a jar of discord, a pang of regret; yet - after all - I ought to be thankful; while yet after all - I ought to be thankful - certainly it was not flattering ^ - it might have been worse.364

It is significant that Lucy experiences this disjunction when she is clothed in a new dress for a public engagement. The moment is uncanny because Lucy becomes the object of her own gaze, once again developing the idea that female public identity is an artifice and does not reflect the reality of the self. Thus, as

364 MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 78r.
Brent argues, her self is indeed ‘destabilised’ in the eyes of others by the narrative that is implied by her appearance. Peter Brooks has written on the relationship between narrative and the body and provides a simple distinction that characterises Brontë’s meaning here: ‘The body is both ourselves and other’.\textsuperscript{365} The reader experiences the moment at the same time as Lucy, but that moment is fleeting. Before we can understand what this disparity between one’s appearance and their selfhood means for Lucy, she has regained ‘consciousness’. In a way that is symptomatic of the dynamic between expression and evasion in \textit{Villette}, Lucy barely has time to reveal the ‘wholesome truth’ of her reaction before she becomes aware of the public nature of her appearance.

The first excision is indeed suggestive, then, as it occurs during a sentence in which Lucy is describing her reflection. She never gets past her attire, however, but proceeds with a large gap, or silence. The implication is that Lucy could divulge her reflections, but she chooses not to. On the manuscript, the gap also provides a literal space within which the reader can become active in interpreting Lucy’s meaning and project their own fantasies about her reflection. The manuscript-reader becomes a participant in constructing Lucy’s narrative and it is these moments that Werner would describe as the point at which ‘reading approaches the experience of writing’.\textsuperscript{366} Additionally, these examples demonstrate how, in \textit{Villette}, Bakhtin’s theory that the text ‘cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue’ is given a further dimension, where the reader enters into a dialogue with the text and, to an extent, activates the development of the narrative.\textsuperscript{367}

\textsuperscript{366} Werner, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{367} Bakhtin, p. 276.
It is worth bearing in mind that it is not just the manuscript-reader who engages dynamically with the text at this point; Brontë’s physical gaps on the manuscript create similar gaps or silences within the text that are difficult for the reader to ignore. Consider the second excision in this passage; it lies close to text that is simply crossed out, hinting that there is a revision hierarchy, but it also makes the reader aware of Lucy’s omission: ‘No need to dwell on the result.’ In a novel that is so preoccupied with female identity, why does Brontë want to obscure Lucy’s reflection on herself? As a reader of the edited text, specifically, Brontë suggests that to acknowledge the crisis Lucy experiences when she does not recognise her public identity is enough; it is her psychological narrative that we are encouraged to follow. A reader may also interpret Lucy’s tone of disgust in the omission. She is potentially repulsed by her appearance, providing a commentary upon the reality of female experience in the Victorian public sphere; a meaning that would lose its effect if it were not preceded by a large excision. The point of this exercise is twofold: to demonstrate how excisions contribute to the evasive narrative mode of Villette (and have a demonstrable effect on how the text is interpreted) and the personal and diverse nature of the manuscript-reader’s response to the manuscript that fills these silences upon the page with interpretive gestures.

Attending to the manuscript enhances our interpretation of silence within the novel; it is perhaps another perpetual irony of the female archive that the physical quality of excisions cannot be captured by transcription. Figure 4 illustrates the physical effects of excision in a passage in which Lucy reflects on how her social position has the potential to disrupt her sense of self. In the transcription of the
passage, it is very easy to skim over the excisions without considering impact this style of revision can have on the text as it exists on the manuscript:

I was no bright lady’s shadow; not Miss de Bassompierre’s. Overcast it was my nature to be, of a subdued habit I was but the dimness & depression must both be voluntary—such as kept me docile enough—*[c. twelve words excised]* ^ at my own desk in the midst of my in now well-accustomed pupils at Mde Beck’s first-classe, or alone at my own were bedside in her dormitory, or in the alley and seat in her garden which my qualifications were not convertible—not adaptable; they could not be made of called mine ^ —*[c. three words excised]* the foil to any gem the—[one the adjunct of the word excised]^ to any beauty—[one word excised] appendage to any greatness in Christendom.368

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368 MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 233r.
The cuttings are small and precise; they would require a level of patience and physical labour. At the risk of psychoanalysing Brontë, it is also worth mentioning that these minute excisions would require a level of risk and ruthlessness. Scissors - especially when used in such a precise way - could easily slip and damage other parts of the manuscript-page (and therefore the text). The fact that text is physically removed and destroyed also confirms the hierarchical nature of Brontë’s revisions; the words she is using in this passage to describe Lucy’s reflection on her self - and her relation to others - are implicitly not appropriate for the manuscript-reader.

Ironically, in this passage, Lucy anticipates the way she is interpreted by the people around her (and by extension the reader), only to open up the gaps within her description of herself to allow ‘extra-grammatical’ space for the manuscript-reader to produce different interpretations. The key word here is ‘voluntary;’ Lucy can embrace others interpreting her personality if it is on her terms. In this case, for example, M. de Bassompierre is taking advantage of his social privilege to engage Lucy in a role that would support the social advancement of his daughter. Thus, Lucy’s rejection of this role bears the shadow of Brontë’s commentary in Jane Eyre on the oppression of individuality in middle-class female working roles, such as that of the governess. Lucy places an emphasis in this passage on what is ‘her’s’ - the material things that she can claim for herself. Her critique implies that women need autonomy over their own lives and narratives for their subjectivity to develop. The gaps in the manuscript show points at which Brontë is creating a cryptic narrative, turning Lucy into the ‘cypher’ that she celebrates; she is offering the manuscript-reader space in which to comment upon the ways in which a mid-
Victorian society considers women of a certain social position to be ‘appendages’ rather than subjects of their own narrative.\textsuperscript{369}

Moments at which Lucy surveys others’ perceptions of her are not uncommon within \textit{Villette} but becomes the means by which Brontë exposes the futile narratives frequently attached to women working in the autobiographical mode. Writing to William Smith Williams (the reader at her publishing house) in November 1852, Brontë clarified that her omissions were intentional authorial acts:

You say that she may be thought morbid and weak unless the history of her life be more fully given. I consider that she is both morbid and weak at times […] If, however, the book does not express all this - there must be a great fault somewhere - I might explain away a few other points but it would be too much like <wr> drawing a picture and then writing underneath the name of the object intended to be represented. We know what sort of a pencil that is which needs an ally in the pen.\textsuperscript{370}

It is interesting how Brontë compares her text to a ‘picture,’ a visual image that does not require further clarification through language. She identifies how the threshold of his expectation is inadequate for reading the text according to the level of interaction and interpretation it requires. When visiting the art gallery, Lucy Snowe does not interpret ‘The Cleopatra’ according to a piece of writing that is laid before her, but meaning is produced through her subjective response to it. This is similar to the dynamic that Brontë adopts in \textit{Villette}; indeed a significant portion of Lucy’s autobiographical narrative (and the ‘wholesome truth’ of her thoughts and reactions to events in the novel) are provided as clues or hints for the reader to interpret.

\textsuperscript{369} \textit{Villette}, p. 356.
\textsuperscript{370} \textit{Letters of Charlotte Brontë}, iii, p. 80.
An example of the way that Brontë provides clues to the ‘wholesome truth’ of Lucy’s personality can be found in yet another survey of the ways in which other characters view Lucy:

Snowe

Well done Lucy!” cried I to myself “you have come in for a pretty lecture, brought on yourself a “rude savon”, and all through your wicked fondness for worldly vanities! Who would have thought it? You deemed

yourself a [one word excised] sober-sides^; Miss Fanshawe there regards you as a sort of second Diogenes in his tub; M. de Bassompierre the other day politely turned the conversation when it ran on the wild gifts of the

Snowe

actress Vashti—because as he kindly said “Miss Frost looked

uncomfortable” [c. two lines excised] Dr John Bretton knows you only as creature

“quiet Lucy”—“a being inoffensive as a shadow”; he has said, and you have heard him say it: “Lucy’s disadvantages spring from over-gravity in such are your own and your

tastes and manner, want of colour in character and costume.” ^ [c. seven

friends’ impressions, and behold! There suddenly starts up a little man differencing dia-

words excised]metrically from all these, roundly charging you with being too volatile and unstable, too flowery and coloury

harsh

pitiless

too airy and cheery [c. nine lines excised] This ^ little man—this rigid censor—371

At almost every instance during which Brontë can elaborate on how Lucy is perceived, she replaces the text with an excision. Lucy ‘deems’ herself to be melancholy, but that is nothing new to the reader; it is an admission of what the reader has witnessed all the way through the novel. However, the gap suggests that Lucy considers herself in different terms and leaves it to the reader to speculate on that alternative meaning. Similarly, she does not elaborate on the reasons why M. de Bassompierre considers it inappropriate for Lucy to converse about Vashti; however, the reader already knows that Lucy admires the actress’ performance and so can predict Lucy’s transgressive response to this censorship.

And then to move to M. Paul’s perception, which appears full of contradictions and presents an ‘unstable’ character indeed: Brontë removes what seems to be Lucy’s elaboration on this identity. In all cases in this passage, the removed text does not suggest that Brontë is self-censoring; on the other hand, it opens up the manuscript-page to further acts of interpretation. This occurs within the text too - the reader is given enough contradictory opinions to project some alternative interpretation of Lucy’s character onto the text. As Brontë said to William Smith Williams, she provides enough information for the reader to engage with the text in the same way as a spectator to a painting. We can therefore interpret Lucy’s tone when reflecting on her own representation as ironic.

A study of the novel’s revision demonstrates how this ironic tone was produced - or enhanced - after initial composition, which exposes the importance of this narrative mode within Brontë’s female autobiography. For example, when Ginevra Fanshawe asks ‘in a tone of such undisguised and unsophisticated curiosity’ “‘Who are you, Miss Snowe?’,” Lucy’s response almost mocks the reader who maintains this expectation at such a late stage in the novel;372

am I indeed?
“Who can I be? Perhaps a personage in disguise…? Pity I don’t look the character.”373

Brontë once more shifts the tone of Lucy’s narration, from a self-effacing sense of her identity being tied up with aspiration and possibility, to a mocking rhetorical question which makes Lucy’s self-understanding implicit. What is more, Lucy points out how the reality of her character may be obscured by her appearance; her body - as a visual and material embodiment of her personality - is at odds with

373 MS 43481 ‘Villette’, fol. 250r.
her self. It is the self-reflexivity of the metaphorical or linguistic gap between representation and reality that characterises Brontë’s approach not only to how the female subject is represented, but how this identity formation is tied up with the act of writing and role of the female author itself.
Fig. 5 ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 216r.

Fig. 6 Damage to fol. 216 from ink scraping.
CHAPTER THREE

‘Double vision’: *Aurora Leigh* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Hybrid Poetics

In the Fifth Book of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes that ‘poets should/Exert a double vision’ (V. 183-4).\(^{374}\) In the verse that follows, she explains her meaning: poets should generalise and individualise simultaneously; see ‘near things’ and ‘distant things’ with the same comprehensiveness and intimacy (V. 185-187). Barrett Browning also makes a wider claim that is not just about the poet’s ability to capture their subject: she confronts a stereotype that feminine works ‘individualise’ and masculine works ‘universalise’.\(^{375}\) Aurora’s desire to hybridise this binary is central to her development as a female poet. In fact, hybridity plays a key role in the eponymous heroine’s development as a revisionary poetic subject and is often reflected in self-reflexive moments such as this one. Revisions that Barrett Browning made to the printer’s copy manuscript of the poem when preparing it for publication reveal hybridity to be a key strategy for positioning her heroine within poetic debates in the mid-nineteenth-century.

The changes that Barrett Browning made at this late stage in composition expose how hybridity plays out in numerous ways: in the coupling of masculine and

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\(^{374}\) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996). This will be the edition referred to throughout.

\(^{375}\) This stereotype is captured in Aurora Leigh’s exchange with her cousin Romney in the Second Book, where he criticises her ability to write poetry because she is a woman:

    You *generalise*

    *Oh, nothing,—not even grief!* Your quick-breathed hearts,
    So sympathetic to the *personal* pang,
    Close on each separate knife-stroke, yielding up
    A whole life at each wound, *incapable*
    Of deepening, widening a large lap of life
    *To hold the world-full woe.* (II. 183-189) [my emphasis]
feminine poetic traditions, the dialogic relationship between the poem’s metre and its meaning and the assimilation of everyday subjects with the epic form.

Unlike Gaskell’s manuscript, where revision mitigates social aspects of the text’s reception, and Brontë’s, where revisions cause silences that maintain the female subject’s control over her representation, the way this manuscript is revised appears not so directly related to the social experience of the female author. On the contrary, Barrett Browning’s changes are smaller and more specifically related to the nature of Aurora’s hybrid poetics. Nevertheless, this manuscript presents an opportunity to experiment with a methodology that recognises revision as a key part of female authorial identity. In the case of Aurora Leigh, deletions and substitutions establish and refine Barrett Browning’s metrical and thematic challenge to poetic tradition, which facilitates feminist interpretations of the text.

The ways that doubleness features in Aurora Leigh’s struggle as a woman writer has been written about extensively since the poem’s return to popularity after the publication of Cora Kaplan’s Women’s Press edition in 1978. For example, Joyce Zonana considers Aurora’s artistic autonomy towards the end of the poem to be based on her simultaneous roles as poet and muse;376 Mary Mullen observes parallel temporalities in the poem that facilitate the construction of unconventional female identity;377 Alison Case argues that gender conventions become ‘both resources and restrictions’ for the female protagonist.378 Others have

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located this doubleness within the language and metre of the poem: Herbert Tucker describes how *Aurora Leigh* ‘narratises its own composition’;\(^{379}\) Emily Harrington argues that Barrett Browning’s ‘renegade scansion’ can invite alternative readings of her poetry.\(^{380}\)

Feminist discussion has driven the debate about *Aurora Leigh*. This chapter builds on these debates by attending to the composition of the text; a perspective that the poem’s imagery supports. *Aurora Leigh* is such a capacious text that it is impossible for this chapter to offer a global reading of how hybridity functions thematically throughout the whole poem. Instead, it argues that revision offers a way of reading the text’s development as a cathartic experience that allows the female poet to develop thoughts about identity and genre through verse. Finally, it contends that it is by experimenting with blank verse that enables Barrett Browning to establish her female poetics in the Fifth Book, where Aurora hybridises her two impulses; those of ‘woman’ and ‘artist’ (II. 2).

The novel-poem opens with self-reflexivity by repeatedly and emphatically drawing attention to writing; ‘Of writing,’ (I. 1) ‘I, writing,’ (I. 9) ‘I write’ (I. 29) begin the first three verses. In framing her poem in this way, Barrett Browning reflects the stages of the künstlerroman through which Aurora develops. Firstly, she considers what the trajectory of writing as a nineteenth-century woman is (‘of writing’); secondly the caesura signifies the experience of detachment between the heroine and the writing she produces (‘I, writing’); and the final declarative establishes the achievement of artistic autonomy when (fictionally) writing her

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self-titled autobiography (‘I write’). This chapter will follow a similar trajectory. It begins by examining the physical state of the printer’s copy manuscript, which is the witness of the poem that Barrett Browning prepared for publication of the first edition. It then goes on to explore the nature of hybridity and how it plays out in multiple ways in the epic-poem. This leads to a discussion of the relationship between manuscript revisions and thematic revisions in the poem by studying Barrett Browning’s commentary ‘Of writing’ (I. 1) in response to a classical tradition and the issue of influence. The next section considers how manuscript revisions facilitate Aurora’s transition from ‘I, writing’ (I. 9) to ‘I write’ (I. 29) by considering Barrett Browning’s commentary on form and genre. The final section will explore how the readings offered by manuscript revisions can inform our perspective on Aurora’s thematic revision of a feminine sentimental tradition.

The Manuscript

Barrett Browning’s verb progression between ‘Of writing,’ (I. 1) ‘I, writing’ (I. 9) and ‘I write’ (I. 29) also registers a self-conscious trope of what Michael O’Neill considers to be ‘poetry that displays awareness of itself as poetry’.

Critics have addressed how Aurora Leigh displays awareness of itself to draw attention to its experimental genre and use of language. For example, Dorothy Mermin describes it as ‘overtly “poetical”’. Mermin joins others in locating the novel-poem’s self-awareness in its metre and lyricism but her term can also be substantiated by a material approach. A study of the printer’s copy of Aurora Leigh suggests that the

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poem’s self-reflexivity is a gesture towards how texts are mitigated for publication through revision.\textsuperscript{383} In particular, Barrett Browning’s use of a Victorian ink eraser, which involves scraping the page until the writing is removed, visually produces the metaphor of revision and rewriting that is a key part of the text’s premise. Barrett Browning used this tool throughout her career - similar marks appear, for example, on the manuscript of \textit{Drama of Exile} - but in the case of \textit{Aurora Leigh} the act of revision is closely linked to the revisionary themes that operate within the text.\textsuperscript{384} The term ‘poetical’ has a material dimension because the poem is aware of the stages through which it has developed - both textually and materially - to become that poem.

As would generally be expected from a fair copy being submitted to a publisher, the manuscript-pages of the printer’s copy (held in the Houghton Library at Harvard) are relatively neat. Towards the beginning of the text, there are some interesting changes in vocabulary but not enough compelling material to form a revision-narrative for this text. In the Second Book, however, hard-to-discern smudges appear frequently. After closer inspection they are not smudges (as in, they are not marks upon the surface of the manuscript-page) but parts of the page where the surface had been erased or scratched off and written over (incidentally, this is not something that would have been as easy to discover if looking at a digital copy; handling the manuscript was an important part of this

\textsuperscript{383} There are numerous manuscript witnesses of \textit{Aurora Leigh} located all over the world. Major drafts can be found at Wellesley College and the Houghton Library, Harvard. There are also drafts and proofs located at the Armstrong Browning Library, Dartmouth College, McGill University, Eton College Library, Pierpoint Morgan Library, the Bodleian library, Biblioteca Bodmeriana, Princeton University, Lilly Library and Yale University. The dispersed and fragmented manuscript witnesses are symptomatic of the state of the Barrett Browning archive.

\textsuperscript{384} Drafts of \textit{Drama of Exile} are also widely dispersed across the Huntington Library, Armstrong Browning Library, New York Public Library, Karpeles Manuscript Library, British Library and Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre. Digitised pages from the printer’s copy can be found at http://ebbarchive.org/manuscripts/drama_of_exile.php.
study). It is a kind of ‘reverse-Tippex’ except, unlike Tippex which forms a layer over the original writing, words have been taken away. Like other manuscripts, this forms a hierarchy of revision, where some text is crossed out lightly, heavily, or scratched away. In many instances, the changes make certain lyrical episodes more concise or even recopy lines to make them more readable. While this provides less critical purchase on the text, the style of revision and indeed presence of a revision hierarchy invites the manuscript-reader to reflect on the role and mode of cancelling in the development of the female text.

Like Tippex, these deletions and substitutions create a palimpsest on the manuscript-page; unlike Tippex, the manuscript-reader has to rely on remnants of deleted text to understand the layers of meaning-production. Palimpsest is a term adopted by other critics of the novel-poem, though not in terms of its textual development. Donald S. Hair, for example, has argued that readers require the ‘double perspective of the palimpsest’ to access an ‘underlying text’. Gail Turley Houston has written about Barrett Browning’s use of double-meaning in *Aurora Leigh*, which, she argues, obscures her ‘radical theological meanings’: she claims that the ‘savvy reader’ can navigate the ‘palimpsest’ of the text to access these interpretations. The term is therefore useful for conceiving the relationship between Barrett Browning’s multi-layered approach to meaning-making in the text and the appearance of the manuscript.

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Palimpsest is classed as both a noun and a verb; the noun perfectly describes some of the revisions on the printer’s copy of *Aurora Leigh*. Figure 7 illustrates how some words (in this case ‘Instructed poorly for interpreters,’ ‘Thrown out by an easy,’ and ‘Even so my’) are written over the top of previous words that have been scratched away from the surface of the manuscript-page. Indeed, remnants of the original text remain, even impacting the legibility of new words (for example, the word ‘instructed’ has been clarified in pencil). Palimpsest is also an active term, however - not just related to the appearance of the literary object - and the verb captures how Barrett Browning actively distinguished a hierarchy of revision by overwriting some words but simply crossing out others.

Barrett Browning refers to the palimpsest of the manuscript-page when describing how she produces meaning. In the First Book of the novel-poem, she playfully links Aurora’s selfhood to the hybrid nature of the text’s form, which demonstrates how the protagonist’s identity is related to the text’s development:

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388 ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 199r.
Let who says
‘The soul’s a clean white paper,’ rather say,
A palimpsest, a prophet’s holograph
Defiled, erased and covered by a monk’s -
The apocalypse, by a Longus! poring on
Which obscene text, we may discern perhaps
Some fair, fine trace of what was written once,
Some upstroke of an alpha and omega
Expressing the old scripture. (I. 824-32)

Aurora objects to the spondaic description of the soul as ‘clean white paper’ in the second line, an image which captures an impossible state of innocence; we are reminded later that all people are ‘disorganised/By sin i’ the blood’ (I. 817-8). Barrett Browning acknowledges how spiritual identities are more complex than ‘clean white paper’, marked as they are by original sin, and depicts this in a textual sense with the polysyllabic ‘palimpsest’. The metaphor echoes the German higher criticism of the period that considered the bible to be formed from a similarly palimpsestic historical process of multiple voices and perspectives. Aurora also links the image to her own textual identity because it is these palimpsestic papers that ‘brought [her] nearer to the central truth’ (I. 800). Aurora suggests that there is inevitably no distinction between the defilement of the monk’s transcription and that of Longus - a composer of erotic texts from Lesbos. By bringing these two styles of authorship together, Barrett Browning provocingly suggests that the transmission of any kind of text can corrupt the original word which was written on the paper. For Aurora, books and identities are similar because they can both distort and reveal the ‘alpha and omega’ of original truth at the same time.

Barrett Browning contrasts the beats of ‘clean white paper’ with ‘palimpsest,’ which makes the latter seem to overflow the rhythm of the line. Herbert Tucker finds overflowing rhythm to be characteristic of Barrett Browning’s poetry in
Aurora Leigh; he describes ‘the pump of the verse as it oversplashes prosodic limits’.389 This oversplashing does not necessarily involve extra beats but the pattern of the sounds within the line pushes at the limits of its prosody. In this case, Barrett Browning’s metre reflects not only the multiple layers of meaning within spiritual experience, which are not limited to regular beats, but signposts how the form of her poetry hybridises the multiple meanings of its subject.

By focusing on the textuality of Aurora’s authorial act, Barrett Browning uses a trope that pushes against the relative spontaneity of feminine poetry in the early nineteenth-century. Elizabeth Helsinger argues that textuality is often used by women to separate themselves from the myth of the ‘artlessly expressive female singer’. She concludes that ‘[w]omen had much to gain by emphasising the textuality of their poetry’.390 Barrett Browning’s comparison of the ‘soul’ to ‘paper’ is therefore significant and holds multiple meanings. ‘Palimpsest,’ as we have seen already, refers to a document that has multiple layers of writing inscribed on the top of one another. This not only suggests that Aurora’s identity is more complex than the public would have it, but self-reflexively gestures back to the manuscript-page on which the novel-poem is composed. Barrett Browning hints that, like the ‘palimpsest’ of the soul, the text itself harbours alternative meanings below its surface (literally and metaphorically). Likewise, there is something transgressive about Aurora’s description of herself as a ‘palimpsest’. Unlike the ‘clean white paper,’ which suggests purity, possibility, a clean surface which can be written upon, a ‘palimpsest’ harbours secrets, is sometimes difficult

to decipher and, as Aurora suggests, is ‘[d]efiled, erased and covered’ (much like the ink scrapings witnessed by the manuscript-reader).

Aurora reflects on the complexity of articulating her identity and her desire to write books while experiencing ‘anguish in the thick/Of men’s opinions…press and counterpress’ (I. 801-2). She exposes the superficiality of the marketplace that she aspires to publish in, which reflects a particularly gendered concern: Linda Shires has explored these concerns elsewhere in Barrett Browning’s oeuvre, such as the ‘ideological crises’ she faced when writing for William Thackeray in The Cornhill Magazine. According to Shires, Thackeray wanted to market Barrett Browning’s poetry on ‘her reputation as the epitome of good wife and mother’. In order to balance this image while fulfilling her own political agenda, Barrett Browning therefore engaged in ‘cross-dwelling’ between conformity and subversion; a technique she also used in Aurora Leigh. Thackeray’s focus on Barrett Browning’s private life, just like Elizabeth Gaskell’s emphasis on Charlotte Brontë as a ‘the friend, the daughter, the sister, the wife’ (original emphasis), shows that public women were judged against what were considered to be ‘normal’ female behaviours.

To mediate the extent to which her own text is ‘defiled,’ then, Barrett Browning self-reflexively gestures to a way of reading her text. The verse concludes by inviting the reader to look for the hidden ‘upstroke,’ ‘[s]ome fair, fine trace of what was written once’. Though the manuscript is not easily accessible to common readers, Barrett Browning refers back to the experience of composition and revision - and the ways in which the manuscript has been

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391 Shires, p. 327.
392 ibid., p. 329.
393 Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p. 375
‘[d]efiled, erased and covered’ - to hint to the reader that there is more to uncover than a primary surface reading might bring up. This provides an additional perspective on Harrington’s reading of how ‘readerly liberty’ functions as a mode of meaning-production in *Aurora Leigh*: ‘[i]n a work devoted to advancing women’s rights and considering the relationship of poetry to philanthropy, Barrett Browning’s flexible use of blank verse links readerly liberty to the broader freedoms she wishes for English civic life’. By inviting the reader to make decisions about the text’s content and metre for themselves, she makes them complicit in the development of her feminist agenda.

It is not hard to imagine, then - and is somewhat visible in Figure 7 - that these ‘upstroke[s]’ and ‘trace[s] of what was written once’ make the manuscript difficult to read. Barrett Browning’s handwriting is hard to decipher when written in its neatest form, let alone when it is written in a hurry or over the top of a deletion. She herself felt dejected when faced with her own drafts, describing them to her friend Anna Jameson in 1856 as ‘the heap of dishevelled m=s’. This presents issues for working with this particular text because deciphering some words, which are relatively illegible, can involve a level of interpretation which is, of course, subjective. Marjorie Stone acknowledges this in her work on the Barrett Browning archive, suggesting that archival research can further obscure our interpretation of a work instead of clarifying it, ‘its “hard” documentary facts are subject to mediation, morphing into less definitive interpretations.’ Not only this, *Aurora Leigh* also exists in multiple manuscript witnesses, many of which are

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394 Harrington, p. 341.
located across the United States. Indeed, some witnesses were broken up further in the Sotheby auction of 1913 with the selling off of the Brownings’ estate. Stone describes this as the ‘fragmentation’ of the Barrett Browning archive and links it to the kind of ideological commercialism that surrounds the ‘relics’ of the female author.\textsuperscript{397} She explains the ‘geographical and financial challenges’ (closely linked to institutionalised funding) this presents to the researcher, which can limit the extent to which one can engage with the whole archive.\textsuperscript{398}

To navigate this problem, I have chosen to focus on the printer’s copy because, like the other manuscripts in this study, it is the witness that was prepared specifically for publication. I am interested in the revisions Barrett Browning made with a direct view to the text being circulated amongst her readership to consider how reception in the mid-Victorian period influenced the development of the text. While I do make reference to the first draft of \textit{Aurora Leigh}, held in Wellesley College (Barrett Browning’s handwriting on this witness is generally illegible), this is simply to note the transitions between drafts and gain some perspective on what has been scraped out.

The relationship between the physical form of the manuscript and the material form of poetry is one yet to be sufficiently scrutinised. In line with many other theorists, Simon Jarvis considers these two significations of form to belong to different approaches:

It is not surprising that many critics of poetry would rather hypothesise upon a precious inkblot in a manuscript - as though this were the auratic stuff itself - than scan a line of verse when the questions of what rhythm and metre themselves are, and how they work, remain so uncertain.\textsuperscript{399}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{397} Stone (2007), p. 38.
\item \textsuperscript{398} ibid., p. 38.
\item \textsuperscript{399} Simon Jarvis, ‘For a poetics of verse,’ \textit{PMLA}, 125.4 (2010): 931-935 (933).
\end{itemize}
Jarvis suggests that textual criticism tends to shy away from questions of form because form itself is indefinable (Angela Leighton sympathetically describes how ‘form makes mischief’). His description of the ‘precious inkblot’ hints at his frustration with those who tend to fetishise the manuscript and its ‘auratic’ relationship to the author or text. Jarvis’ reasoning here is interesting, however, because it lends itself to the ways in which manuscript-study can illuminate our understanding of poetry. The question of ‘what rhythm and metre themselves are, and how they work’ is central to *Aurora Leigh*; not only in Aurora’s rumination on what it means to be a female poet but the ways in which Barrett Browning establishes female poetic identity through form. For example, Harrington provides a convincing close-reading of *Aurora Leigh* in which she concludes that Barrett Browning’s use of blank verse intentionally relies on the multiple possible scansion of the same line, which can simultaneously conform to and subvert regular form. It appears that Barrett Browning embraces, and contributes to, the ‘mischief’ of form and attending to the manuscript provides a method of understanding exactly how she does so. The ‘precious inkblot’ is often revealing about the ways in which Barrett Browning formed her form and the intentional linguistic choices that establish her poetics.

A similar methodological issue emerges out of the text itself. As evidenced by the mass of critical attention *Aurora Leigh* has received in recent years, the novel-poem is densely rich in detail and the metaphorical threads that bind the poem together are numerous. In other words, in pursuing one thread, something is always missed out. This may be the case for numerous works of literature but it is

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401 Harrington, pp. 340-1.
testament to this text’s status as a masterpiece, which presents so many opportunities for the literary researcher. Thus, I will focus on Barrett Browning’s hybrid poetics by paying attention to some of the self-reflexive images and metaphors that run throughout.

**Aurora Leigh’s Poetic Hybridity**

The hybrid mode within *Aurora Leigh* - and its thematic relationship to revision - is introduced in the First Book of the poem where Barrett Browning has her eponymous heroine read her late father’s books, ‘the giant fossils of my past’ (I. 836). As the metaphor suggests, Aurora considers these books to be traditional (as old and ingrained in history as ‘fossils’), threatening (they are both physically and symbolically ‘giant’ to the child), and linked to a sense of her identity (‘my past’). Her relationship to her literary inheritance (as it is here conceived) is complex and conflicting. This is further evidenced by the way Aurora subsequently envisages poetic inspiration. She reworks the myth of Zeus and Ganymede, the shepherd boy he fell in love with, by substituting herself for the ambivalent object of Zeus’ attention:

> …poetry, my life,  
> My eagle, with both grappling feet still hot  
> From Zeus’s thunder, who hast ravished me  
> Away from all the shepherds, sheep, and dogs,  
> And set me in the Olympian roar and round  
> Of luminous faces for a cup-bearer (I. 918-923)

At this early point in the künstlerroman, Barrett Browning represents Aurora’s poetry as something external, the eagle who lifts the shepherd boy into the realm of the gods. Her ascent is not necessarily a straightforward experience either: the

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402 See Reynolds’ footnote in *Aurora Leigh*, p. 31.
eagle’s ‘feet,’ which is a pun on poetic metre,’ are ‘grappling’ her; a term which captures how poetry and its rhythms become the (sometimes ambivalent) means through which Aurora can make sense of her experience of the world. The eagle’s feet are ‘still hot’ from Zeus’s thunder, which suggests seduction, but Barrett Browning’s choice of the word ‘ravished’ reclaims the act of female authorship from something that is actively transgressive or seductive. She positively recuperates this act of transgression into something involuntarily enforced by a higher power, which elevates her away from the banal experience of life among the ‘shepherds, sheep, and dogs’. However, when she reaches Olympus and is placed in the role of ‘cup-bearer’, Aurora is overwhelmed by the ‘luminous faces’ she attends to, just as the metre within the line, ‘And set me in the Olympian roar and round’ overwhelms the pentameter. The pyrrhic foot in the middle of the line makes the reader stumble into the multiple syllables of ‘lympian,’ which can be scanned in two ways. The reader can either elide ‘pian’ into one syllable or stress the first syllable, making an extra beat. The onus is placed on the reader to decide whether the line is regular or not but the final alliterative stress on ‘roar’ and ‘round’ intentionally draws the reader’s attention to the knotted rhythm anyway. Blank verse offers a means through which Barrett Browning can reclaim the female poet’s struggle and transform it into a poetics itself.

Barrett Browning uses metre to focus the reader’s attention on these moments of self-reflexivity, which establish Aurora Leigh as a text involved with revision. Here, for example, she uses epic imagery (Aurora’s patronage from Zeus) but revises the myth as a means to understand the experience of the female poet. This revision relies on hybridity because Aurora is able to work through her struggle with poetic inspiration by splitting her self and her poetry into the roles of
shepherd boy and eagle. After doing so, Barrett Browning allows herself further creative license with the myth and imagines Aurora swooning back to earth; a feminised gesture.⁴⁰³

    We drop the golden cup at Heré’s foot
    And swoon back to the earth, - and find ourselves
    Face-down among the pine-cones, cold with dew,
    While the dogs bark, and many a shepherd scoffs,
    ‘What’s come now to the youth? ’ Such ups and downs
    Have poets. (I. 924-933)

In the last part of this verse, the pronouns shift from the personal ‘my’ and ‘me’ to ‘we’ and ‘ourselves’. Implicitly, the two sides of Aurora’s nature are hybridised when she suggestively drops her cup at the foot of Zeus’ wife and ‘swoon[s]’. Victorian readers would have recognised swooning as a feminine act of overwhelming emotion or feeling. Here, it signifies Aurora’s fledgling poetic nature; she is unable to assimilate her poetic impulses with the inspirational glory she finds in her father’s books because she is conscious of herself as a female subject. The swoon suggests that, if Aurora were to succumb to the conventions of feminine versification, she would drop the golden cup of inspiration that lead her to the higher realm. The pun on ‘foot’ is an intentional reference back to the ‘grappling feet’ of Aurora’s poetry.

Not only this, the second half of the verse expresses a concern about the subject of poetry that Barrett Browning would resolve throughout the text. Aurora finds relief amongst the cold dew of the pine-cones which seemingly curb the heat of Zeus’ thunder. As the scene suggests, at this early point she is unable to hybridise the mundane matter of her present moment with the form of her epic poem. Nevertheless, the comical tone of the last two half-lines reassures the

⁴⁰³ For further examples of female swooning in Victorian fiction, see footnote 324.
reader that the shepherd’s ‘scoffs’ do not undermine Aurora’s role as poet: it is these ‘ups and downs,’ she implies, that form the basis of her poetic act.

On the printer’s copy of *Aurora Leigh* these passages are relatively neat. On the whole, Barrett Browning’s handwriting is difficult to read but these lines are perfectly copied, with no substitutions or crossings out. The act of revision is not simply limited to the manuscript with this text, though there is an interesting relationship between the way the text is revised and how revision functions as a poetic device.

**Revision and Poetic Tradition**

Having demonstrated how hybridity functions thematically within the poem as a means through which to deal with literary tradition, this section will turn to the actual revisions that Barrett Browning made to the printer’s copy, which expose how this narrative mode informs her linguistic choices and functions at the level of metre. It is by experimenting with established forms in this way that Aurora Leigh can embrace her own identity as a female poet.

At the beginning of the Second Book, Aurora crowns herself with foliage ‘to learn the feel of it’ (II. 33) and, in doing so, acknowledges Apollo, the god of poetry and song in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. She rejects the traditional bay leaf, however, fearing it would be ‘overbold’ (II. 39) and instead opts for ivy. A small revision emphasises how this choice is related to Aurora Leigh’s poetic approach:

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such
  I like the ivy!404
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404 ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 49r. 
The change from ‘the’ to ‘such’ establishes the sense of immediacy and reality that Barrett Browning chooses as her poetic subject. Instead of transforming ivy into a general metaphor of foliage that could easily be substituted for the traditional bay leaves (the laurels worn by Apollo that signify the poetic power Aurora desires), Aurora gestures to what is closest at hand. It is ivy’s very ubiquitousness that makes it the appropriate plant with which Aurora will crown herself. It is relatively mundane because it is not hard to find; it is easy to overlook and paradoxically requires the artist’s perspective to recognise its value. It is not intended to be representative of another more prestigious leaf; instead Aurora embraces the ivy itself as a metaphor for her role as a poet, however quotidian that may be.

For Aurora, ivy is a positive substitute for the bay leaf. Nevertheless, the rhythm running through the rest of the stanza allows the reader to experience the ambivalence of her poetic ambitions at this early point in the novel-poem:

Ah - there’s my choice - that ivy on the wall,
That headlong ivy! not a leaf will grow
But thinking of a wreath. Large leaves, smooth leaves,
Serrated like my vines, and half as green.
I like such ivy, bold to leap a height
’Twas strong to climb; as good to grow on graves
As twist about a thyrsus; pretty too,
(And that’s not ill) when twisted round a comb.’
Thus speaking to myself, half singing it,
Because some thoughts are fashioned like a bell
To ring with once being touched, I drew a wreath
Drenched, blinding me with dew, across my brow (II. 46-57)

The repetition of ‘ivy’ creates momentum between the first and second lines. Similarly, the internal half-rhyme between ‘leaf’ and, on the following line, ‘wreath’ suggests that the crowning leaves inspire Aurora’s poetic chain of thinking. She flexes her poetic abilities further with sibilance and repetition in the
next two half lines (‘leaves,’ ‘smooth leaves,’ ‘[s]errated like my vines’). But Barrett Browning soon halts this forward-moving rhythm with a full-stop; the leaves are ‘half as green,’ which can be read as a recognition of ivy’s mediocrity but more importantly signals the difference in Aurora’s poetic ambitions. ‘Half’ does not necessarily hold negative connotations in Aurora Leigh but hints at the import of hybridity: common ivy is, after all, literally ‘half as green’ due to its variegated colouring (unlike the uniform colour of the vine or bay leaf). The ‘half as green’ colour of the ivy is therefore positively supplemented by something else, which is also characteristic of how Barrett Browning suggests that its growth depends on a supporting structure. It appears ‘on the wall’ and Aurora admires its ability to ‘climb;’ it can ‘grow on,’ ‘twist about’ or be ‘twisted round’ but it does not stand independently. The ivy is therefore a symbol of Aurora’s hybrid poetics, which depends on a supportive structure to precipitate strength in her own poetic voice.

Barrett Browning’s use of ivy engages with a metaphor used by other female poets. Both Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon describe ivy in a way that suggests the supportive structure Aurora is looking for is linked to tradition: ‘ancient days’ (to use Hemans’ words) or the ‘aged temple’ where ‘[b]reathed the deep sigh of poesy’ (in Landon’s words).405 In fact, Barrett Browning’s lines ‘I like such ivy, bold to leap a height/’Twas strong to climb; as good to grow on graves’ directly echoes Hemans’ lines from her 1821 poem ‘To the Ivy’: ‘Thou that wilt climb the loftiest height,/And deck the humblest grave.’406 Barrett Browning makes a

406 Hemans, p. 397.
notable shift from Hemans’ relatively passive admiration of the ivy as a ‘record of
the grand and the fair’ by internalising its ambition and claiming it for Aurora’s
own, ‘I like such ivy’. It seems the ivy is a suitable image for Aurora (and
Hemans) because it hybridises the female poet’s ‘lofty’ ambitions with the more
humble, corporeal experience of mortality signified by the grave. Not only this, in
Hemans’ poem, the ivy’s association with the grave is not simply related to death
but remembrance and posterity; the fact that ivy covers the tomb means that ‘all at
once glorious earthly things/At length are thine alone.’ This adds a further
dimension to Barrett Browning’s alliterative description of the ivy as ‘good to
grow on graves;’ the ivy’s growth is literally supported by gravestones and,
likewise, Aurora uses its relationship to the past as a source of poetic inspiration
to develop as a poet. In addition to this sombre image of graves, the ivy can also
‘twist about a thyrsus,’ a staff carried by Bacchus and his followers. In this verse,
the ivy hybridises the sombre link to the past with Bacchanal artistic freedom and
power. Her description of its prettiness when ‘twisted round a comb’ and
insistence that ‘that’s not ill’ is important because it allows Barrett Browning to
claim ivy as an image of female creativity which hybridises both aesthetic and
intellectual inspiration.

407 Hemans, p. 397.
408 Ibid., p. 397.
409 In a letter to her cousin John Kenyon, Barrett Browning comments on seeing some ivy being
planted in her garden. She writes that there ‘is ivy enough for a thyrsus, and I almost feel ready
to enact a sort of Bacchus triumphalis ‘for jollitie,’ as I see it already planted, and looking in at
me through the window. I never thought to see such a sight as that in my London room, and am
overwhelmed with my own glory.’ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘To John Kenyon, May 19 1843,’ Letters of Elizabeth Barrett
Browning, I, p. 153 in British and Irish Women’s Letters and Diaries 1500 to 1950 <https://
bwl2.alexanderstreet.com/cgi-bin/BWLD/hub.py?type=getvolume&sourceid=S4397> [accessed
12 July 2020].

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A further revision to this passage illustrates how Barrett Browning’s pre-publication decisions also contributed to hybridising everyday material with epic poetic form:

ivy
That headlong foliage!410

Though Barrett Browning did not actually cancel the word ‘foliage,’ the change to ‘ivy’ persisted throughout the printed proofs and editions so it can be assumed that this is a substitution. It appears to be a small change, which specifies the ‘foliage’ Barrett Browning is referring to and elevates its status from excess leaves and bushes, but it also removes an extra beat from the line. The resulting text is perfect iambic pentameter, like the rest of this passage, which reflects Barrett Browning’s effort to apply the conventions of classically established form to ordinary matter. Nevertheless, the ivy is described as ‘headlong,’ defined by the OED as moving in a forward motion, usually recklessly or hastily.411 Aurora self-reflexively registers her reserve about the poetry she is crafting. She implicitly lacks the experience required to produce the art she aspires to at this early point in the poem, which is reflected in her strict adherence to pentameter.

Aurora’s decision to choose the humbler leaf is therefore not only related to her comfort in hybridity but also establishes Barrett Browning’s project in transforming the epic. It was her self-confessed ambition to confront ‘the Humanity of the age’ and critics, such as Hair, have explained that Barrett Browning transforms potentially mundane, everyday material into the subject of

the epic poem. For example, Hair argues that Barrett Browning makes a bold and ‘political’ move by converting everyday speech and conversation into blank verse. He explains how, conventionally, ‘the epic simile not only describes and enriches but also elevates’ but often Barrett Browning’s practice ‘lowers and diminishes’. I would rephrase this: while she may ‘lower’ her subject-matter, in terms of scale and consequence, she does so to ‘elevate’ it to epic proportions. The ivy, for example, is ‘half as green’ as the other leaves considered by Aurora but she admires, and implicitly relates to, its ambition to ‘leap a height’. As a woman, Aurora is involuntarily assigned a domestic role, which is epitomised by Romney’s expectation that she must become his wife. Instead, Aurora transforms this mundanity into a poetics itself. Thus the image of death that ivy evokes (it makes Aurora think of a ‘wreath’ and is ‘good to grow on graves’) does more than remind the reader of her frustration with her ability to produce art at this point in the novel-poem. It also grounds her ambitions within a tangible and limited human experience. Unlike epic, which is described by Michael D. Hurley and Michael O’Neill as ‘magisterial’ because it is a genre that deals with the ‘sublime,’ *Aurora Leigh* ‘lowers and diminishes’ her subject to deal with Victorian society, evidenced by her commentary on Christian socialism and the fallen woman. But this does not mean that its majesty is ‘diminished’; Aurora uses a classical simile to argue that the ivy is as appropriate for Bacchus’ staff as it is for the

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413 Hair, p. 212.
414 ibid., p. 208.
human grave (reiterated by the enjambment and parallel alliteration, ‘as good to grow on graves/As twist about a thyrsus’).

The enjambment between these lines flows an image of relative mundanity (ivy on a grave) into epic imagery, which characterises Barrett Browning’s hybridisation of the two modes. This hybridisation registers a contemporary Victorian debate about the subject of poetry, or what Anthony H. Harrison describes as a ‘culture war’.416 This debate can be read through the differing poetic ideals of Matthew Arnold and his friend Arthur Hugh Clough; Arnold did not consider Clough’s work as ‘properly poetical’ (original emphasis) because it did not focus enough on the ‘rhetorical, devotional, or metaphysical’.417 Harrison locates the root of their differences as poets in Clough’s ‘radically democratising impulse,’ compared with Arnold’s ‘effete aestheticism’ that some considered to be out of touch with his generation.418 Indeed, Harrison - among others - compares Clough’s approach to that of the realist novel, quoting from his review of Alexander Smith, a Spasmodic poet who also espoused these values:419

to be widely popular, to gain the ear of multitudes, to shake the hearts of men, poetry should deal more than at present it usually does, with general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of human nature420

Clough echoes the theorists of the realist novel by placing importance, and locating beauty, within the ‘ordinary feelings’ and ‘the actual palpable things with

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418 Harrison, pp. 511-2.
which our every-day life is concerned’.\textsuperscript{421} For example, Clough worked through his ambivalence about Christianity, which stemmed from the Oxford Movement in the 1830s and 40s, by exploring an historically specific ‘devotional, or metaphysical’ relationship between poetry and religion.\textsuperscript{422} This contrasts to Arnold, who valued beauty in terms of high culture; in Gregory Tate’s terms, his poems were concerned with their own beauty.\textsuperscript{423} Arnold favoured the classical past as a way of shaping culture in the present because, as he explained in his 1853 preface to his Poems, ‘[a] great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting…than a smaller human action of to-day.’\textsuperscript{424} It was, more specifically, the ‘transitoriness’ of the present-moment which he deemed unfit for poetry.\textsuperscript{425} As Arnold’s criticism of rhetoric shows, subject was closely related to rhythm and metre; he found ‘the deficiency of the beautiful’ in the sound of Clough’s poetry. He disliked poetry that existed ‘merely for the sake of single lines and passages’ rather than a ‘total-impression’.\textsuperscript{426} This totality, he argued, could only be achieved with a classical subject because ‘the action is greater, the personages nobler, the situations more intense;’ feats which inevitably increase the ‘enjoyment’ of the reader.\textsuperscript{427}

\textsuperscript{421} Clough, p. 512.
\textsuperscript{423} Tate, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{425} ibid., p. xxvii.
\textsuperscript{426} ibid., p. xix.
\textsuperscript{427} ibid., p. viii.
Aurora Leigh is Barrett Browning’s experiment in hybridising these two poetic philosophies by democratising epic form to address contemporary social issues, including the development of the female subject. She responds to ideas laid out in Arnold’s preface by hybridising the ‘proportions’ of the classical past with the present age:

All actual heroes are essential men,
And all men possible heroes: every age,
Heroic in proportions, double-faced,
Looks backward and before, expects a morn
And claims an epos. (V. 151-154)

The adjectives ‘actual’ and ‘essential’ modify the seemingly interchangeable terms of ‘heroes’ and ‘men’ in a way that grounds them in everyday experience. Significantly, here, Barrett Browning claims these subjects as suitable for an ‘epos,’ which is defined as an epic poem. Again, duality is a defining quality of this poetics: the past and the future are equally valuable to the epic poet who should also be ‘double-faced.’ In framing her response in this way, Barrett Browning recalls Aurora’s earlier experience of duality when she considers herself ‘Woman and artist’:

Time followed one another. Came a morn
I stood upon the brink of twenty years,
And looked before and after, as I stood
Woman and artist - either incomplete,
Both credulous of completion. (II. 1-5)

Barrett Browning suggests that the experience of the female poet, which is ‘double-faced,’ makes them sympathetic to writing the ‘epos’ of the current age. Thus, while the heroes and subjects of poetry she considers in the Fifth Book are ‘men,’ hybrid poetics can forge a place for the female epic subject.

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Interestingly, Dorothy Deering points out that Clough’s democratising impulse - and his focus on the ‘ordinary’ - dispelled the ‘self-consciousness’ engendered by emulating the kinds of traditional poetics favoured by Arnold. Self-consciousness takes on additional meaning in *Aurora Leigh*, not only because Barrett Browning is hybridising these two poetic modes but because she does so as a female poet with a female protagonist. In his work on the self-conscious Romantic poem, O’Neill concedes that, while critics should steer away from ‘a caricatured notion of the ‘masculine’,’ women poets of the same period ‘wear their self-consciousness with a difference’. Consider, for example, how self-consciousness operates in Byron’s *Don Juan* (a text Barrett Browning claimed as an inspiration for *Aurora Leigh*). ‘I want a hero, (l. 1)’ the narrator claims in the first canto, ‘But can’t find any in the present age/Fit for my poem’ (l. 38-39). O’Neill’s statement tells us that self-consciousness is not always a negative term that denotes oppression. Byron, for example, playfully draws attention to the development of his epic in order to satirise the genre; his hero is his to claim if he wants it. In comparison, Barrett Browning makes her epic poem self-conscious as a means to temper the conflicting identity of her protagonist.

It is worth noting how Aurora is ‘half singing’ her response to the leaves on the wall. The idea of song (and lyric) as a female form is enlightened by Yopie Prins’ argument that “‘Sappho’ [the female lyricist from Lesbos] is, in many ways, an artifact of Victorian poetics’ (which gendered lyric as feminine). Aurora’s

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430 O’Neill, p. xxv.
432 Prins (1999), p. 3.
attempt at ‘half singing’ is timid because, implicitly, she lacks the confidence and experience to establish her own poetics - associated with a female tradition - against the predominantly male tradition she evokes with the image of the laurel crown. She is thus ‘blinded with dew’ when she draws the ivy branch around her head, suggestively hinting at her fledgling poetic nature, whose vision is obscured because she cannot fully assimilate her feminine impulse with her poetic ambitions. This metaphorical struggle between blindness and vision extends throughout the novel-poem and is resolved for Aurora in the Fifth Book when she suggestively claims that ‘poets should/Exert a double vision’ (V. 183-4).

The Fifth Book of *Aurora Leigh* has been described as the text’s ‘poetic manifesto’. It is here that Barrett Browning deals most explicitly with contemporary poetic debates about the relevance of her current moment as a poetic subject. Echoing the claims of those such as Carlyle (who is directly mentioned) and Arnold, she describes her current times as ‘A pewter age,–mixed metal, silver-washed;/An age of scum, spooned off the richer past’ (V. 160-1). She makes a pun on the idea of a Golden age by reflecting on those who devalue the present and nostalgically look to the past for cultural riches, which are measured against pewter, metal and silver. She goes on to reject this idea but her revision of the following lines on the manuscript suggests that she did not wish to dismiss the work of major poetic figures of her time:

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433 I do not consider Romney’s blinding at the end of the poem to contribute to this poetic discourse of blindness and vision. Barrett Browning’s description of how ‘The visual nerve is withered to the root’ (IX. 579) holds connotations of castration that Romney must endure in recognition of Aurora’s autonomous role as poet. This is further developed when Aurora describes Romney as ‘mulcted as a man’ (IX. 564). Barrett Browning repeated the word ‘mulcted’ in her letter to Anna Jameson on the subject of his blinding, which suggests not only the import of castration in levelling the power relations between Aurora and Romney but, in line with Gilbert and Gubar’s reading, encodes female anger and the need to punish the oppressive male figure. Gilbert and Gubar, p. 580.

That’s wrong thinking, to my mind,
wrong
And such thoughts make poor poems.435

Again, Barrett Browning’s revision is comparatively small when considered alongside the other manuscripts in this project, but it is an important one for understanding her poetics. In the first line, Aurora accuses writers (such as Carlyle and Arnold) of ‘wrong thinking;’ originally, Barrett Browning’s use of ‘such’ implicates these authoritative voices in making ‘poor poems’. However, in the first line she makes it clear that valuing the past over the present is wrong according to her own opinion (‘to my mind’). Revising to repeat the word ‘wrong’ instead emphasises Aurora’s recognition that she must value her independent thought in order to write poetry. While she may admire the works of her male contemporaries, attempting to emulate their poetry would make her produce ‘poor poems’ because the ideologies behind them do not align with her own. Barrett Browning then goes on to use the carving of Mount Athos by King Xerxes of Persia to suggest that, even in the classical past, ‘the peasants’ found it difficult to put the ‘giant image’ they were creating into perspective. She concludes that ‘’Tis even thus/With times we live in, - evermore too great/To be apprehended near.’ (V. 181-3) While Aurora values the traditional poetry of her contemporaries, she thus revises their thinking on the classical past as a means to assimilate it with her own hybrid poetics. She suggests that historical perspective is an illusion that makes the past seem more relevant or ‘great,’ whereas distance is a trick which paradoxically magnifies thought and action.

Clara Dawson suggests that Barrett Browning’s engagement with classical traditions meant that her own authorial image was mediated by her reception in

the marketplace. Reflecting a debate among Barrett Browning’s reviewers, she asks, ‘[d]id her extensive knowledge of Hebrew and Greek make her a bluestocking poetess whose learning lay heavily and clumsily on her poetry, or did she have a quality of ingenuity which inspirited these classical texts for her own times?’ The author’s reliance on Greek texts to illustrate her poetic ambitions may intentionally have appeared ‘bluestocking’ as part of her project to elevate the subject of her poetry. Barrett Browning’s ‘ingenuity’ in relation to classical texts is evident in her conscious revision and modernisation of them to suit her own purpose. Early in the novel-poem, Barrett Browning signals her interest in hybridising masculine classical tradition with feminine poetics when she has Romney describe Aurora’s Greek marginalia as ‘lady’s Greek/Without the accents’ (II. 76-7). While Romney appears to suggest that ‘lady’s Greek’ is inferior to the version of the language that Victorian men are taught, because incorrect, it is an irony that reflected Victorian prejudices about female learning but is actually a moment in which Barrett Browning signals her own superior education. Margaret Reynolds points out that both Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning did not use accents when writing Greek, suggesting that Romney’s is an incorrectly gendered assumption. Similarly, she explains that, while reading with Hugh Stuart Boyd in 1828, Barrett Browning argued against the use of accents because scholars doubted their authenticity. Thus, Barrett Browning’s revision of classical traditions are not simply a rejection of male poetics but a refinement of her own intellectual thought.

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437 See footnote in *Aurora Leigh*, p. 41.
Through her revisions of a classical epic mode, the manuscript-reader can witness the evolution of Barrett Browning’s thinking about the spiritual and theological ideologies supporting her poetry. An example of this can be found early in the Fifth Book, when Aurora reacts against a tradition within Greek poetry - and, as Sarah Parker points out, a trope inherited by the Romantics - to instil nature (often gendered as female) with ‘issue’ and ‘symbol,’ allowing the speaker to evoke a spiritual divine:

There’s not a flower of spring  
That dies ere June, but vaunts itself allied  
By issue and symbol, by significance  
And correspondence, to that spirit-world  
Outside the limits of our space and time,  
Whereto we are bound. Let poets give it voice  
With human meanings, - else they miss the thought,  
And henceforth step down lower, stand confessed  
Instructed poorly for interpreters,  
Thrown out by an easy cowslip in the text. (V. 120-9)

During revision, Barrett Browning creates a correspondence between her metre and meaning to transform this tradition. This is illustrated by the appearance of the passage on the manuscript, which was subject to revision from Barrett Browning’s ink scraper. The manuscript-page highlights that parts of the final lines of this verse were substituted, such as the words shown in bold:

**Instructed poorly for interpreters,-**  
**Thrown out by an easy** cowslip in the text

The fact that these words have been revised places pressure on this part of the passage. It not only draws attention to a hierarchy of revision - where some words are simply crossed out while others are scraped away - but to the nature of revision itself at a point where Barrett Browning is metaphorically revising poetic traditions. There is a relationship between the appearance of the manuscript and

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438 ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 199r.
the subject of the text: the manuscript-reader is indeed ‘thrown out’ by the revision, which litters the manuscript-page. The two spondees in the final line, ‘Thrown out’ and ‘cowslip’ literally make these words stick out of the iambic pentameter. Barrett Browning mirrors her disruption of metre in this line with her intent to disrupt conventional, established form and its subject; note, for example, the pun on the ‘cowslip in the text’. In the neatly pruned garden of poetry, Aurora celebrates the ‘easy cowslip,’ an image more readily interpreted because of its frequent presence and natural, organic growth.

Consulting the first draft of *Aurora Leigh* allows one to access a rough example of what text Barrett Browning substituted in this passage. It demonstrates that this form of revision contributed to Barrett Browning’s refinement of her challenge to poetic tradition in terms of metre, so that disruptiveness is not simply thematic, but rhythmical. The stages through which the text was revised for publication are no longer present on the manuscript (because they have been scraped away), which suggests Barrett Browning’s confidence here in both revising the past and establishing her own poetic form:

Poets must *not*  
Let us give  
it voice  
And human  
With Articulate meanings. Else they miss the  
note  
henceforth step down lower—
As poets And must henceforth stand confessed  
learned to interpret everything for the  
[illegible word] speak for nature  
earth.  
And baffled by a  
And most unworthy of the cowslip there.439

439 Wellesley College, ‘MS Browning D49, Aurora Leigh: The Original Manuscript of the First Draft’, fol. 158r. This manuscript can be accessed online via the following link: https://repository.wellesley.edu/msbrowningd49/.
It is interesting that, even though Barrett Browning might ‘diminish’ her subject matter (to use Hair’s term) to make it more ‘articulate’ (and implicitly reach a wider audience), she still clarifies the authority of the ‘poet’. Her subject may be grounded in the real and mundane, but she eventually claims that it is ‘poets’ who must ‘give it voice’ rather than the collective ‘us’. Thus, although Aurora may set herself against aspects of tradition, she maintains a recognition of the ‘poet’ figure as something to aspire to, authorising her own poetic act. While she retains the metaphor of the wildflower littering the pristine, well-tended landscape of the nature generally evoked in poetry, the metre of her original composition is not as forceful. The change from the iamb ‘and baffled’ to the trochee ‘[t]hrown out’ (my emphasis) instils the rhythm of this line with the kind of power that Aurora asserts through her revisionist poetics. Attending to the process of composition and revision through which *Aurora Leigh* developed thus helps us to understand how, as Hair remarks, Barrett Browning’s ‘prosody realises her purposes’. The Fifth Book’s function as a ‘poetic manifesto,’ in which Aurora explicitly claims her position within a poetic tradition, can thus be read within the very texture of the verse itself.

Throughout this verse, Barrett Browning voices a Wordsworthian dilemma between the ‘issue and symbol’ of poetry and its relationship to the ‘spirit-world’. She describes how traditional epic poetry finds within nature access to

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440 Hair, p. 4.

441 Barrett Browning’s admiration of Wordsworth is well known and their works have often been compared. In 1986, during the revival of *Aurora Leigh*, Kathleen Blake described the novel-poem as a Wordsworthian ‘defense of representing the commonplace’ (p. 388). Kathleen Blake, ‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Wordsworth: The Romantic Poet as a Woman,’ *Victorian Poetry*, 24.4 (1986): 387-398. More recently, Emily V. Epstein Kobayashi’s ‘Feeling Intellect in *Aurora Leigh* and *The Prelude,*’ *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 51.4 (2011): 823-48 argues that Aurora Leigh revises and develops Wordsworth’s idea of intrasubjective love in *The Prelude* by transforming the character of the blind Beggar into the protagonist of the narrative.
spiritual knowledge that is not readily available to human consciousness. But she challenges this idea by suggesting that spirituality manifests in a material world that is not just limited to a formulaic ‘issue and symbol’. The half-line ‘[w]hereto we are bound’ holds several meanings: we are ‘bound’ to the spirit-world because it is the destination towards which our souls are heading after death; we are ‘bound’ because the spirit-world implicitly permeates every aspect of human life; however, ‘bound’ also signifies limits and finality. Through these multiple meanings, Barrett Browning suggests that an insistence on ‘issue and symbol’ is restrictive; she points out that the spring flower ‘dies ere June’. Instead, she claims that the poet’s responsibility is to invest symbols with ‘human meanings,’ those that do not implicitly glorify nature and are more readily interpreted because they are ground in reality. Instead of superficial symbols of abstract spirituality, poets should also ‘step down lower’ and attend to the irregular, ordinary nature of the ‘cowslip’ itself, which implicitly disrupts idealised Nature.

The knotted rhythm of these lines - established during revision - forces the reader to attend to Barrett Browning’s revisionary poetics, which she implies can be as disruptive and untended as the cowslip. This verse can also be read through Armstrong’s idea of ‘polyrhythmia,’ which considers ‘the multiplicity of rhythms interacting with one another’.

Demonstrated by her own close-reading, Armstrong suggests that rhythms can operate between lines as well as across them. For example, in this stanza, most lines are separated by a caesura, with half-lines either side that begin with either a preposition or conjunction. The result is an organised argument in which Barrett Browning demonstrates her authorial

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command when critiquing poetic tradition. It also creates what Hurley and O’Neill describe as ‘metrical tension’ within the lines that are not structured by caesura. The poet cannot crudely fit such sublime subjects into consistent poetic form. Likewise, the final two lines lack the balanced structure of the rest of the verse but do so to make a different point. They do not, as the fifth line suggests, disrupt consistent form because they transcend it but because Barrett Browning intentionally wishes to mirror the lack of conformity that she is celebrating within the rhythm of her poetry. Thus, the reader experiences Barrett Browning’s challenge because they are also ‘thrown out’ by the rhythm of these lines; an experience she ensured during revision.

These poetic ideas are established after Aurora’s experiences with publishing for a mass audience, in which she realises that ‘[t]he public blames originalities’ (III. 71). This not only characterises Aurora’s difficulty with claiming an authorial identity but, as Cheri Larson Hoeckley points out, indicates a ‘general Victorian ambivalence about the writer as worker, regardless of gender’. It may be the case that both men and women separated true art (whatever that may be) from labour but, for middle-class women, there was a sense of transgression by entering the field of labour and work altogether. Thus, while Aurora enters the literary world, she does so by producing stereotypically female texts. Caley Ehnes explains that this was common for nineteenth-century writers who ‘supplemented their income by contributing saleable, sentimental

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443 Hurley and O’Neill, p. 20.
verse to the periodical press’; she adds that, to do so, ‘women had to produce work aligned with the sentimental tradition and precepts of domestic morality in order to escape criticism’. These are examples of what Claire Knowles would describe as the texts that ‘pandered to fashionable literary tastes through their overt engagement with the literary marketplace;’ texts that, in other words, Barrett Browning wished to distance herself from. The Fifth Book goes further to establish the distinction between Aurora’s feelings of dissatisfaction in the Third Book as a publishing author and a vision of an ideal female poetics, were it not mediated by the marketplace.

Inheriting aspects of the classic past - a form of poetry championed by Arnold - and reworking them into her poetics of the ordinary through revision is essential to this identity-formation, which is also tied up with the development of Aurora’s thinking about genre and her autobiography. As an example against writing for ‘the standard of public taste’ (V. 270) Aurora adopts Æschylus, a victim of public derision, as her muse to argue against writing plays:

Weep, my Æschylus,
But low and far, upon Sicilian shores!
For since ’twas Athens (so I read the myth)
Who gave commission to that fatal weight
The tortoise, cold and hard, to drop on thee
And crush thee, - better cover thy bald head (V. 291-6)

According to the myth, Æschylus left Athens for Sicily after he lost a dramatic contest to Sophocles. He was then killed in Sicily when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his bald head, mistaking it for a rock. According to Aurora, however, Athens intentionally commissioned the eagle to drop the tortoise on Æschylus’

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445 Ehnes, p. 21.
head, presumably because of the bad reception of his dramatic works at the time. ‘[S]o I read the myth,’ she claims, which hints at how she has made an interpretive leap between the two events, according to her own experience. On the printer’s copy, Barrett Browning uses the ink scraper to substitute the words ‘Weep my Aeschylus/But low and far upon’. The first draft offers no clear insight into why Barrett Browning made this substitution; ‘Why, then sweet, my Aeschylus, weep’ is the original text, which reads very similarly. However, the version on the printer’s copy makes it clearer that the accident was part of Athens’ revenge, which makes Barrett Browning’s revision of the myth more explicit. The act of revision makes this whole passage on the printer’s copy clearer and more readable, providing a visual narrative of Barrett Browning’s growing confidence in asserting her eponymous heroine’s position against writing according to the tastes of a popular audience.

Æschylus acts as a cautionary model for Aurora of the repercussions of writing for public recognition, rather than a spiritual purpose. Margaret Reynolds creates a connection between this part of the poem and an unfinished poem Barrett Browning wrote about Æschylus’ final hours, where he realises that he is condemned because ‘I spoke my Greek/Too deep down in my soul to suit their ears’. She implies that the public enjoy superficial beauty, suggesting that the ‘universal’ (celebrated by the likes of Romney) appeals more readily to mass consumption. However, she argues that true poetry comes from within and cannot be measured by its reception, rather its ability to embody the ‘soul’. This is

447 ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 205r.
448 ‘MS Browning D49’, fol. 164r.
449 See footnote in Aurora Leigh, p. 152.
something she glosses directly before her evocation of Æschylus in *Aurora Leigh* in a way that serves as an ironic commentary of her own journey into posterity:

What the poet writes,
He writes; mankind accepts it if it suits,
And that’s success: if not, the poem’s passed
From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand,
Until the unborn snatch it, crying out
In pity on their fathers’ being so dull,
And that’s success too. (V. 261-7)

Barrett Browning suggestively genders this passage, which assimilates her role with that of the male poet (‘He writes’), and perhaps comments on the gendered reception of texts within the nineteenth-century. Like her contemporaries, Barrett Browning was aware that female-authored texts were often received differently from texts written by their male counterparts. It is, she suggests, the tastes of ‘fathers’ that decide what kinds of texts are successful. What she makes more explicit is that a poem’s contemporary reception is not necessarily a marker of its value; the ‘mankind’ that receives the poetry is fickle. Again she echoes the Wordsworthian idea that marginality can equate to genius and argues that posterity is as important as current fame. It is rather ironic that Barrett Browning seems to predict her own future here; a poet whose archive is passed ‘from hand to hand’ who, while she was immensely famous during her lifetime, only regained popularity in the mid-twentieth-century because of the feminist politics that deemed her relevant again.

While the poem does not necessarily gesture back to the revisions that have been made to it, it does self-reflexively gesture to its materiality as a means to understand the gendered dimension to textual production. This is developed in the

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450 See footnote 82.
Fifth Book, when Barrett Browning intentionally forges the relationship between the ‘book’ and its gendered materiality:

There’s more than passion goes to make a man
Or book, which is a man too.
I am sad. (V. 398-399)

Barrett Browning’s terminology here is interesting; instead of addressing the ‘poet’ and ‘poetry’, as she frequently does, she addresses materiality by choosing the ‘book’. Thus, these lines hold several layers of meaning. On the surface, the reader understands that Aurora’s frustration with writing comes, not from being without the desire to do so, but her inability to find a subject. By gendering the ability to write, Barrett Browning suggests that it is easier for male authors because what they produce is supported by a strong and established tradition. The half line at the end, ‘I am sad,’ literally sets Aurora’s experience aside from a male mode of composition, emphasising not only her feelings of dejection but her physical isolation from an established mode of writing. By referring to the ‘book,’ Barrett Browning makes another claim about the circulation of a text within print. In the same way that a man is not just defined by his emotional experience, but also his physical form, Barrett Browning hints at Aurora’s literary output in the Third Book, which is at the mercy of a male-dominated publishing industry that transforms the written text into a book.

Aurora extends this discourse of materiality by going on to compare her ‘doubts’ to the experience of Pygmalion, an ancient Cypriot sculptor mentioned in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* who fell in love with the statue he created:

I wonder if Pygmalion had these doubts
And, feeling the hard marble first relent,
Grow supple to the straining of his arms,
And tingle through its cold to his burning lip,
Supposed his senses mocked, supposed the toil
Of stretching past the known and seen to reach
The archetypal Beauty out of sight,
Had made his heart beat fast enough for two,
And with his own life dazed and blinded him! (V. 400-408)

Barrett Browning’s use of the ink eraser occurs in this verse. The final line, ‘And with his own life dazed and blinded him!’ is written over a deletion on the manuscript, which has been removed with the tool.\(^{451}\) While it may have been practical for Barrett Browning to remove the line, there are other examples where text has simply been crossed out or substituted above. This is the hierarchy of revision, though it is difficult to tell what the terms of it are. Nevertheless, here the manuscript-page is obscured, one might even say dazed, the manuscript-reader ‘blinded’ from reading what was deleted by the text that has been substituted. It is symptomatic of the relationship that emerges between the text and its physicality on the manuscript. The material struggle that Aurora experiences within the novel-poem, both with producing a ‘book’ and reflecting on the experience of Pygmalion when sculpting the female figure, does register examples on the manuscript where Barrett Browning appears to have experienced a similar struggle with composing and revising the text.

Michele Martinez argues that the ‘sculptural conceits’ in \textit{Aurora Leigh} pay tribute to the female sculptor Harriet Hosmer, who Barrett Browning was friends with and who sculpted the ‘Clasped Hands of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’ (1853).\(^{452}\) While Hosmer was influential as a woman who established herself in a predominantly male profession, I would also argue that these ‘sculptural conceits’ provide Barrett Browning with a suitably material form

\(^{451}\) ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 209r.

through which she could grapple with her experience of composition. Alike with Pygmalion’s visceral sensation of ‘feeling the hard marble first relent,’ Barrett Browning would have had a similar experience of erasing ink and scraping the surface from the page. The process requires precision and the right amount of strength and pressure to remove text without ripping the paper completely. It is a process that interferes with the page in a way that crossing out would not; this is something emphasised by the change in texture to Barrett Browning’s particular notepaper, which is generally very smooth, because these types of permanent deletions make the paper rough and thin (Figure 6).

Martinez considers Aurora’s comparison to Pygmalion to be productive. As well as continuing to equate the poet with the sculptor, a trend within neoclassical and Romantic aesthetics, she argues that Barrett Browning confirms Byron’s view that ‘poets and sculptors can perfect nature’s imperfections and bring the ideal to life’. The allusion is not that simple, however, and it is interesting that Barrett Browning transforms Ovid’s original myth in which Aphrodite grants Pygmalion’s wish and imbues the statue with life. For Barrett Browning, Pygmalion ‘supposed his senses mocked’ when the statue began to ‘tingle’ because he has willingly embraced a false illusion. The repetition of the word ‘supposed’ balances each side of the line and creates a distinction between the sculptor’s ‘senses,’ on the one hand, and the physical ‘toil’ involved in realising his ideas.

Indeed, she suggests that Pygmalion’s attempt at ‘stretching past the known and seen to reach/The archetypal Beauty out of sight’ is produced from translating his own imagination into form (‘He made his heart beat fast enough for two’), an act which leads him to become ‘dazed’ and metaphorically blinded. Compare this

453 Martinez, p. 215.
to the way that Aurora was blinded by the ‘dew’ on the ivy-crown. It appears that the temporary blinding of the artist is symptomatic with a struggle for vision and expression. Just as Aurora’s attempt in the First Book to ‘[pour] [her]self/Along the veins of others’ (I. 972-3) was unproductive because she was ‘counterfeiting epics’ (I. 990), Pygmalion’s attempt to possess the woman he is carving (suggested by the passive way in which the marble ‘relents’) is not the empowering poetic act we might think it is.

The spondee in the final line extends the stress on Pygmalion’s ‘own life dazed’ (my emphasis), which suggests both that he is blinded by an illusion of his own making, but also that he has projected his own self upon the statue of the woman he wants to possess. The exclamation suggests that the author is aware that her statement goes against the traditional narrative of the myth; she conjures a sense of surprise for the reader, foreshadowing and almost satirising a reaction to her revisionist approach (which, conversely, makes it seem more radical). Barrett Browning seems to be making a wider claim about representation here: that stretching ‘past the known,’ which becomes the subject of her poetry, is not something tangible that can be achieved by labour alone. Those who attempt to claim the ‘archetypal Beauty’ are indeed reaching ‘out of sight,’ into an unknown realm where meaning is obscured and their vision ‘dazed’. While, as Martinez explains, the author is concerned with bringing ‘the ideal to life,’ she exposes Pygmalion’s superficial materialism. He carves from the outside in, producing the image of Beauty that he wishes to possess, whereas Barrett Browning suggests that the ideal comes from within and is then translated into material form.

Emily V. Epstein Kobayashi considers gestures like this to be part of Barrett Browning’s ‘movement from introspective vision to outward engagement,’ which
expands Wordsworth’s poetic vision. Here, Barrett Browning champions internal vision rather than Pygmalion’s attempt to work from the outside in. It is this personal and spiritual relationship to what is expressed that produces the glimmers of ‘archetypal Beauty’ that the poet is otherwise blinded from. In doing so, she also exposes Pygmalion’s false representation of the female muse who is an unwilling object.

**Aurora Leigh’s Female Poetics: From ‘I, writing’ to ‘I write’**

Attending to the material way in which *Aurora Leigh* engages with classical artistic modes demonstrates how Barrett Browning’s challenge to established conventions was rooted in transforming myths as well as poetic form. Revisions on the manuscript do not appear to be a defensive gesture which mitigate the impact of her subversion by concealing it (like Gaskell) or antagonising the reader through silence (like Brontë) but a way to legitimise her female poetics. This section will explore how the künstlerroman within *Aurora Leigh* develops through the relationship between metre and meaning in the poem. It traces the ways Barrett Browning revises the very form of her poetry to manifest a poetics for her protagonist that embraces her subject position as a female poet and enables her transition from ‘I, writing’ to a confident subject who claims ‘I write’. To begin with, I will examine how Barrett Browning positions herself against traditional poetic modes by self-reflexively discussing her novel-poem’s relationship to form. Then I will argue that Barrett Browning’s language and prosody becomes the means of establishing her female poetics, which is refined through the process of revision.

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454 Kobayashi, p. 823.
In a letter to Robert Browning, Barrett Browning made her intentions to disrupt traditional form explicit:

But my chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem - a poem as completely modern as ‘Geraldine’s Courtship,’ running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like, ‘where angels fear to tread’; and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it out plainly… I am waiting for a story, and I won’t take one, because I want to make one, and I like to make my own stories, because then I can take liberties with them in the treatment.  

It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the ways that form becomes the root of her transgression. Breaking down gender constructions involves confronting the ‘[h]umanity of the age,’ but specifically in a manner that is ‘plain’ and ‘without mask’. And it is fair to say that, in many ways, Barrett Browning achieved her ambition; at the level of form, by transforming everyday matter into the epic, and in its dealing with controversial topics, such as the transformation of narratives dealing with the fallen woman. In *Aurora Leigh*, however, writing ‘without mask’ is not always compatible with ‘taking liberties’ in the treatment of ‘stories’. For example, Aurora’s description of the poet’s ‘double vision’ (V. 184) has another meaning, which refers to how the terms of Barrett Browning’s transgressions are often meted out in double-meanings or embedded within her prosody. The self-conscious questioning of writing as it is happening seems to offer the female writer a means through which she can legitimise her own authorial act.

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456 Leslie Thorne Murphy has connected Barrett Browning’s representation of the fallen woman and Greek myths of rape with the development of Aurora Leigh’s poetic process. Murphy, ‘Prostitute Rescue, Rape, and Poetic Inspiration in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*,’ *Women’s Writing*, 12.2 (2007): 241-58.
Hurley and O’Neill argue that form can ‘dramatise the way the poem thinks its thoughts,’ which provides a useful way of approaching the self-reflexivity of *Aurora Leigh*. An example of how Barrett Browning’s form structures her thought is her argument about the subject of epic and her decision to focus on ‘human meanings’. There is a necessary correspondence, Hurley and O’Neill suggest, between the argument of the poem and the ways in which that argument is conveyed to the reader. If form is said to show the poem’s thinking, then *Aurora Leigh* can be said to be thinking about the act of thinking itself. Not only does Barrett Browning embed this in the way her argument is transmitted, but form - and thinking through form - becomes one of Aurora’s key subjects. Thinking becomes both the subject and the form when Aurora claims to be thinking through her autobiographical novel-poem while she is writing it:

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What form is best for poems? Let me think
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,
As sovran nature does, to make the form;
For otherwise we only imprison spirit
And not embody. Inward evermore
To outward, - so in life, and so in art
Which still is life.
    Five acts to make a play.
And why not fifteen? why not ten? or seven?
What matter for the number of the leaves,
Supposing the tree lives and grows? exact
The literal unities of time and place,
When ’tis the essence of passion to ignore
Both time and place? Absurd. Keep up the fire,
And leave the generous flames to shape themselves. (V. 223-236)
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This stanza stands alone on both the manuscript and printed page, focusing the reader’s gaze on how Barrett Browning abruptly - almost crudely - draws attention to the process of composition seemingly as it is happening. Despite the direct question in which Aurora considers an appropriate form, she playfully

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457 Hurley and O’Neill, p. 17.
distances ‘forms’ from her considerations of ‘art,’ which has a double meaning. On the one hand, she foreshadows the point she works through when revising the myth of Pygmalion; that art should originate in an internal spiritual experience that is ‘embodied’ in the external, rather than the other way around. On the other hand, she makes a point about gender. Form has a proliferation of meanings: it is, as Leighton describes, ‘a noun lying in wait for its object’ but ultimately its signification comes back to the body.\textsuperscript{458} If Aurora claims that she does not wish to think of ‘forms’ and ‘the external’ she is, to some degree, rejecting the relationship between her own gendered body and the poetry she produces. She wishes to transcend material form so that the ‘spirit’ - an implicitly ideal mode of understanding - can transform ‘passion’ into poetry. The pyrrhic foot in the middle of the second line shifts into two trochaic feet that allow Aurora an exclamatory, glorifying tone when she encourages the reader to ‘[t]rust the spirit’. This echoes the ‘essence of passion’ she celebrates later in the verse when she explains that the relationship between form and subject should be an organic one rather than the comparatively shallow world of the literary marketplace which, she argues, admires simply ‘clever versifiers’.\textsuperscript{459}

It is interesting that Barrett Browning makes no clear distinction between male and female experiences of ‘the inward,’ although she does present ‘spirit’ as something almost instinctual that is often imprisoned, linking it to a feminine emotional experience. She then, suggestively, goes on to evoke Milton by using his spelling of ‘sovereign’ (‘sovran’), which the OED points out is almost


\textsuperscript{459} Knowles, p. 132.
exclusively used in a poetic context.\footnote{OED [online], ‘sovran, adj. and n.’, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/185353?redirectedFrom=sovran#eid [accessed 11 April 2019].} By making this connection, Barrett Browning not only claims authority for her own epic text, but suggests that the power of male authors such as Milton to evoke ‘sovran nature’ comes from combining an inner spiritual experience with the material aspects of form and thought. The lyrical mode in which Aurora ruminates during the first half of the stanza is echoed by the generally steady, consistent beats of the iambic pentameter. This kind of thought shifts, however, from the second half-line where the spondee ‘[f]ive acts’ establishes Aurora’s more forceful, and conversational, questioning of poetic form. Nearly the whole verse is posed as a question until the eventual spondee ‘[a]bsurd,’ which portrays the climax of Aurora’s frustration.

Barrett Browning cleverly uses the image of ‘leaves’ that grow on a tree to suggest both the spontaneity of nature, which cannot be easily quashed into consistent rhythm, but also the physical ‘leaves’ of a page. The reader confronts their own experience of holding a book, which involves literally turning the leaves, and Barrett Browning exposes here the types of mediations that go into materialising art. In doing so she references her own authorial act, which is dramatised through Aurora, to anticipate gendered expectations they may place on her text. By drawing attention to the nature of composition here, and posing it as a question, Barrett Browning makes the reader aware of their role in legitimising and revising a female mode of writing that embraces ‘passion’ and relies on the flexibility of form.

The idea of art being mediated by the marketplace is developed in the following verse, when Barrett Browning concludes ‘And whosoever writes good
poetry./Looks just to art.’ (V. 251-2) The material and economic advantages procured by those who write simply for a public audience are, implicitly, not important to Barrett Browning.\textsuperscript{461} She extends her claim that posterity is more important than contemporary popular opinion by asking, ‘If virtue done for popularity/Defiles like vice, can art, for praise or hire,/Still keep its splendor and remain pure art?’ (V. 258-260) Apparently not because, according to Barrett Browning, a true artist will not edit their ‘holy lines’ (V. 257) according to popular opinion. In the first draft, she originally elaborated on the kinds of opinions that could convince an artist to mediate their work, but uses the ink scraper to remove it from the printer’s copy:\textsuperscript{462}

\begin{verbatim}
An inch long’s swerving of his holy lines
   school or scholar
In deference to another’s sight vision. What they
All virtue done for popularity
Shall stink like vice, and art that’s done
   In [illegible word] praise or hire\textsuperscript{463}
\end{verbatim}

Barrett Browning’s original addition in the first draft makes an interesting distinction, reminiscent of the masculine/feminine dichotomy, between artistic ‘sight vision’ - implicitly an organic poetic ability - and the ‘school or scholar’ which would place a sense of value upon the text.

On the printer’s copy, there is evidence that Barrett Browning started writing this line but chose to remove it with the ink eraser and substituted it with ‘If virtue done for popularity…’. The erased words are telling about Barrett Browning’s attitude to form, which can restrict art as well as liberate it. According to her, the

\textsuperscript{461} Ehnes argues that, when situating herself against a feminine poetic tradition, Barrett Browning distinguishes between ‘literary celebrity,’ which ‘indicates a broader moral decline,’ and fame based on literary merit (p. 424).

\textsuperscript{462} ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 203r.

\textsuperscript{463} ‘MS Browning D49’, fol. 163r.
artist should defer to no one, no matter their status or learning. In doing so, she may also have been protecting her own claim to authorship. Although, as Knowles explains, Barrett Browning’s illness allowed her the time to pursue ‘the type of education from which girls were typically excluded,’ it was generally assumed that women publishing in the mid-nineteenth-century marketplace would not have been educated in the same way as men. To therefore gesture towards the criticism of ‘school or scholar’ may draw attention to this educational lack as well as reinforcing poetry as belonging to a masculine realm of intellect, whereas Barrett Browning claims throughout that poetic genius is inclusive of a feminine impulse, one as innate and organic as ‘vision’.

There is also another meaning to ‘school,’ which is more closely related to form. Barrett Browning is ambivalent towards poetic schools - Herbert Tucker has written about her engagement with tropes of the Spasmodic school in Aurora Leigh - which suggests that, while she admires established poetic forms, she also acknowledges that to adhere to them too closely, for the sake of emulating others, would be counterproductive and damaging to her own poetic voice.

In the first draft passage, and on the printer’s copy, Barrett Browning suggests that ‘virtue done for popularity’ is easy to identify in the published text. According to Barrett Browning, ‘it shall’ or ‘must’ ‘stink like vice,’ suggesting that it noticeably corrupts the text. Barrett Browning makes a distinction between writing for publication and chasing popularity. Indeed, she showed an early desire to write with a view to publication; she even referred to her father as the ‘public’ and the ‘critic’ of her childhood ‘verses’ in her dedication to him at the beginning.

464 Knowles, p. 143.
of *Drama of Exile*.\(^{466}\) Instead of inviting criticism about the ways that her former publications may emit the ‘stink’ of writing for a public audience, the revision to ‘[d]efiles’ instead suggests what is at stake for literature as a whole if the artist loses sight of their purpose. Barrett Browning compares art produced ‘for praise or hire’ to ‘serfdom’ and directs readers to ‘[e]schew’ it. Art that simply attends to public taste is implicitly alike to a menial form of labour rather than ‘the holy lines’ of the poet’s authentic thoughts. Poetic voice is thus restricted when it is assimilated with established poetic forms for the sake of popularity.

Aurora Leigh’s self-reflexive discussion of poetic form reflects the caesura that separates her poetic ‘I’ and ‘writing’ in the second verse of the novel-poem. Her disconnected identity is certainly related to gender but is also more specifically engendered by Barrett Browning’s experimentation with the epic mode. In making ‘human meanings’ and ‘the Humanity of the age’ her sublime epic subject, she grapples with transforming flux - such as the cowslips that litter her landscape - into form. I will now turn to the ways in which revision becomes a mode through which Barrett Browning can establish her linguistic and prosodic transformations of form into a mode suitable for Aurora as a female poet.

Tucker’s reading of Barrett Browning’s engagement with (and ultimate critique of) the Spasmodic tradition provides a useful example of how Barrett Browning’s transformations work. He argues that she uses Spasmodic tropes to grapple with the human experience, which he defines as ‘a somatic epic machinery connecting sensation to purpose’.\(^{467}\) Barrett Browning’s prosody certainly does carry the

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rhythm of bodily sensation and, in *Aurora Leigh*, serves to embody her struggle with form. Consider, for example, her famous description of ‘the rhythmic turbulence/Of blood and brain swept outward upon words’ (I. 897-8). The reader can indeed experience the ‘turbulence’ caused by the change in rhythm of the trochee at the end of the line. The enjambment leads to iambic reflections of the internal beating of the ‘blood and brain’ (a suggestive combination of masculine and feminine parts of the body) but these beating iambs are interrupted by the parallel stresses separated by a pyrrhic foot ‘swept outward upon words’. The extra stress makes the pentameter feel like it is overflowing, even though it is not, giving the sense that form is inevitably too rigid to embody the flux of the human body.

Language itself seems to be the locus of Aurora’s struggle to reproduce her experience as a woman writer - more specifically, how to command language in a way that pays tribute to the complexity of female experience. When, at the beginning of the Third Book, Aurora claims that ‘The word suits many different martyrdoms’ (III. 8) she explores how language can simultaneously liberate meaning but also reinforce a sense of anguish. The image is taken from John 21.18-19 and suggests that God’s advice to Peter to steer away from potentially foolish or corrupt social customs is applicable to nineteenth-century readers. The appearance of this passage on the printer’s copy indicates that Barrett Browning considered the tendency to follow convention to be a gendered trope:

mere men
For ’tis not in just death that we die most\footnote{468 ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 97.}
Barrett Browning shifts from an inclusive sense of deficiency - which assumably includes the female writer - to target ‘men’ specifically. The revision gives the manuscript-reader the sense - both from her address throughout the novel-poem and from the fact that she decided to revise these words in the first place - that when Barrett Browning refers to ‘men,’ it is not in the casual mode of referring to a general public. Implicit is that language is a masculine realm, which precludes female agency and authorship. The revision makes no difference to the number of beats within the line but shifts from unstressed to stressed syllables; the alliteration of ‘mere’ and ‘men’ carries that sense of pattern and convention that Aurora strains against. Embedded within the very prosody of the line, then, is Barrett Browning’s claim for the female poet as a figure of resistance against traditional form. She makes us aware of her distaste for traditional male-dominated poetic form in the Fifth Book when she claims that ‘death inherits death’ (V. 199); the idea of inheritance - itself a tradition that favours men - is unproductive for Aurora. If she cannot inherit, she must ‘take liberties’ and establish the female writer outside of that canon.

The manuscript of *Aurora Leigh* draws our attention to how female authorship itself is a kind of ‘martyrdom’. Barrett Browning’s revision of this line not only makes this reference clearer but makes a more substantial claim for female authorship:

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  different
  The word, I think suits many ^ martyrdoms
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The author changes the scope of her claim about ‘the word’ from something personal to a broader statement about God’s teaching and words themselves. The

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implication is that the act of female authorship - and deviating from convention -
is one encouraged by God’s teaching to Peter. The female author can thus lay
claim to the spiritual by appropriating masculine poetic and linguistic power. If
we take the word ‘martyr’ according to its Latinate meaning ‘witness,’ we can
read a further claim here that reinforces Isobel Armstrong’s idea of the gendered
‘double poem’.\footnote{Harrington, p. 340.} Not only is Barrett Browning drawing attention to the poem as
something constructed by an author who is conscious of the mode in which she is
writing, but she makes reference to how ‘the word’ can simultaneously hold
alternate meanings. The multiplicity of meanings that Barrett Browning refers to
is translated into what Harrington describes as her ‘renegade scansion’\footnote{Shires, p. 334.}. The
introduction of the word ‘different’ brings with it multiple possible scansions for
the line, depending on whether the reader elides the third syllable of diff-er-ent
into diff’rent. Harrington’s description of this as ‘renegade’ suggests there is
something violent underscoring Barrett Browning’s experimentation with metre.
On the contrary, it appears here that the multiple rhythmic patterns offered by
working in blank verse allows Barrett Browning to establish the ‘double vision’ of
the metre. The reader, depending upon the speed at which they read the line, is
empowered to choose whether they conform to the ordered iambic regularity or
introduce the additional beat and experiment with the line. It allows Barrett
Browning to hover between conformity and subversion and thus engage in ‘cross-
dwelling.’\footnote{Shires, p. 334.}

\footnote{OED [online], ‘martyr, n.’, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114474#eid37663565 [accessed
15 March 2019].}
The flexibility of blank verse thus gives Barrett Browning a form through which she can experiment with combining masculine and feminine modes. Revisions track her use of language for multiple purposes. Sometimes, for example, it is the sound patterns produced by language that enable Barrett Browning to develop her argument. To adopt Meredith Martin’s term, she encourages readers to read ‘metrically’ rather than ‘thematically’ (which, Martin argues, is the way female poetry tended to be read in the Victorian period).\(^{473}\) Ironically, however, Barrett Browning’s transgressive experiments with blank verse led reviewers to comment on her lack of skill; Martin concludes, ‘EBB’s rhyming innovations and prose-like blank verse may have been less offensive to critics if the argument of *Aurora Leigh* had not been that a true female artist must strain against traditional poetic and gender norms.’\(^{474}\) It is perhaps the ubiquitous nature of blank verse that is so tempting for writers of long poems or plays but, according to the frequent attention Barrett Browning pays to the idea of ‘verse’ - both in the text and on the manuscript - suggests that it plays an important role in the identity-formation of the female poet.

When grappling with her infertile attempt at emulating her male predecessors in the Third Book, Aurora describes how she ‘ripped my verses up’ because they were ‘[m]ere tones, inorganised to any tune.’ (III. 245-250) The latter line is balanced between three spondees and three iambics, which stresses the harsh sounds of the ‘mere tones’ that Aurora produces. By creating this contrast in rhythm, Barrett Browning implies that the sound of verse is equally as important as its


\(^{474}\) ibid., p. 31.
content. Blank verse offers the author the flexibility to play with sounds in this way but the alliterative descriptions of ‘tones’ and ‘tune’ is reminiscent of the idea of song and lyric. Monique Morgan has described how lyric, which is an ‘ambivalently gendered’ genre, is used as a ‘mode’ within *Aurora Leigh.*\(^{475}\) She argues that, through lyric, Barrett Browning blurs the distinction between the composition and reception of the poem to create ‘productive tensions’ about gender.\(^{476}\) Certainly, in this line (although it cannot be classed as lyric), Aurora interacts with her verses in a physical way to show that she experiences the composition of her poems viscerally and materially, which makes a similar gesture in drawing attention to the process through which her poem has become a poem.

The self-reflexivity in Aurora’s song-like aspirations is also explained by Prins’ work on how Sappho became as much an aspirational model as a signification for female authorial identity in the mid-Victorian period. Prins argues that female poets related to the ‘forms of disjunction, hiatus, and ellipsis’ present in Sappho’s lyrics and the ‘irreducibly textual embodiment’ of female poetic identity.\(^{477}\) Aurora’s identity is not just predicated on her economic success but the ability for her metre to embody her experience as a woman in the mid-nineteenth-century. The ways in which Barrett Browning draws attention to the physical experience of the female text, involving not simply the initial process of composition but several later stages of revision, arguably creates ‘forms of disjunction’ in the poem as it interrupts the rhythm of poetic narrative (just like lyric) and makes the reader

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\(^{476}\) ibid., p. 149.

\(^{477}\) Prins, p. 4.
reflect on the contingency of the physical text in their hands. Prins has elsewhere described lyrics as voices which talk figuratively about voice.\textsuperscript{478} Barrett Browning experiments with combining multiple poetic modes within the novel-poem to do exactly this; to allow the poem to think aloud about the discourses within which it is composed and mediated.

Later on in the Third Book, Aurora ruminates on the material nature of female poetic craft by drawing attention to the different economic opportunities offered by prose and verse:

\begin{quote}
In England no one lives by verse that lives;  
And, apprehending, I resolved by prose  
To make a space to sphere my living verse. (III. 307-9)
\end{quote}

Here Aurora concedes to the material needs of the poet, which ironically enable her insistence on the internal rather than ‘external’ (V. 224). It foreshadows Virginia Woolf’s claim at the beginning of the following century that ‘[a] woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.’\textsuperscript{479} While Woolf refers to a specific mode of literary fiction, Barrett Browning considers the consequences of a Victorian view (one she expresses earlier) that poetry transcends the popular opinion of the marketplace. It is difficult to earn a ‘living’ from a particular kind of ‘live’ poetry alone and so Aurora must supplement her income by writing prose for ‘cyclopaedias, magazines,/And weekly papers’ (III. 310-11); genres that, in contrast, lack the spiritual truth she seeks within her poetry. These lines hold additional meanings and can be interpreted in more than one way. The repetition of ‘lives’ in the first line draws attention to its numerous meanings. For example, Barrett Browning may again be dealing with influence:

\textsuperscript{479} Virginia Woolf, \textit{A Room of One’s Own} (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), pp. 5-6.
she implies (however inaccurately) that there is no poet alive at the time she is writing that can earn a living through verse; it is her historically male predecessors whose poetry is worthy of purchase. The idea of prestige also surrounds the term ‘live;’ at the time of composition, Aurora is living in the centre of London in small rooms that reflect her small income. The implication she makes here is that those who experience the trials of life - and rub up against many experiences of life in the city - are ‘living’ compared to the comfortable lives of the upper classes. All of these interpretations suggest that the poet should dedicate themselves wholly to the production of their ‘verses’ and cannot do so if they are distracted by their material circumstances.

The words ‘lives’ and ‘verse’ are repeated in the first and final lines but the way the lines are structured embodies the different experience of writing verse ‘for the booksellers’ (III. 303) and ‘for myself/And art’ (III. 304-5). In the first line, prepositions separate ‘lives’ and ‘verse;’ in contrast, there is a sibilant sound pattern running through the third line which creates a more mellifluous rhythm within ‘space to sphere my living verse’. Both lines are written in perfect iambic pentameter but the stilted one-syllabled words in the first line suggest how writing verse under the pressures of the marketplace is unproductive for Aurora, compared to the relative freedom of composing verse for a spiritual purpose.

The change in the tone of the poetic voice draws attention to how that poetic voice is composed and the relative freedom of certain voices to express. Aurora uses prose writing as a means to literally create a space for ‘living verse’ to be written. The use of the verb ‘sphere’ suggests not only that writing poetry occurs in a space surrounded and encircled by the material opportunities offered by prose, but how that poetic space ideally operates within its own ‘sphere’ and not
influenced by the pressures of the economic world. A further reading is provided by attending to the way Barrett Browning crafted this line on the manuscript, where these words literally claim additional space on the page:

\[
\text{a space to sphere my} \\
\text{To make [three illegible words] my living verse}^{480}
\]

Comparing this to the first draft shows that ‘a space to sphere’ was substituted by Barrett Browning on the printer’s copy; originally she wrote ‘A room for [my] life & [living] verse.’\(^{481}\) The change demonstrates how words are used as vehicles of sounds and rhythm patterns, which serves Barrett Browning’s purpose to privilege poetry produced specifically for a spiritual purpose. In the later version, the verse is indeed ‘living’ because the sounds produce a more visceral experience for the reader, unlike the jarring, relatively lifeless rhythm of the mono-syllables. The distinction she makes in the first draft between ‘life’ and ‘living’ is also combined in the printer’s copy to become ‘my living verse’, which reinforces not only the distinct ‘sphere’ of poetic craft from the mundanity of Aurora’s life but how her identity is predicated on her poetic abilities. As she mentions at the very beginning of the poem, she has written ‘much in prose and verse/For other’s uses’ and ‘will write now for mine’ (I. 2-3).

Barrett Browning’s repeated attempt to define her poetic approach through blank verse does indeed confirm the form’s ubiquitoussness but does so in a way which distinguishes a hierarchy between different verse modes. Aurora reclaims its ambiguous and flexible nature as a form sympathetic to the representation of the female poet and textualises her journey in re-visioning blank verse as part of

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\(^{480}\) ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 109r.

\(^{481}\) Words substituted above the line are provided in brackets. ‘MS Browning D49, Aurora Leigh,’ fol. 77r.
an elite female poetics. For example, in the First Book, she despairs over her ‘lifeless imitations of live verse’ (I. 974) when attempting to emulate her male predecessors (one may notice the distinct parallel here between her ‘lifeless’ verse at the beginning and her ambitions to write ‘living verse’ in the Third Book). Similarly, verse is gendered by Romney in a derogatory way in the Second Book when he bargains with Aurora and permits her to ‘write woman’s verses’ and, at the same time, ‘be my wife’ (II. 831-4). Implicitly Romney finds nothing harmful or ‘witch’-like (II. 79) about ‘verse,’ which he deems a suitable genre for Aurora to indulge herself with under the protection of matrimony. In the Third Book, however, when Aurora begins to gain confidence in her poetic abilities, she recognises the flexibility of verse and its ability to embody her living experience. She writes that she felt ‘My heart’s life throbbing in my verse to show/It lived’ (III. 339). It is the beat of the heart and, symbolically, Aurora’s internal emotional experience that is complemented by blank verse form. It is the spondee ‘life throbbing’ which enlivens the rhythm of this line, mimicking the embodied relationship between Aurora and the verse she produces. She reclaims the genre that Romney scorned (because he deems it feminine) to reinforce her poetic identity.

However, this is not enough: she goes on to compare herself to Adam to celebrate not only how blank verse can elevate her subject but deal with the ‘disorder’ of original sin: ‘But even its very tumours, warts and wens/Still organised by and implying life’ (III. 342-3). Blank verse is the form that is sympathetic to Aurora’s female poetics because it is not only able to embody the ‘living,’ ‘disordered’ emotion of the feminine but affords these ‘tumours, warts and wens’ a sense of order. Not only this but Barrett Browning demonstrates the
possibilities afforded by blank verse by embedding it within the multiple possible
scansions of the line ‘[b]ut even its very tumours, warts and wens’. The reader can
choose whether to include an additional unstressed beat in ‘even,’ introducing a
pyrrhic foot that extends the rhythm of the line (meaning the rhythm disrupts or
‘disorders’ the line, like a tumour, wart or wen). Alternatively, the reader can elide
the two syllables to e’en, resulting in perfect iambic pentameter. Barrett Browning
does not write this elision into the line, suggesting that she allows the reader to
make this choice, while at the same time hinting at the subversive possibilities of
her rough scansion, which conceals itself within established form.

Aurora’s experimentation with blank verse enables her to make the transition
to poetic identity; a journey symbolised by a revision on the printer’s copy at the
beginning of the Fifth Book when she asks ‘shall I hope/To speak my poems in
mysterious tune/With man and nature?’ (V. 1-3). The printer’s copy shows that
Aurora’s ‘poems’ underwent two different significations in draft form:

verses in
To speak my words in such mysterious tune482

As Barrett Browning demonstrates in previous books of the poem, Aurora is
ambivalent about the power of ‘words’ only. Her autobiography is hybridised into
a novel-poem because blank verse affords her the freedom to experiment with the
sounds and rhythms of ‘words’ so that they can hold multiple meanings. Aurora
Leigh thus provides an example of the numerous ways that language can be
manipulated. ‘Verse’ lends itself to Aurora’s ‘mysterious tune’ because it can
accommodate several layers of meaning. It is a phrase that signifies both her
disruption of metre (and the smooth rhythms of ‘tune’) and the ‘mysterious’ and

482 ‘Aurora Leigh: Manuscript, 1856, Houghton MS Lowell 5’, fol. 194r.
non-linear experience of the female poet. It is clear at this point in the text that ‘man and nature,’ as it has so far been conceived, is a pairing that represents her attempt to assimilate female epic poetry with the everyday matter of her subject. It is not surprising that Barrett Browning made an additional claim for Aurora’s poetic identity and - at some point after the printer’s copy and before publication - revised the line again so that Aurora speaks her ‘poems’. In the very specific revision-narrative of this line we can trace the künstlerroman through which Aurora develops to claim her own act of authorship, transforming her words into verses, the flexibility of which she embraces in her poetry. It is through this transition that Aurora must emerge to become an autonomous female poet who claims ‘I write’.

**Aurora Leigh and Female Tradition**

The analysis of Barrett Browning’s subtle revisions to the *Aurora Leigh* manuscript invites a reinterpretation of her challenge to the female poetic tradition. This requires us to look differently at other poems in which Barrett Browning developed these themes, as well as her relationship to other women poets. For example, the way that Barrett Browning carefully refines the relationship between her metre and meaning through revision requires new readings of her other poems that deal with the role of the female artist. Revisions shed light on how Barrett Browning’s self-reflexive attention to themes of gender, hybridity and authorial power in *Aurora Leigh* are part of her ongoing transformation of a female poetic tradition.
These ideas were worked through in two sonnets that Barrett Browning addressed to George Sand, published in 1844. The first was titled ‘To George Sand: A Desire’:

Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man,
Self-called George Sand! whose soul, amid the lions
Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance
And answers roar for roar, as sprits can:
I would some mild miraculous thunder ran
Above the applauded circus, in appliance
Of thine own nobler nature’s strength and science,
Drawing two pinions, white as wings of swan,
From thy strong shoulders, to amaze the place
With holier light! that thou to woman’s claim
And man’s, mightst join beside the angel’s grace
Of a pure genius sanctified from blame
Till child and maiden pressed to thine embrace
To kiss upon thy lips a stainless fame.483

Sand was a controversial figure in the Victorian period known not only for her subversive novels, which portrayed heroines that intentionally rebelled against social conventions and engaged in cross-class romances, but her transgressive personal life. She would wear male clothing and smoke tobacco in public, which was frowned upon by many of her contemporaries. Barrett Browning’s public admiration of Sand and use of the pseudonym is therefore a bold move in itself that serves a purpose, not only because George Sand was the name recognised by a wider readership, but because of the gender fluidity suggested by the moniker. The speaker of the sonnet wishes that Sand’s mixture between a ‘woman’s claim/
And man’s’ is recognised and sanctified as ‘pure genius’. Margaret Molier informs us that Barrett Browning’s use of the phrase ‘large-brained woman and large-hearted man’ responded to, and subverted, Joseph Mazzini’s 1839 praise of Sand

when he compared her to a ‘large-hearted woman and large-brained man’. By switching the adjectives, Barrett Browning does not simply challenge stereotypical qualities of gender but captures the artistic possibilities this fluidity opens up for both women and men. Not only can women lay claim to being ‘large-brained’ - a feat that goes against scientific discourse in the mid-nineteenth century which considered women to be both intellectually and physically inferior - but men can harness the expressive power of a female-dominated tradition of sensibility.

The spondee in the first half of the line produces three consecutive stressed syllables ‘large-brained woman’ (my emphasis), which make Barrett Browning’s challenge to gendered poetry more forceful. The line distinguishes between the relative authority of intellect and sensibility. Though Sand was primarily a novelist, Barrett Browning’s ambivalence towards stereotypically feminine tropes establishes her own challenge towards a female poetic tradition of sensibility. For example, her complaint of having no literary ‘grandmothers’ suggests that she did not want to be consigned to the tradition of her predecessors, such as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon. She presents Sand as one who, in spite of her masculine form and ‘strong shoulders,’ can still ‘embrace’ the seemingly fragile ‘child and maiden,’ thus preserving her femininity and ‘sanctifying’ her ‘from blame’. The ‘embrace’ is, after all, reciprocated by the ‘kiss upon thy lips’. Barrett Browning’s allegiance with Sand makes a claim for her own authorial act. The

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485 Kirstie Blair has explained how parts of the body were gendered in the Victorian period, such as the feminine heart in *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

486 See Ryan (2008).
ambivalently gendered angel into which Sand transforms, ‘Drawing two pinions, white as wings of swan, From thy strong shoulders,’ underpins Barrett Browning’s ideological poetics at this point. The powerful ‘roar for roar’ of Sand’s spirit is symptomatic of gender neutral angels of the period, who were considered to be the warriors of the lord. Sand’s combination of masculine and feminine power allows her to embody and express a spiritual divine and, by extension, cast her audience with ‘holier light’.

It is worth noting that this sonnet was published with an accompaniment, ‘George Sand: A Recognition,’ in which the inspirational power Barrett Browning describes in ‘A Desire’ flattens and the author comments on the reality of Sand’s authorial identity. This ‘recognition’ involves identifying how, in the practice of harnessing masculine power, Sand resists her femininity and ‘dost deny/The woman’s nature with a manly scorn’. Barrett Browning concludes that, even if Sand relinquishes her femininity in public to ‘burnest in a poet-fire’ - a passionate image that suggests both transgressive female emotion as well as male authority and power - the ‘beat’ of Sand’s ‘woman heart’ betrays her feminine sensibility. In this play on words, Barrett Browning establishes the rhetorical strategy that she would develop throughout her career in which the rhythms (or ‘beats’) within the lines of her poetry embody a hybrid mode of double meaning. She also suggests that the ‘pure genius’ described in her previous sonnet will inevitably (if unconsciously) manifest within verse because it is governed by that ‘holier light’.

She ends with a directive that seems to espouse her own attitude towards poetry and gender:

Beat purer, heart, and higher,
Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore
Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire! (l. 12-14)

These lines suggest that hybridising the ‘woman’s claim/And man’s’ is a spiritual practice rather than a material one (and one that is ironically forestalled until the body is detached from the implicitly genderless spirit). The conclusion drawn from this pairing of sonnets is a complex one: how can Barrett Browning aspire to the ‘large-brained woman and large-hearted man’ in ‘A Desire,’ while repeatedly reminding Sand of her ‘woman’s nature…woman’s voice…woman’s hair…woman-heart’ in ‘A Recognition’? While ‘A Desire’ may serve as the ideal authorial image for Barrett Browning’s feminist polemic, she diplomatically separates herself from Sand by distinguishing between embracing masculine authorial power - an empowering move - and appropriating the identity of a male author, which is inevitably ‘disproved’.

*Aurora Leigh*, in its very nature as a female *künstlerroman*, uses form to resolve the questions posed in the George Sand sonnets about what it means to engage in an authorial act as a mid-Victorian woman. To understand this, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms feminine and female. Using Barrett Browning’s own words to differentiate the two, Knowles writes: ‘to Barrett Browning, the “poetess” and the “female poet” were two entirely different creatures - the first was merely a “clever versifier,” while the second recognised the “divineness of poetry”’.\(^488\) Barrett Browning makes a case for the female poet, but often does so by challenging aspects of a seemingly superficial feminine tradition which she suggests should be considered as related to aesthetics and not gender, compared to the spiritual or divine form of poetry produced by the female

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\(^{488}\) Knowles, p. 132.
This is an attitude that she demonstrates in ‘Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon and Suggested by Her “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans”’, where she is sceptical of Landon’s emotional outpouring for Felicia Hemans; she describes the female elegist disrupting the peace of the grave and ‘[d]ropping o’er the tranquil eyes/Tears not of their shedding’. This ‘type of human seeming’ and clinging on to dead voices is not a genuine form of poetics for Barrett Browning, who more productively (and playfully) suggests that Landon should ‘Reserve thy tears for living brows/For whom such tears are meeter’. In this play on words, Barrett Browning makes a subtle distinction in her own poetics: the female poet’s tears are more appropriate for living subjects, who can feel and respond to emotion, but these kinds of outpourings should also be tempered by the form or ‘metre’ of poetry.

Modern critics, such as Armstrong, also insist on deconstructing this gender binary. Armstrong distinguishes between the ‘gender-based experience, male and female’ and ‘a conventional, affective account of the feminine as a nature which occupies a distinct sphere of feeling, sensitivity and emotion quite apart from the sphere of thought and action occupied by men’. The spectrum between ‘sensitivity and emotion’ and ‘thought and action’ is useful for exploring the extent to which Victorian poets consider form to be fuelled by what Martin

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489 In *A Drama of Exile*, Barrett Browning playfully suggests that it is important for feminine expression to *sound* pleasing when she has Lucifer describe Eve’s reaction to her transgression, ‘That she should curse too - as a woman may - /Smooth in the vowels.’ (p. 47).

490 Barrett Browning, ‘Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon and Suggested by Her “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans”’, *The New Monthly Magazine*, 45 (1835), p. 82 in *Hathi Trust Digital Library* [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044019231497&view=1up&seq=96&q1=stanzas%20addressed%20to Miss%20Landon&f=false] [accessed 14 July 2020].

491 Ehnes explains how Barrett Browning often sought to distance herself from the ‘feminine poetics’ of Hemans and Landon, which was difficult within the periodical press because it often marketed her poetry in these terms (p. 429).

describes as ‘flashes of feeling’ (for example, Landon describes her own poetry as a ‘deep sigh’ being ‘poured’ from her heart’), or from the intellect and learning of established literary conventions.\textsuperscript{493} Barrett Browning’s explicit and self-reflexive treatment of form in \textit{Aurora Leigh} suggests that hybridising these modes is necessary for female poetic power.

Towards the end of the Fifth Book, Aurora is declared ‘the unfavouring muse’ (V.796) by a friend of her cousin’s, Lord Howe. By including this in her autobiographical poem, Aurora appears to claim that title, which characterises her attitude towards writing poetry by reworking her predecessor Charlotte Smith’s elegy to ‘[t]he partial muse’ (l. 1) in the first of her \textit{Elegiac Sonnets}, first published in 1795.\textsuperscript{494} In a gesture that foreshadows Barrett Browning’s use of double-meaning, Smith’s ‘partial muse’ is both responsible for Smith’s poetic power and insufficiently inspiring. Smith explains that, while the muse grants her poetic abilities and (like the poet crowned with laurels) ‘decks the head with many a rose’ (l. 7), the ‘flashes of feeling’ (to use Martin’s term) in her melancholic verse do not relieve her pain but ‘[r]eserves the thorn, to fester in the heart’ (l. 8). She prefaces her poetic collection with a sense of inadequacy that ‘deepens ev’ry sigh’ (l. 11) and is thus linked to a feminine mode of sensibility, ‘how dear the Muse’s favours cost./If those paint sorrow best - who feel it most’ (l. 13-14). For Smith, the act of writing poetry engenders anguish as much as it relieves it. Despite this, Smith’s use of the conditional ‘[i]f’ instigates her own protest against the persistent alignment of female poet and subject within poetry. Emotional

\textsuperscript{493} Martin, p. 31.; Letitia Landon, \textit{The Improvisatrice; and other poems} (London: Hurst, Robinson & Co., 1825), p. 3; 13 in Archive <https://archive.org/details/improvisatricean00lelluoft/page/n12> [accessed 8 August 2019].

outpourings should not always be the subject of female poetry, she argues, or they can unproductively ‘fester in the heart’.

In *Aurora Leigh*, Lord Howe suggestively transforms Aurora into the muse, albeit a silent one. Smith’s attitude to the muse may be ambivalent but, to Barrett Browning, its partiality also allows her to separate the female poet from the kinds of values associated with the cult of sensibility. While Aurora may be inspired to express, her silence when conversing with her peers suggests that she is not at the mercy of feeling and controls her form, unlike Smith whose poetic act is frustrated by her emotion and ‘melting eye,’ which ‘[s]tream[s] o’er the ills she knows not to remove’. There is also another irony to Lord Howe’s epithet: he describes Aurora in this way because she does indeed *appear* ‘unfavouring’ according to her ‘intensely calm and sad face’ (V. 800). Implicit is that Aurora’s appearance and demeanour do not live up to his standard of what the female muse should look and act like (as an object). He compares staring at her to studying a statue, ‘A Pallas’ (V. 799) in the Vatican, but finds no ‘fellowship’ in her as the object of his attention. Aurora’s response is to denounce the objectively feminine aspects of her womanhood; she suggests that she has sacrificed her femininity (according to his standards) by becoming a ‘printing woman’, ‘who [has] clipt/ The curls before our eyes’ and thus deserves to be spoken to plainly, ‘man to man’ (V. 806-811). The exchange establishes the frustrating and infertile objectification that Aurora resists as a female poet, while her inclusion of the episode allows her to reclaim and rewrite the terms of the ‘unfavouring muse’ as a form of control rather than untempered melancholy.

495 Zonana interprets this as a basic challenge to the patriarchal idea that the muse is an “‘object’ of a quest’ (p. 242).
This is not to say that, throughout her apprenticeship in writing poetry, Aurora does not refer to her own frustration with composition and sense of inferiority. She describes how ‘I played at art, made thrusts with a toy sword’ (III. 240), which echoes Romney’s earlier conclusion that she ‘play[s] at art, as children play at swords’ (II. 229-30) but transforms it from a childish image - one which reveals Aurora’s inexperience - to a phallic one. The way in which she ‘thrusts’ the infantile toy sword signifies Aurora’s attempt to imitate male poetry but her productions are altogether insufficient because ‘[t]he heart in them was just an embryo’s heart’ (III. 247). Barrett Browning intentionally pairs a phallic metaphor with one of motherhood but, at this early stage in Aurora’s künstlerroman, her maternity is not fully fledged. The extra beat in the line emphasises the final stress on ‘heart;’ the implication is that Aurora must learn to assimilate a feminine poetics related to the ‘heart’ alongside her strive to emulate her male predecessors.

The traditional masculine poetry that both inspires and intimidates Aurora is expressed through her dealings with classical poetry. For example, she goes on to differentiate the ‘embryo’s heart’ with the ‘hot fire-seeds of creation’ held by Jove, comparing the creative force of her motherhood to his ‘clenched palm,’ while suggesting that hers is not consummated:

And yet I felt it in me where it burnt,
Like those hot fire-seeds of creation held
In Jove’s clenched palm before the worlds were sown,
But I - I was not Juno even! my hand
Was shut in weak convulsion, woman’s ill,
And when I yearned to loose a finger - lo,
The nerve revolted. ’Tis the same even now:
This hand may never, haply, open large,
Before the spark is quenched, or the palm charred,

496 At the end of the poem, during Aurora’s romantic union with Romney, she suggestively (and a little disappointingly) describes how ‘I flung closer to his breast,/As sword that, after battle, flings to sheath’ (IX. 833-4).
To prove the power not else than by the pain. (III. 251-260)

Barrett Browning suggests that the autonomous female body cognates those ‘hot fire-seeds of creation’. She differentiates between Jove’s ‘power’ when sowing the seeds and the alliterative ‘pain’ Aurora experiences within her hand, which is ‘shut in weak convulsion’. In doing so, she characterises the traditional binary between masculine action and feminine feeling. Aurora implies that she, too, holds poetic power but, unlike Jove, does not have the means to express that power. She is, as she explains, limited to expressing her power through feeling (in this case ‘pain’).

The iambic pentameter of the verse is littered by two lines containing an extra beat (III. 254 and III. 260); enclosed within the form of Aurora’s creative output itself is an inability to express herself at the same time as conforming to consistent rhythms. The extra beat in the final line is produced by a word which could be elided to fit into pentameter, a move that is characteristic of Barrett Browning’s push back against tradition later in the poem. At this early point, however, to elide the two-syllabled ‘power’ into ‘po’er’ would undermine the impact (or power) of the key word in the final line. While Barrett Browning demonstrates the potential for Aurora to transgress traditional verse forms, a feat she refines later in the poem through revision, she suggestively buries a missed opportunity within the rhythm of these lines in a way that reflects Aurora’s lack of self-confidence.

This feeling of frustration and lack of masculine power haunts Aurora into the Fifth book, where Barrett Browning delivers an image of castration, ‘[w]e women are too apt to look to One/Which proves a certain impotence in art.’ (V. 43-4) Here she criticises that female tradition of sensibility, which Romney argues is preoccupied with ‘individualism’ rather than the ‘universal’ (II. 478-9). The full-stop at the end of the line betrays the frustration and unproductiveness Aurora
experiences when being limited by a solely feminine poetics. This is related to the
gender of the artist, ‘we women,’ and the sense of deficiency she wishes to
compensate for is engendered by Aurora’s ‘impotence,’ which again is an infertile
image. One can interpret Barrett Browning’s claim to have no ‘grandmothers,’
then, to recognise a lack of female-authored poetry that is not conventionally
feminine; a poetics which would embrace the fluidity that she admires in George
Sand. Aurora Leigh’s self-reflexivity - in the various forms that takes - refers to
the process in which Barrett Browning develops a distinct poetics for the female
poet. The implication is that Aurora is credulous in assuming that one can inhabit
the distinct roles of ‘woman’ and ‘artist’ (II. 2). She argues that these two roles
(one feminine, one masculine) must become hybridised for a woman writer in the
mid-nineteenth-century to produce art. Revision offers her the tool to hybridise
these poetic modes in the very form of her verse.

It is by experimenting with blank verse that enables Barrett Browning to
establish her female poetics in the Fifth Book. Aurora hybridises her two poetic
impulses - those of ‘woman’ and ‘artist’ - by consummating her own motherhood
through poetry:

But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
That, when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
‘Behold, - behold the paps we all have sucked!
This bosom seems to beat still, or at least
It sets ours beating: this is living art,
Which thus presents and thus records true life.’ (V. 213-222)

The passage is intentionally flooded with emotion and feeling. It voices both ‘the
essence of passion,’ which is ordered and revered by shaping itself within the
‘impress’ of history, and transgressive feminine emotion (the ‘burning lava’ and
‘full-veined, heaving’ breast is sexualised in a way that would intentionally shock Victorian readers). It is thus that Aurora can hybridise her interest in the epical ‘Age’ (with a capital A) with the mundane ‘record’ of ‘true life’ in a way which still appeals to a sense of ‘living art’. But most importantly, it is the female poet’s experimentation with genre that enables these two voices to develop simultaneously. Barrett Browning’s epic is indeed ‘unscrupulous;’ it challenges conventions to avoid being strangled by them and embraces the transgressive potential of the feminine ‘song’. She claims that the ‘bosom’ of the novel-poem will be able ‘to beat still’ for future generations because it does indeed ‘set ours beating.’ Revision is the means through which Barrett Browning ensures her metre reflects her meaning and refines her hybridisation of different poetic modes. *Aurora Leigh* is therefore as much an apprenticeship for the reader in interpreting the ‘mysterious tune’ of Barrett Browning’s poetics, which can be teased out of her double-meanings and the rhythm of the language itself.
CONCLUSION

The main contribution of my thesis lies in its approach to the manuscript as an agent for interpreting the inflections of gender within the production of female authored texts in the mid-nineteenth-century. The idiosyncratic nature of each manuscript, as well as its relationship to the text, has led to different readings of how revision provides a tool for negotiating prescriptive discourses around gender in the Victorian marketplace. In some cases, it allows women to soften the impact of their meaning through deletions and substitutions; in others, revisions establish their challenge to tradition by refining their language. By extension, analysing the way that texts develop through revision also provides evidence of the very nature of pressures that women writers were working with.

Not only has this research uncovered the different editing practices employed by authors - including collaboration, cutting and scraping - it also demonstrates that textual critics can make metaphorical connections between the mode of editing and the text’s content. This work therefore adds another perspective to Briggs’ claim that Virginia Woolf’s texts ‘remain fully conscious of whatever processes of silencing they may have undergone’.497 The texts studied here all address the nature of white middle-class female representation and, in doing so, often use non-narration to gesture to the way the text has been developed. The texts analysed here not only make the reader aware that they have been silenced in some way, but allow for the possibility that something potentially transgressive has been taken out. This project therefore contributes to scholarship that is exploring women’s ‘active negotiation’ of the symbolic order of gender in the

497 Briggs, p. 213.
mid-nineteenth century, rather than their subjection to it, by arguing that we can
witness how these negotiations are produced during revision.

In The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell mainly uses revision to control the
impact of the text’s reception. Revisions that are made collaboratively with her
husband William make the text shift between an ambiguous and a direct narrative
voice to mitigate the distance between the biographer and her subject. The way
that Gaskell narrates her omissions invites readers to fill in ambiguities about
Brontë’s life and character, which makes them complicit in her commentary on
the author. On the other hand, Brontë’s revisions on the Villette manuscript
suggest that her protagonist would rather embrace silence or complete non-
narration - however transgressive that is - than compromise her representation of
female subjectivity. Brontë’s non-narration antagonistically makes the reader
aware that something has been omitted but does not attempt to satisfy their
cravings for more information, allowing her to retain control over the
representation of her female protagonist. Barrett Browning’s revisions are
similarly antagonistic but, instead of producing silence, they refine her challenge
to traditional poetic forms. Revisions narrate how she reworks her metre so that it
reflects her purpose and allows the reader to experience disruption within the very
rhythm of Aurora Leigh’s lines. Analysing texts from the perspective of the
manuscript emphasises how these texts are self-reflexively aware of their own
textuality. This self-reflexivity manifests in gestures to the acts of narration or
non-narration (such as the direct address to the reader used by Gaskell and
Brontë) or simply by referring to their existence as written constructions (such as
Barrett Browning’s image of the ‘palimpsest’). These gestures are a major part of
their active negotiation of the text’s reception.

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The thesis advances current research on the Victorian woman’s exploration of materiality and form. When surveying the field of Victorian women’s poetry, Linda K. Hughes recognised how ‘women often approached genres as flexible forms that they treated experimentally.’ Attending to the manuscript provides evidence of the way that women took advantage of the flexibility of form; revisions show them reworking traditional tropes of genre in order to produce meaning in alternate ways. Hughes alludes to the ‘embodied readers’ of Victorian poetry, which appealed to the ‘ear, eye, pulses’ not only through its rhythm and metre but its physical appearance and location on the published page. She describes poetry as ‘an inherently multimedia genre,’ which could be received in infinite ways by readers of different medias. The manuscript-page, which more often than not presents multiple variations in punctuation before it is standardised by the printer, produces another kind of visceral experience for its reader and can surely not be excluded from these reading experiences. The work done in this thesis to demonstrate the interpretive opportunities present on the manuscript illustrates why Dickinson is not the only Victorian female subject that necessitates manuscript-study to understand her work.

Close-reading the manuscript to inform an interpretation of the text is a relatively unexplored approach in Victorian Studies and transforms our understanding of the term ‘manuscript textuality’. As modern readers, with access to a large amount of newly digitised archival material, we are arguably more attuned to the materiality of a text and its relationship to reception. This is

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499 ibid., p. 3.
500 ibid., p. 3.
501 Sargent, p. 224.
something recognised by Jerome McGann who argues that digital technology has changed our perspective on the archive:

The complete genetic information about any cultural work is coded in the double helix of its DNA, that is, the codependent relation of its production history and its reception history. While much more could and should be said about the structure of that codependent relation, the essential point to realise is that each strand of this double helix is produced by the collaboration of multiple agents. The terms “the poet” and “the reader” are high-level generalised descriptions of a dialectical process of various persons and institutions.

McGann is addressing the scholarly edition and how digital editions of books can take advantage of archival material that is now far more accessible than it used to be. He identifies another type of ‘active’ reading, where ‘users’ of digital textspace can follow links and interact with text in a complex network that informs their interpretation of a text. What McGann argues is also relevant to the ‘codependent relation’ between a woman’s production of a text in the mid-nineteenth-century and her awareness of its immediate reception. As chapters one and two demonstrate, this awareness can influence a woman writer to delete text, change words or temper their impact in an attempt to control the way the text is received.

Likewise, this project has identified how the production of a text can involve a kind of collaboration between multiple agents; whether that is collaborative editing or the influence of a potential readership. By centring the manuscript as a way of understanding how meaning is produced, we can deepen our understanding of the specific social pressures, or ‘multiple agents,’ acting on the female text.

McGann argues that the emergence of digital archives can rejuvenate our perspective on traditional philological approaches to a text by highlighting a

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‘multidimensional field of interpretive action’.\textsuperscript{503} This project is a case-in-point: by looking past the manuscript as simply a historical signifier, we can access new socio-historical and thematic interpretations of the text. This kind of approach is centred mainly on texts that are written by hand, however, and textual philologists face another challenge with contemporary texts produced on word-processers: is ‘track changes’ the twenty-first century equivalent of Victorian ink scraping or is the genesis of a text irretrievably lost thanks to the delete button? Contemporary texts do not possess the same kind of genetic code as the handwritten manuscript. Nevertheless, these texts are still keenly aware of the way they are constructed. Take, for example, Margaret Atwood’s \textit{The Blind Assassin}, another text with a female narrator that is written in the autobiographical mode. At the end of the novel Iris Chase, the protagonist, explains: ‘I look over what I’ve written and I know it’s wrong, not because of what I’ve set down, but because of what I’ve omitted. What isn’t there has a presence, like the absence of light.’\textsuperscript{504} Just like the Victorian texts at the centre of this project, what is omitted has a presence because its absence is gestured to within the narrative. This non-narration allows the protagonist to signal the more transgressive realities of her sexual and social relationships, which are otherwise covered up in the society in which she operates.

As this example shows, it is not just ‘genetic information’ that is afforded by reading from a textual perspective, which is evidenced by the metaphorical relationship between the texts and their manuscripts. Reading revisions has the potential to invite interpretations that see women suppressing the production of

\textsuperscript{503} McGann, p. 281.

their texts according to an awareness of their reception. However, this project has demonstrated that revision could afford women writers a ‘workable dialogism’ (to use Armstrong’s term) that allowed them to negotiate their encounters with the public. The means of this dialogism is not always the same but the mid-Victorian women studied here shared similar positions and anxieties about the gender codes through which their texts would be received. The methodology at play in this project has the potential to uncover the way that texts are negotiated across a broad spectrum of socio-historical issues. If revisions can tell us about the particular pressures related to middle-class femininity in the nineteenth-century, then they could also tell us much about Victorian masculinity (another complex gender construction loaded with expectations) and working-class identity.

Nancy Armstrong considers the archive to be central to nineteenth-century studies because the taxonomic desire for information characterises a Victorian mindset. She uses Krook’s junk shop in *Bleak House* as an example of the complex network of information that can (or cannot) be useful to both Victorian and modern readers. A bundle of letters picked up in Krook’s shop may be fraught with emotion for some characters (such as Lady Dedlock) and easily overlooked by others. Armstrong takes this further than the collection of junk to argue that readers of this serialised novel would have engaged in a similar archival practice of ‘gathering together scattered bits and pieces of information and assembling them as a world.’

But, just like the archive (and the manuscript material consulted in this project), information resembles ‘another order of characters’ in *Bleak House*: ‘units of information that can circulate, disappear, promote or block

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desire, and undergo modification.\textsuperscript{506} By attending to the way that Victorian fiction - and science - gestured towards the frustrating and ever-changing nature of information, Armstrong encourages us to reimagine ‘the question of origins’ and change our perspective on ‘the pieces of the past that have gone missing, the very pieces that would lend wholeness and stability to the archive itself.’\textsuperscript{507} This thesis has explored one of the avenues that is opened when we embrace silences in the archive (in this case the literal silences or deletions that women produced during revision). Just like the characters in \textit{Bleak House}, readers can pair the absence of information with the act of interpretation to provide another perspective on the archive itself. Armstrong is right to encourage readers to reimagine ‘wholeness and stability,’ which can be limiting. The aim of this thesis is to show how readers can embrace a lack of stability within the archive, which can provide evidence of the pressures involved in producing these silences and facilitate new perspectives on well-trodden material.

\textsuperscript{506} Nancy Armstrong., p. 385.
\textsuperscript{507} ibid., p. 380.
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