The Angry Woman's Case Against the Mask Lyric: Or, Redefining the Dramatic Monologue

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Feminist scholarship has questioned many critical commonplaces about the dramatic monologue, particularly Robert Langbaum's claim that the genre generates a "tension between sympathy and moral judgment" (85). Dorothy Mermin, Cynthia Scheinberg, Glennis Byron, and Melissa Valiska Gregory, among others, have persuasively shown that poets' and readers' capacities for sympathy and judgment are not the universal constants Langbaum suggests, but rather are influenced by cultural affiliations and structures of power and exclusion.[1] The consequences for Ralph Rader's category of the mask lyric have been less thoroughly explored. I want to make two related claims. First, the inclusion of works by women in the canon of dramatic monologues compels us to abandon the mask lyric as a distinct genre. Second, I propose a more capacious definition of the dramatic monologue that will allow us to see more clearly the polemical content, and the range of rhetorical goals and techniques, in monologues by both men and women.[2]

Abstract: Feminist scholars have broadened the canon of dramatic monologues to include the works of women poets and have questioned the dynamics of sympathy and judgment central to Robert Langbaum's foundational study of the genre. I argue for two further consequences of their work. First, Ralph Rader's category of the mask lyric can no longer be considered a distinct genre. Second, I propose that we redefine the dramatic monologue so as to recognize that individual examples can fall within various positions on four axes: 1) the speaker's difference from the poet, 2) the speaker's representative status, 3) the poet's identification with the speaker's predicament, and 4) the poet's agreement with the speaker's statements and opinions. This definition may allow us to see more clearly the polemical content, and the range of rhetorical goals and techniques, in monologues by both men and women.

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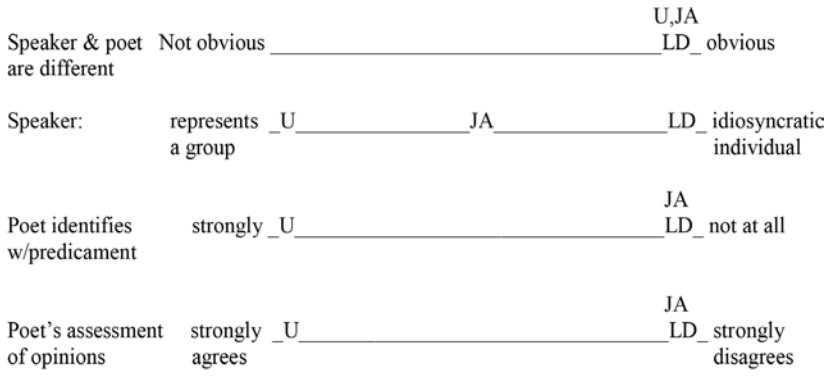
Rader defines the mask lyric as a monologue in which the poet utters his own thoughts and feelings through the mask of a fictional character. (I use the pronoun "his" deliberately; all of Rader's examples are by male poets.) Sympathy is crucial in the mask lyric. According to Rader, "we feel the poet in the poem. But we feel also that the character's predicament is in essence our own; as the poet expressed himself in the character, so we find ourselves in him also" (141). Monologues by women, as understood through recent scholarship, demand a more nuanced approach to the dynamics of sympathy. The speaker's predicament may be specific to his or her gendered, racial, or religious identity, which might prevent some readers from feeling that predicament as their own, but without necessarily preventing them from feeling for, and agreeing with, the speaker. Though few readers identify with the predicament of the fallen woman in Amy Levy's "Magdalen" (1884), for example, female readers may be more likely to pity her and share her anger at the sexual double standard she faces, while Christian readers may be less likely to sympathize with her rejection of religious values.

Rader said of the mask lyric and the dramatic monologue, "it is of the first importance to keep the two genres distinct," but it is no longer possible to maintain a clear (or even a fuzzy) boundary between them (142). Instead, I propose that we expand the category of dramatic monologue to include any work that is spoken by a single character who is not the poet and in which the revelation of character is an important rhetorical goal, if not always the primary one. Building upon and systematizing the work of Glennis Byron, I argue that dramatic monologues can fall within various positions on four axes, each taken as a variable continuum: 1) the speaker's difference from the poet, 2) the speaker's representative status, 3) the poet's identification with the speaker's predicament, and 4) the poet's agreement with the speaker's statements and opinions.

In the older, Langbaum-influenced view of the dramatic monologue, epitomized by Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842), we have maximal difference between poet and speaker with respect to their identities, predicaments, and opinions, with some variation in how individualized or representative the speaker is. In Rader's definition of the mask lyric, exemplified by Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses" (1842), the speaker's identity is obviously different from the poet's, but there is strong agreement between the speaker's and poet's predicaments and opinions, and the speaker becomes so representative as to be supposedly universal (fig. 1). Both Rader's mask lyrics and Browning's uber-canonical monologues are included within the more capacious definition I am proposing.



JA = Browning's "Johannes Agricola in Meditation"
LD = Browning's "My Last Duchess"
U = Tennyson's "Ulysses"

Fig. 1. Langbaum's dramatic monologue and Rader's mask lyric.

Byron has persuasively argued that, "as the canon has expanded," we can see more clearly that the dramatic monologue "allow[s] for various positionings of the speaking subject with respect to the writing poet" ("Rethinking" 91). I've grouped these positionings into four axes that are interrelated, but one axis never wholly determines the others, and readers could legitimately disagree about where exactly to place a specific poem (fig. 2). On the first axis, the speaker can be more or less obviously distinct from the poet, and there are many techniques for marking distance.[3] As Elisabeth Howe notes, "the speaker's 'otherness' can be established by a name, title, or profession," by dates, or "by using a figure from history or myth"(7). Monologues spoken by historical figures or mythical characters are obviously not spoken by the poet. Some readers of Augusta Webster's "Faded" (1893), however, might need to consult Webster's biography to realize that she was married, and that her experiences do not match those of the aging, unmarried speaker. On the second axis, the speaker can be an idiosyncratically distinct individual or a general representative of a larger group (or of several groups, as Lindsey O'Neil argues)—or anywhere in between. This need not align strongly with the first axis. The speaker of "Faded" is not so obviously different from the author, and she represents the experiences of many aging women. The speaker of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1848) is clearly meant as representative of a group, a group which just as clearly does not include the poet herself. (This can be a gesture of appropriation and silencing, rather than solidarity, as Gregory shows us in her contribution to this forum.)

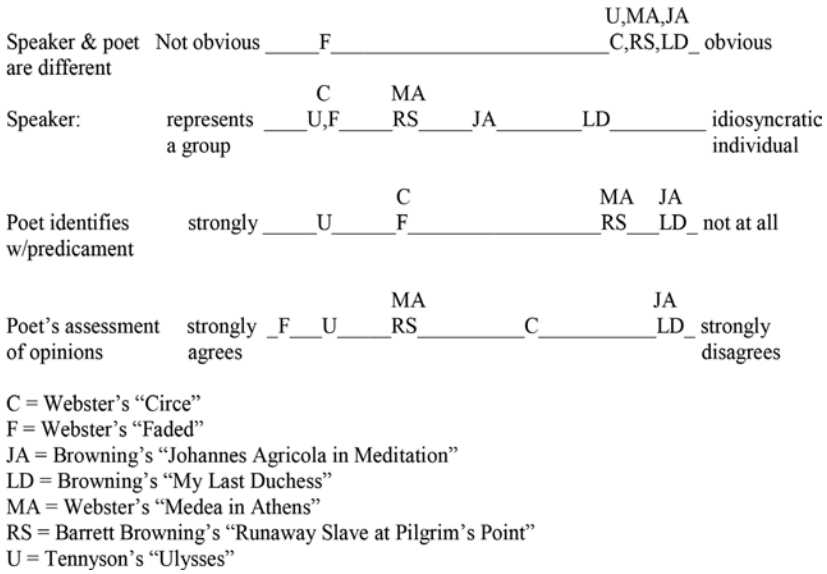


Fig. 2. My assessment of various dramatic monologues.

The remaining two axes focus on the poet's attitude toward the speaker: the poet may more or less strongly identify with the speaker's predicament, and the poet may more or less strongly agree or disagree with the speaker's statements, (though the dynamics of identification can be much more complex, as Emily Harrington demonstrates elsewhere in this issue). Byron rightly notes that, in some dramatic monologues, "the basic position proposed by [the] speaker is fully endorsed by the poet" (*Dramatic* 16). The poet's agreement with the speaker's opinions, however, does not necessarily correlate with an identification with the speaker's predicament. In "Circe" (1870), Webster depicts the enchantress's isolation on her island as emblematic of Victorian women's isolation within the domestic sphere, yet Webster does not seem to endorse Circe's more extreme statements.[4] In contrast, Webster has nothing in common with Medea's predicament after she murders her children to avenge her husband's abandonment of her, yet, as Gregory interprets "Medea in Athens" (1870), Webster uses Medea to critique "the ideological structures of marriage itself" ("Augusta Webster" 31).

The capacity for such a wide variety of dynamics between poet and speaker results, of course, from the gap between them. I agree with Cornelia Pearsall's argument in this issue that the speaking "I" is the most crucial feature of this genre. The difference between poet and speaker produces a double-voiced utterance, a phenomenon that has been illuminated by New Formalist and

rhetorical approaches.[5] Unlike expressive lyrics in which the speaker is assumed to be (a version of) the poet, dramatic monologues demand that readers question and analyze the relations between speaker and poet, and different readers might come to somewhat different assessments. The four axes I have identified are intended as heuristic tools that might help both beginning students and advanced scholars in their analyses of the poet-speaker dynamics within a given dramatic monologue.

The generic definition I've proposed, like those offered by Alan Sinfield and Linda Hughes, welcomes a wide range of authors into the canon and encourages us to recognize the richness and flexibility of the dramatic monologue. My definition differs from theirs in that I try to disentangle distinct phenomena that Sinfield groups under sympathy and judgment, while also focusing on a smaller set of dynamics than does Hughes.[6] I share Byron's goal of making "polemic" "more central" to the genre (*Dramatic* 102), but I differ from her in that I avoid labeling new subgenres of monologues, and I see the potential for polemic not only when the poet strongly agrees with the speaker's stated opinions, but also when he or she strongly disagrees.[7] And whereas Byron thinks a greater focus on polemic will result in Browning's poems becoming "strangely decentered" from the genre, I hope that a wider definition will allow *more* poems to be perceived as central ("Rethinking" 97). We might no longer treat as outliers monologues in which Browning expresses his own views through one of his speakers, as in Karshish's eventual praise of an all-loving God. We might gain more nuanced judgments, not only of the speakers themselves, but also of the social conditions which produced them. "My Last Duchess" would then not just reveal the Duke's individual pathology but also polemically expose the immense privilege he represents and abuses. And we might gain voices of feminist critique and righteous anger, voices that would partly fill the silence of the Duke's last duchess.

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NOTES

1. See especially Mermin, 75-76; Scheinberg, 176-82; Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* 21-23; and Gregory, "Robert Browning" 497–503.

2. In making the second claim, I build upon my previous work on dramatic monologues by women. See Morgan, 16–19.

3. Byron notes, "the dramatic monologue always contains signals that we should not conflate poet and speaker, but they are not always . . . obvious" ("Rethinking" 88–89).

Alan Sinfield argues that in dramatic monologues "the 'I' may be close to the poet or distanced by a wealth of fictional devices" (26).

4. See Byron, *Dramatic* 58.

5. I see my approach as compatible with Isobel Armstrong's argument that dramatic monologues are simultaneously "the *subject's* utterance" and "the *object* of . . . critique" (12), and with Herbert Tucker's notion that monologues involve an "interference effect" between the lyric subject and historical context (229). Though I accord a somewhat less prominent role to the revelation of character than does James Phelan, my approach is otherwise congruent with the "double logic" he finds in his distinction between the poet's purpose of revealing the speaker's character and the speaker's rhetorical purpose in the specific dramatic situation (23). The speaker's desire for "rhetorical efficacy" is central to Pearsall's earlier work on the dramatic monologue (10).

6. See especially Sinfield, 8–18; Hughes, 10–12.

7. Byron distinguishes between the "historical" dramatic monologue, which "focuses primarily on questions of epistemology" and is used "to demonstrate that any attempt to reconstruct history will always be partial and interested," and the "polemical" dramatic monologue, in which "representations and interpretations of the self in context primarily serve the function of social critique" (*Dramatic* 5).

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