

SONNETS FROM THE SELF-REFLECTIVE: AGENCY AND POWER IN AUSTEN,  
BRONTE, AND BARRETT BROWNING

By

ALEXANDRA VAN BOVEN

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A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's Degree  
With Honors in

English

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

MAY 2011

Approved by:

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Dr. Susan Aiken  
Department of English

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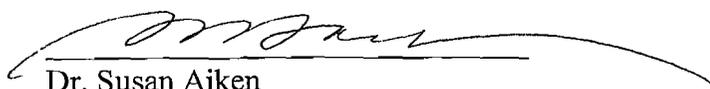
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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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Signed: Aliyandra Van Boren

The Socratic maxim “know thyself” has influenced literary texts for generations. Though we often note its use in male-authored texts, it is not a principle exclusive to literature by men. Female authors such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning also explore “knowing thyself,” and indeed, in some of their most popular texts, the concept of dedicating the mind to self-reflection is a driving force of the narrative. In *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, these female authors create powerful female protagonists who are also capable of critical self-reflection. In these texts, the idea of “knowing oneself” serves as a guiding principle, allowing the female protagonists, as well as their authors, to find power in a society that often denies them agency.

“Till this moment, I never knew myself.” Thus Elizabeth Bennet proclaims, chastising her conduct through the novel until the moment she finally realizes that “vanity, not love, as been [her] folly” (Austen 202). Elizabeth struggles with the fact that her intelligence and keen insight, which she has so highly valued, has misled her. A pivotal scene in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s analysis of Darcy’s letter marks a clear epiphany for not only the protagonist, but the reader as well. This plot development challenges all of the assumptions made by the protagonist and the reader up to this point in the novel. Elizabeth learns in this moment how to be self-reflective, and in doing so, she attains a new kind of intelligence – wisdom. Elizabeth develops to “know” her true self and to accept her human faults. Her worldview is refined, and her character undergoes tremendous growth. Elizabeth’s character development is not, however, the product of a singular moment; it is important to analyze how she has come to this point of the story.

It is apparent from the outset why Elizabeth Bennet is the novel's protagonist when the narrator explains that Mr. Bennet esteems her above all his daughters: "they are all silly and ignorant like other girls," he says, "but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters" (Austen 7). Elizabeth is distinguished right away from her not just her sisters, but also many other women in the novel. Austen establishes that the distinction between Elizabeth and other women is due to her sharp wit, fierce intelligence, and independent spirit. As Tony Tanner notes, "Elizabeth has a lively mind...and her impressions are comparatively lively...She is capable of both complex impressions and complex ideas" (373). The reader connects with Elizabeth because she possesses such appealing traits.

Many of Elizabeth's acquaintance also admire her for other attractive qualities, such as her playful nature (24) and her "vivacity" (86). Several in Elizabeth's company also note that she is a reader, a quality that speaks to her intelligence. Elizabeth astonishes the Bingleys and Hursts when she turns down an offer to play cards and instead decides to "amuse herself for the short time she could stay below with a book" (37). Here, Austen further contrasts Elizabeth with other women, particularly Caroline Bingley, who the narrator notes as choosing a book "only...because it was the second volume of Mr. Darcy's" (54). Miss Bingley's superficial love of reading is established when she boasts, "I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading...when I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library," a claim to which "no one [makes] any reply" (54).

Miss Bingley's actions set her apart from Elizabeth, who is free of Caroline's material vanity<sup>1</sup>, and Elizabeth is described by Austen as having "a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself" (17). Elizabeth also displays a greater confidence in herself; unlike does not rely on the approval of others. This contrasts with Miss Bingley's desperate attempts to draw Darcy's attention to herself. Where Miss Bingley constantly dotes on Mr. Darcy and craves his approval, Elizabeth willfully challenges the notion that she must acquiesce to a man of Darcy's consequence:

"Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at!" cried Elizabeth. "That is an uncommon advantage, and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss to *me* to have many such acquaintance. I dearly love a laugh." (56)

Here, Elizabeth uses her wit, playfulness, and independent mind to distinguish herself from Miss Bingley.

Much to Miss Bingley's displeasure, Elizabeth's "conceited independence" (36) and "teazing [sic]" (56) does not alienate her from Darcy; rather, her special qualities quite endear her to Darcy. Though he determines her to be only "tolerable" upon first sight, her physical beauty increases when he realizes that "her face...was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes" (24). The "playfulness" of Elizabeth's manners (24) and the "energy" of her independent spirit further captivate Darcy; as he examines more closely, Darcy realizes that his physical attraction to Elizabeth is intricately connected to the qualities of her mind and demeanor. This is particularly true of Elizabeth's intelligence. When Darcy enumerates the qualities

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth is free of the material vanity that afflicts Miss Bingley, but Elizabeth's intellectual vanity in regards to her opinions of Wickham and Darcy proves to cause her much grief later.

of an accomplished woman to the party at Netherfield, he makes a very clear allusion to Elizabeth (and her mind for reading) by saying, "...she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (38). Darcy singles out Elizabeth "for the liveliness of [her] mind" and because she is "so unlike" other women in the novel, who are "always speaking and looking, and thinking for [his] approbation alone" (359).

Elizabeth is cognizant of her merits. She is aware that she is intelligent and witty, and she takes pride in this. She further realizes that these qualities permit her to speak to figures that have considerable power over her, such as Lady Catherine and Mr. Darcy, in the manner that she does. She explains to her sister Jane:

There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more I am dissatisfied with it, and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either *merit or sense* [emphasis added]. (133)

Elizabeth demonstrates that she recognizes her merits are superior to many others' in the novel. With this knowledge comes another crucial characteristic that sets Elizabeth apart from others – she perceives that she has agency.

This agency manifests itself in a myriad of ways. Elizabeth teases, and more importantly, challenges Mr. Darcy about Mr. Wickham during the ball at Netherfield, and engages in witty repartee with him (92). She faces Lady Catherine and realizes "herself to be the first creature who had ever dared to trifle with some much dignified impertinence" when addressing her Ladyship (162). Perhaps most significantly,

Elizabeth refuses both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy's proposals of marriage, even though in doing so she is jeopardizing her and her family's security in slighting men of greater societal consequence than her own self. Though refusing both men is a highly dangerous, and arguably selfish, undertaking, Elizabeth places her own happiness and agency above all else.

Mr. Collins, in a rare moment of acumen, accurately expresses the imprudence of Elizabeth's negative response to his proposal, "you should take it into farther consideration that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made to you" (106). Elizabeth nevertheless powerfully responds, "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a *rational creature* speaking the truth from her heart," invoking Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and reaffirming her perceived agency. Elizabeth echoes this sentiment in her refusal of Mr. Darcy wherein Elizabeth. Though touched with "anger" as he catalogs her various flaws, she retains her composure and calmly enumerates her reasons for being unable to marry him, while rightfully chastising his inability to propose in a "gentleman-like manner" (188). In refusing both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth asserts herself as a "rational creature" who, despite her gender and want of connections and fortune, has power and agency.

Yet, how profound is her sense of agency and her power over others? Truthfully, Elizabeth Bennet, for all her perceptions of agency, actually lacks substantial social power. She is constrained by the entailment, and her refusal to marry men who would increase her social standing is, given her cultural context, an utter act of foolishness that would doom most women in Austen's society (Barnitz 2). Because she is a striking,

intelligent character, Elizabeth and the reader are deceived into overestimating her agency. Yes, she challenges Darcy, Mr. Collins, and Lady Catherine, but in all this, she must retain a sense of civility and adhere to social constructs. Elizabeth is painfully away of how societal paradigms function; she watches, in agony, those constructs play out to full effect in Lydia's elopement with Wickham. Darcy even significantly points out that Elizabeth, along with her sister Jane, is the only one in her family who acts appropriately in civil society (Austen 202).

Elizabeth ultimately suffers due to her gender and lack of real economic power (Barnitz 3). Her own intellectual vanity and overestimated sense of agency cripples Elizabeth's true power. She does not express authentic power in refusing Mr. Collins and Darcy, because by refusing their proposals she is essentially dooming herself to a life with little money, and even less social agency. Elizabeth maintains the illusion of real power though the first half of the novel, but this sense of power is merely blemished by her own pride.

Elizabeth comes into her real power only after reading Darcy's letter. This is a turning point for the novel, Elizabeth, and even the reader. Upon analyzing Darcy's letter, Elizabeth realizes that she has fallen victim to vanity, and put too much faith in her "merits and sense." She becomes self-reflective and critical of her behavior. It is through this act of self-reflection that Elizabeth attains real power. Judith Lowder Newton states: "The most profound source of what we feel as Elizabeth's power is her ability in the last third of the novel to turn her critical vision upon herself" (38). Only after Elizabeth learns to be self-reflective is she able to transform into the most powerful character within the novel, and make social and economic gains.

Austen foreshadows Elizabeth's moment of introspection, and it is unsurprising to the careful reader that Elizabeth's moment of growth is attached to *language* – Darcy composes the letter, and the well read Elizabeth receives it. At first, she rejects the letter, trying to maintain that it is “all pride and insolence,” but when “she [reads] with somewhat clearer attention,” she recognizes how she has erred (Austen 198). Elizabeth realizes that she must give Darcy's account of Wickham credit, and “[grows] absolutely ashamed of herself – Of neither Darcy nor Wickham she could think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd” (199). By reflecting how she has allowed her vanity to taint her judgment and perception of agency, Elizabeth, in true, Socratic fashion, comes to “know herself.”

This action of admitting fault and recognizing she has committed a wrong allows Elizabeth to attain full power. Admitting fault enables her acceptance of Darcy, and after she dismisses her former prejudices, she makes him “the object of [her] compassion” (206). Finally, the realization of Elizabeth's agency culminates in her confrontation with Lady Catherine. She outright challenges her Ladyship who, enraged, demands, “Miss Bennet, do you know who I am?” (335). This prompts Elizabeth to make her claim on Darcy by saying, “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far *we are equal*” (337). In this climactic moment, Elizabeth has realized her full power, her right, and her *desire*, to be with Darcy. Her moment of self-reflection ironically mirrors Darcy's own self-reflection much earlier in the novel:

I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper I dare not vouch for. – It is I believe too little yielding, certainly too little for the convenience of the world. I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon

as I ought, nor their offences against myself. My temper would perhaps be called resentful. – My good opinion, once lost is lost forever. (57)

Darcy recognizes his faults and communicates them. Like Elizabeth, he does not “yield” to the “convenience of the world,” and shows a fierce independence and desire for happiness and agency. Therefore, when Elizabeth reaches self-reflection and is able to voice her faults, she becomes his equal, as she emphatically proclaims to Lady Catherine. The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy is one of a renegotiation of traditional power: they each benefit from the relationship. Elizabeth attains higher society (and 10,000 pounds per year), and Darcy learns to soften his temper under Elizabeth’s influence, becoming more “gentleman-like.”

It is difficult for the reader to not identify with Elizabeth Bennet; the qualities that endear her to Darcy endear her to Austen’s audience as well, and she has become one of literature’s most popular and enduring characters. Just as the reader identifies with Elizabeth Bennet, the playful vivacity of Jane Austen’s prose attracts readers to her. In that vein, it is difficult to completely separate Elizabeth, the fictional literary character from Jane Austen, her non-fictional creator. Both are middle-class women from a large family whose entailed estate left the sisters and mother in dire financial straits (Newton 29). Like Elizabeth, Austen was an avid reader of authors such as Wollstonecraft (Austen 106) and Francis Burney (100). In creating a literary character such as Elizabeth, Jane Austen acts out her own agency. Lowder Newton writes:

...There is little indication in [Austen’s] letters that [the economic] difference [between her and her brothers] was a source of oppression or discomfort to Jane...[yet] in Austen’s fiction...we begin to feel a certain edge, a certain critical

emphasis being given to the difference between the economic privilege of middle-class women and that of middle-class men. (28)

The very act of writing and creating a powerful female character in Elizabeth is self-reflective for Austen. It is through her novels that she comes into power of self-expression, and her narratives seem to be products of deep, personal reflection. It is not by coincidence that Austen nominates Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* as Mr. Collins's book of choice for pleasure reading. It is also not by accident that the Bennet women, particularly Lydia, outright reject this selection (Austen 67). Elizabeth even rebukes Mr. Collins with passages Wollstonecraft, who was thoroughly anti-Fordyce.

Austen's writing often criticized the society she lived in. Austen's choice of Elizabeth Bennet, a self-reflective and intellectual woman, to serve as the protagonist who critiques her English society is act which allows Austen herself to feel a sense of agency, a sense of control and power in her own very rigid, patriarchal society. Though at the time Austen's novel resulted in only slight economic gain (Newton 27), the lasting power of her novels was at least partially felt by celebrated reviewers and authors of her time, and continues to be more fully realized by readings in subsequent generations (Blackwell 42).

Yet, Austen was not well loved by all her contemporaries. One of her most vocal critics was none other than Charlotte Bronte, who rejected Austen's world: "I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses" (Tanner 368). In form, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* are obviously quite distinct. Austen pens a light tale full of sparkling humor and playfulness, and no matter how serious the subject matter (whether discussing the dire straits of the Bennet family, or the

lasciviousness of Lydia) the novel never permits its reader to feel the sting of the economic and social hardships the characters face. Where Austen writes in a formal, crisp, neo-classical style, Bronte writes just the opposite: a chaotic, dark, and gothic tale in which the reader feels indignation upon witness all the injustice and cruelty inflicted upon the protagonist, Jane Eyre.

Bronte's Jane and Austen's Elizabeth have certain qualities in common with one another: both are independent; both are intelligent and well read. Moreover, like Elizabeth, Jane Eyre perceives she has agency – though her journey towards real power does not quite mirror Elizabeth's journey. Yet, Jane lives in a much darker, crueler world than Elizabeth Bennet. When she attempts to read, John Reed, whose name contains an ironic auditory pun, punishes her by using her book as a weapon against her and hurling it towards her head (Bronte 5). Even the times when Jane takes control and exerts power, such as during her confrontation with Mrs. Reed, she does not escape unscathed. “*Speak, I must!*” she declares, and though Jane's actions frighten Mrs. Reed, the power Jane assumes is one of unchecked passion, one that she herself cannot control. Jane feels “afterwards the pang of remorse and the chill of reaction” and realizes hers is not real power because “its afterflavour, metallic and corroding, gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned (Bronte 33); essentially, however powerful her explosion may appear, it is not real because, as a *child*, she does not have power over herself.

This is a drastic departure from Austen's characterization of Elizabeth. The reader of *Jane Eyre* actively witnesses the development of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood. Elizabeth and Jane are not on equal intellectual levels at the beginning of their respective novels – Elizabeth is an adult, and Jane is a child. As Jane develops her

mind, with the help of relationships with Helen Burns and Miss Temple, she grows into her intelligence, and it is not until chapter ten in *Jane Eyre* she appears equal in mind to Austen's Elizabeth. Even so, class differences and life experiences (and very dissimilar authors) shape them to become quite different women, with different perceptions of agency.

Elizabeth's lack of power stems from her overestimation of her agency, placing too much trust in her mind and judgments. Elizabeth is spoiled in that most of her critical judgments are true – a fact that leads her astray on the most crucial one, that of Darcy and Wickham. She realizes too late how she overestimates the power of her understanding. Jane, on the other hand, feels powerful during specific, singular moments (such as in her confrontation with Mrs. Reed), but unlike Elizabeth, she realizes early how her power is flawed. Jane's journey through the novel involves more periods of self-reflection, culminating in an ultimate moment of “knowing herself.” Due to the first-person nature of the narrative, and the reader's insight into Jane's mind and personal thoughts, we see the incremental development of Jane's self-reflective process.

Like Elizabeth, Jane is distinguished from other women in the novel, and has her own rival in Blanche Ingram. Where the women of Elizabeth Bennet's universe are nowhere near her intellectual equals, Bronte creates a fair rival to vie with Jane for Rochester's affection. Blanche is an intelligent woman, and a woman who has some social power. She has no qualms about ordering a servant around and exerting control (195). Yet, Jane realizes that Blanche's power, and Blanche herself, is “inferior.” “She was very showy,” Jane says, “but she was not very genuine” (187). Blanche derives her power from her class. Jane's derives her perceptions of agency from her own sense of

*merit*. Jane values herself as being more than Blanche of Rochester because Jane can “understand the language of his countenance” (176): “though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him.”

Like Elizabeth, Jane places faith in herself, and she exerts her agency in many ways. She ventures away from Lowood, and even though she does not know what awaits her at Thornfield, she thinks, “I am not bound to stay” (93); the idea of bonds and constraints is a recurrent theme in the text, and Jane often finds herself in the position of refusing to be bound to any place. Jane also challenges Rochester intellectually through dialogue, just as Elizabeth challenges Darcy. Jane even says outright to Rochester, “It is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are!” (258). There are even echoes of Wollstonecraft when Jane resolutely states, “I am a free human being with an independent will; which I will now exert.”

Yet, like Elizabeth, Jane’s agency is not true. Jane is, realistically, in a more perilous state than Elizabeth ever was: Jane is an impoverished orphan. Her decision to leave Rochester after learning of Bertha Mason’s existence is a seemingly moral decision for a woman who only has her reputation and no financial standing, but it is a decision that she makes entirely because of societal pressures. Jane ignores the truth in her heart that Rochester should not be to blame, and, under the impression of using her own sound judgment, she leaves. Arnold Shapiro states that, as someone who “has been so aware of the horrors committed in the name of society” by individuals such as Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst, Jane should “realize that Rochester is not fully to blame for his terrible

marriage” (692). Instead, Jane buckles underneath the constructs of ‘civil’ society (as Elizabeth does in *Pride and Prejudice*); in “leaving Rochester, Jane seems to be playing society’s game, condoning the evils that have taken place” (Shapiro 692). Jane chooses to refuse Rochester and place herself in a perilous social and economic situation, one that results in her complete destitution and homelessness.

Jane is sure that to stay with Rochester after learning of Bertha’s existence would doom her to the same fate as his former mistresses Celine, Giacinta, and Clara. Jane thinks:

...If I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me...[and] become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory.

(Bronte 319)

Here, Jane misjudges Rochester, and neglects the crucial fact that she is different from all these former mistresses because of her *merits* – her intelligence and willful independence. Jane Eyre is unlike anyone Rochester has ever interacted with, and certainly unlike any other woman. Rochester explains to Jane:

Your garb and manner were restricted by rule: your air was often difficult, and altogether that of one refined by nature, but absolutely unused to society...yet when addressed, you lifted a keen, a daring, a glowing eye to your interlocutor’s face: there was penetration and *power* [emphasis mine] in each glance you gave; when plied by close questions, you found ready and round answers...you watched me, and now and then smiled at me with a simple yet sagacious grace I cannot

describe. I was at once content and stimulated with what I saw: I liked what I had seen, and wished to see more. (321)

Jane lacks the socioeconomic statuses of Celine, Giacinta, and Clara, but she is worthier than they are due to her natural refinement and intelligence. Jane incorrectly compares herself negatively to other women, and misjudges how keenly Rochester loves her. Like Elizabeth, Jane does wrong by the man who cares for her. Jane's perception that he would treat her as a mistress is incorrect for Rochester acknowledges her as “[his] equal” (259).

Throughout the novel, Jane demonstrates her desire for independence and power; in doing so, she attracts Rochester to her. However, her power is still limited due to societal constraints, and with it, her happiness. When Jane leaves Rochester, she is utterly miserably, exclaiming, “I abhorred myself. I had no solace from self-approbation: none even from self-respect. I had injured – wounded – left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes” (329). In this instance, Jane seems to be engaging in the same critical self-reflection Elizabeth does after reading Darcy’s letter. Nevertheless, Jane falls just short of allowing this self-reflection to guide her towards a path of happiness and love. Unlike Elizabeth, who encountered very few moments of self-reflection in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane has many instances in which she is introspective – always with critical results. Jane vacillates between recognizing her merits and unfairly criticizing herself, thereby limiting her happiness. Jane does not have to leave Rochester, and loves him too much to do so without inflicting great self-pain. Yet, Jane’s empowering moment of self-reflection does not come until the last third of the novel.

Jane experiences measured increments of self-reflection through *Jane Eyre*, unlike her counterpart in *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane demonstrates that she learns from reflecting upon Helen Burns' example as a young girl, and she demonstrates that she does in part, "know herself." As she prepares to marry Rochester, Jane frequently rebuffs his offers of finery and jewels, stating "you won't know me sir: I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin's jacket, - a jay in borrowed plumes" (264). Jane has many moments of introspection, and it is apparent to the reader that self-reflection is a driving force of Bronte's novel. It is not coincidence, that Jane stares into a mirror during the narrative's pivotal moments; the mirror serves as a carefully employed motif. The very nature of the story prompts introspection.

The importance that Bronte places on the notion of self-reflection is so great that without it, Jane would doom herself to a life of unhappiness. Indeed, protagonists like Jane Eyre and Elizabeth Bennet make the mistake of placing too much trust in their merits and intelligence; it is only through critical self-reflection, then, can they develop as characters and attain true happiness and agency. Jane, for instance, limits her own happiness in leaving Thornfield and Rochester. Jane truly loves him, and he cherishes her. By leaving, she denies both herself and him happiness. Certainly, Jane creates great emotional and mental suffering in leaving Rochester; she is mentally bound to him, and her thoughts return to him repeatedly. Because Jane's memories tie so strongly to Rochester, she lacks agency; essentially, thoughts of Rochester imprison Jane. Without being self-reflective in respect to how she has been mistake about Rochester, Jane cannot attain her happiness.

Only when Jane rebuffs St. John's advances does she become truly self-reflective in a manner that permits her total, unapologetic agency. On the cusp of agreeing to marry St. John, Jane has her epiphany. She realizes that to acquiesce to St. John would be dooming herself to a marriage, and life, without love, "I had felt what it was to be loved," Jane laments, "but, like him, I had now put love out of the question, and thought only of duty" (431). It is when she entreats the Heavens and opens her heart with the desire to "do what was right," that she hears Rochester's voice. In desiring to know the "right" path, Jane allows her subconscious to guide. She has known all along that being with Rochester is what is right for her, and once she allows herself to be introspective, Jane goes to him and claims her happiness.

As characteristics of Austen were present in the character of Elizabeth, so too can the reader feel Bronte through Jane. Jane is a vessel for Bronte, like Austen, to reflect on the world and society she lives in. While Austen's Elizabeth demurely and inoffensively chides the constructs of her (and Austen's) society, Bronte's Jane bludgeons it brutally. Jane does not fear speaking her mind to the men of the novel (John Reed, Brocklehurst, Rochester, St. John), and in doing so often takes them by surprise. St. John regards her with a "surprised expression" when she challenges him about his affection for Rosamond:

He had not imagined that a woman would dare speak to so to a man. For me, I felt at home with this sort of discourse. I could never rest in communication with strong, discreet, refined minds, whether male or female...(385).

Jane is hardened to survive in Bronte's harsh, cruel, and chaotic society. It is a world that Elizabeth never approaches. Jane saves Rochester from Bertha's (first) fire. She sees Bertha herself in the flesh. In some ways, Bertha even serves as a negative version of

Jane, and adds psychological depth and a sense of turmoil to the novel<sup>2</sup>. There is an element of danger in this world that is not present in Austen's. There is also a heightened level of passion, of eroticism, that challenges Austen's notion of "ladies and gentlemen" in "elegant, confined houses." Where an ineligible marriage and an improper elopement are the great trials that Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy must face, Jane and Rochester must literally battle against raging fires, and the latter is even gravely injured by flames. Where real, fiery passions are suppressed by the civil and genteel society of *Pride and Prejudice*, they are the crux of *Jane Eyre*. The act of writing for Bronte is self-reflective in that it allows her to directly challenge the society, and implicitly the texts, of Jane Austen. *Jane Eyre* gives Bronte, a woman who needed to write under the guise of a male pseudonym, a sense of agency and power – it is her own personal *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and a declaration that women are equal to men and are allowed to be passionate and intellectual.

The motifs of passion that appear in Bronte's works are similar to those in the writing of another prominent female author – Elizabeth Barrett Browning. When Barrett Browning writes in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* about the urn of the "ashes" of her "grief," she invokes the image of flames:

But if instead

Thou wait beside me for the wind to blow

The gray dust up, . . . those laurels on thine head,

O my Belovèd, will not shield thee so,

That none of all the fires shall scorch and shred

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<sup>2</sup> The psychology of Bertha and Jane, and their complex relationship, is explored in detail in Gilbert and Gubar's excellent *Madwoman in the Attic*.

The hair beneath. (V, 11-14)

Here the reader can visualize the lover blinded by the burning embers, just as the fire at Thornfield blinds Rochester. Like Bronte uses *Jane Eyre* as an outlet for her passions, a critique of her contemporary society, and a tool for personal introspection, so too does Barrett Browning use her poetry in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Barrett Browning uses her writing self-reflectively, to discover agency and engage in self-exploration.

Multiple themes apparent in *Sonnets* parallel those addressed in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*: passion, love, the importance of language, and other ideas regarding the treatment of women and class and social standing. The speaker of *Sonnets* works through these topics as Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre do in their respective novels. Within these three texts, we see both a strong female author and her central female protagonist attempting to navigate through these topics. Barrett Browning's *Sonnets* offer the reader a unique perspective, however. Unlike Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre, who have perceptions of agency from the beginning of their texts, the Poet of *Sonnets* has a perception of a *lack* of agency; she asserts her utter powerlessness from the very first sonnet. The speaker is weeping, pondering the "sweet, sad years, the melancholy years," of her life, when she notices a figure. She states:

Straightway I was 'ware

How a mystic Shape did move

Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair:

And a voice said in mastery, while I strove, –

‘Guess now who holds thee?’ – ‘Death,’ I said. But, there,

The silver answer rang, – ‘Not death, but Love.’ (I, 9-14)

The poem invokes the speaker's helplessness, suggesting the image of a rapist who drags their victim by the hair. Though the reader may be relieved that the power holding the speaker is "Love," and not "Death," the speaker herself is not. The following sonnet sequence demonstrates that to the speaker, Love is a construct of which she is unworthy.

It is not that Barrett Browning's poet-self does not want to be in love, or loved by another, but rather that she suffers from very low self-esteem. Barrett Browning's speaker is *too* self-critical, unlike Elizabeth Bennet, who is not critical of herself until reading Darcy's letter, or Jane Eyre, who vacillates between self-critique and valuing her obvious merits. The speaker, in contrast, rejects all notions that she is worthy of love. Her "princely" lover should not bother with her, she thinks: "What hast *thou* to do / With looking from the lattice-lights at me, / A poor, tired, wandering singer" (III, 9-11). The idea that she is worthless and undeserving of the love she is receiving is a tension that is present in the first half of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. She repeatedly requests that her lover to "stand farther off" (V, 14), and "go from [her]" (VI, 1).

The speaker asks of her lover: "What can I give thee back...?" (VIII, 1). Even when she moves past the question of "what" she can give, the speaker questions the worth of that gift: "Can it be right to give what I can give?" (IX, 1). She continues:

...O my fears,

That this can scarce be right! We are not peers,

So to be lovers; and I own, and grieve,

That givers of such gifts as mine are, must

Be counted with the ungenerous. Out, alas!

I will not soil thy purple with my dust,

Nor breath my poison on thy Venice-glass,

Nor give thee any love – which were unjust. (IX, 6-13).

She alludes to her lover as a royal prince, and she purports she is unworthy to be near his “purple” robe, lest she “soil it with [her] dust.” Echoing Jane Eyre’s lamentation as she leaves Rochester that she is “hateful in [her] own eyes,” (329), the speaker determines that she is “poisonous” to her lover, and is unrelenting in the criticism of herself.

Yet, the poet’s claims of unworthiness are unfounded. Barrett Browning, both the author and speaker, are like Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Austen: very intelligent, well read, and familiar with language and writing. The speaker is clearly educated, and often alludes to Grecian figures such as Theocritus and Electra, and to Hebrew Scriptures. The speaker is also self-referential; she says in Sonnet XLII “*My future will not copy my fair past’ – / I wrote that once*” (1-2), and references her letters (XXVIII 1-3). She further asks her lover, “And wilt thou have me fashion into speech / The love I bear thee, finding words enough...?” (XIII, 1-2), adding another dimension of reflexivity to the *Sonnets* and referencing her role as both author and speaker. Barrett Browning is quite aware of her intelligence – she simply does not acknowledge, in the early sonnets, the merit of her intelligence, and how it contributes to her self-worth.

Furthermore, Barrett Browning’s status as a prominent Victorian poet contributes to her worth. She was not only singled out by her peers from many other female poets as a talented writer, but also challenged conventional poetic norms, writing poetry “even though only men were supposed to do it” (Mermin 67). Her poetry attracted her husband Robert Browning to her, yet she as the Poet in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* does not

acknowledge her role, or agency, in this attraction, and writes only that she is unworthy of his affection.

Yet, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is primarily a tale about love, and its melancholy tone cannot sustain itself, nor is it intended to do so. Barrett Browning uses the sonnets to recount the love story between her and Robert Browning, and as history knows, that is a story with a happy ending. To do this, the speaker must come to acknowledge her own self-worth. Barrett Browning, like Jane Eyre, experiences a few introspective moments in which she acknowledges her self-worth, and begins to define her agency. In Sonnet X, the reader sees the glimmer of change, for "...love, mere love, is beautiful indeed, and worthy of acceptance" (1-2). It is just for a moment, however. In the following lines, she speaks that her lover not only "transfigures" her, the "...inferior features / of what I *am*" are altered by his love for her (X, 13-14). Though she begins to accept that "if to love can be desert, / I am not all unworthy" (XI, 1-2), she refuses to acknowledge that her worth is, at least partially, self-made. She appears to forget that her intelligence and skill as a writer has attracted the lover to her, and only thinks of his merits, quickly reverting to self-criticism: "I am not of thy worth nor for thy place!" (XI, 10).

That is not to say that the speaker should ignore her lover's merits. Indeed, letters between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning demonstrate the profound effect their love had on the former, and the oft-ailing Elizabeth reportedly became much healthier in the years following her marriage to Robert. Yet, as Barrett Browning relates her story, the speaker does not immediately recognize how her lover's merits help emphasize her own. She states in Sonnet XVI, "...if *thou* invite me forth, / I rise above abasement at the

word” (12-13). As *Sonnets from the Portuguese* progresses, the speaker begins to recognize her merits, and develop a sense of self-worth and power. She gradually develops the understanding that she deserves happiness, and she remarks, “...I thought the funeral shears / would take this [lock] first, but *Love is justified* [emphasis added]” (XVIII, 11-12). The speaker still is not entirely convinced of her worth, but she has fewer qualms about accepting love and happiness.

Barrett Browning continues to have lingering doubts about why her “king” loves her (XVI, 2), when in Sonnet XXV, she begins to have an epiphany. In this sonnet, she is highly reflective about her life journey, and she begins to recognize how her lover has helped guide her to these moments of introspection. With her lover’s affections serving as the catalyst, she engages in moments of true self-reflection, just as Elizabeth and Jaen do in response to Darcy and Rochester’s love. Barrett Browning states:

A heavy heart, Belovèd, have I borne  
 From year to year until I saw thy face,  
 And sorrow after sorrow took the place  
 Of all those natural joys as lightly worn  
 As the stringed pearls, each lifted in its turn  
 By beating heart at dance time. Hopes apace  
 Were changed to long despairs, till God’s own grave  
 Could scarcely lift above the world forlorn  
 My heavy heart. Then *thou* didst bid me bring  
 And let it drop adown thy calmly great  
 Deep being! (XXV, 1-11)

This sonnet is the beginning of a series of sonnets in which she moves away from self-criticism and recognizes her self-worth. She states emphatically: “I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad” (XVII, 9). The speaker is learning to accept that she is worthy of love, and in accepting this, she is finding happiness and a sense of worth. Sonnet XXXII seems to demonstrate a further change in her beliefs:

The first time that the sun rose on thine oath  
 To love me, I looked forward to the moon  
 To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon  
 And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.  
 Quick-loving hearts, I though, may quickly loathe;  
 And, looking on myself, I seemed not one  
 For such a man’s love! – more like an out-of-tune  
 Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth  
 To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in haste,  
 Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.  
 I did not wrong myself so, but I placed  
 A wrong on *thee*. For perfect strains may afloat  
 ‘Neath master hands, from instruments defaced, –  
 And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.

Though she is still critical of herself, she has fully accepted that she is capable of receiving the love of her “princely giver.”

Like Jane Eyre and Elizabeth Bennet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning owns that she was mistaken about the man who loves her, and in this moment of self-reflection, the

speaker grows capable of receiving his love (and securing happiness and health). She states in Sonnet XXXVI that she “has grown serene and *strong* [emphasis added] since” accepting love (7-8). By engaging in self-reflection and coming to a new understanding of her love, Barrett Browning gains a sense of agency. Her life, once stricken with debilitating illness, is now full of vitality, love, and a sense of power and control.

She exerts this control through writing. Barrett Browning chooses to write sonnets, a form of poetry traditionally monopolized on by male poets, and challenges the patriarchal history of sonnet writing. In *Sonnets*, Barrett Browning turns the traditional sonnet on its head, writing as a female speaker to a male lover (unlike the traditional male speaker found in sonnets written by Shakespeare). She further challenges the patriarchal establishment of her English society by penning highly erotic poetry. Barrett Browning, almost unabashedly, writes of longing to be with her lover intimately:

Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,  
Rustle thy boughs and set they truck all bare,  
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee  
Drop heavily down, - burst, shattered, everywhere! (XXIX, 8-11)

Here she uses the tangle of vines and flora as a metaphor for sexual intimacy and becoming one with her partner. Barrett Browning, Austen, and Bronte use their texts to take control over their sexuality and their female persons. Writing eroticism is just another way of them to establish agency and power. Though Austen’s eroticism is comparatively muted, the reader can see parallels between the witty repartee of Darcy and Elizabeth, and the sexually charged banter of Jane and Rochester. In some form,

sexual passion is present in the texts of Austen, Bronte, and Barrett Browning, and it offers them another opportunity to exert their power.

Without self-reflection, however, eroticism would not be present in any of these texts. To write so freely about sexuality was a risk for these female authors (Mermin 65). Yet, as all the texts in some way represent the author being introspective and discovering her own agency, it was a necessary risk. Sexuality is an intricate aspect of all humans, and the process of developing one's sense of agency requires some acknowledgement and discovery of one's sexuality. Writing about personal sexuality and eroticism in human relationships is one way that Austen, Bronte, and Barrett Browning established power and cultivated the notion that women are capable of being passionate, feeling, and sexual beings. Furthermore, this form of highly erotic writing is especially empowering for Barrett Browning, whose father considered her an invalid with no marital prospects for much of her life.

The reader can feel her power in that famous sonnet, XLIII, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (1). This sonnet quiets the eroticism and suggests that she has come to a place of confident serenity, like Jane at the end of *Jane Eyre*. As she qualifies the nature of her love, the reader senses the power, particularly in the line, "I love thee with the passion put to use / In my old griefs" (9-10); here, she takes control of her past anguish and refusing to let it conquer her again. At the end of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* she does not envision death as a "mystic Shape" stalking towards her as she does in Sonnet I, but without fear says to her lover, "I shall but love thee better after death" (14).

By her life story through sonnets, Barrett Browning control over her life and develops agency. In a process at once cathartic, even empowering, the act of storytelling establishes agency for the author. It is a technique that goes beyond just Barrett Browning: Jane Eyre narrates her story to gain control over her own life, and Elizabeth relates to Darcy the story of courtship from her perspective as a way of coming together in union with him, as equals. Storytelling for these authors is the result of self-reflection, and the authors of these texts are empowered through the writing of these narratives.

Self-reflection, then, is an integral part of the literary process. Introspection and the desire to “know thyself” creates tensions within authors, which they examine through the process of writing. The narratives found in most texts are the products of the writer’s inquiring mind – the author uses writing to explore fundamental questions about their society, world, and their own human condition. The characters within literary texts usually engage in some form of self-reflection, and often operate from the desire to “know themselves.” Most narratives include a character that in some way develops new ideas, thoughts, and ways of understanding of the world they live in. Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre, and Barrett Browning’s speaker all do this. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are important texts then, because they demonstrate women engaging in this process of self-reflection, and publicly claiming power agency at a time when men dominated the literary domain.

Yet, the self-reflective process does not revolve solely around the authors and the narratives. The reader is very much a part of the process, and the act of reading a literary text usually requires some level of self-reflection. Texts inspire thought, and many encourage the reader to reflect on their experience with the text. Literary narratives will

prompt questions in the reader, such as: Do I like this story? Why or why not? How do I connect to it? The process of reading requires the reader to engage in constant introspection. Though the reader may not always create the same ideas on a particular text as another reader, they will always formulate *some* thought or idea *about* the narrative. This self-reflective process helps readers establish agency and the capacity to develop independent thoughts and choices. This is particularly true of the female reader of Austen, Bronte, and Barrett Browning, but it is at its core a universal process for all readers. Literature, beginning with an author and ending with a reader, requires the development of ideas, and the formulation of some kind of independent identity or agency. Through the writing and reading of literature, we come to “know ourself.”

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