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## FAME, EMBODIMENT AND SEXUALITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which three women poets of the long nineteenth-century – Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861), Emily Brontë (1818–1848) and Charlotte Mew (1869–1928) – represent fame in their work in terms of a tense sexualised dynamic of attraction and repulsion, variously modelled as *femme-fatale*-like seduction, repressed lust and the activity in, and consequences of, what Mew terms the “tossed bed” (“Fame”, l. 19). The focusing of fame through the ideas of sexuality and embodiment enables these writers to reflect, explicitly or implicitly, upon the gendered nature of literary creation, public voice and visibility, and thereby to negotiate, at least in part, the complex legacies of the “poetess”. In deploying innovative experiments with structure, form and language, Barrett Browning, Brontë and Mew repeatedly reveal fame’s double-edged nature, as something which may be alluring and enthralling in terms of desire, yet simultaneously silencing and threatening to the intellectual and creative life of the poet. The poems examined here consequently demonstrate that succumbing to fame is something which must be resisted at all costs in order to maintain personal and poetic integrity.

**KEYWORDS** Fame; sexuality; embodiment; desire; Barrett Browning; Brontë; Mew

In a famous scene in Book Two of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Aurora, contemplating her chosen vocation as poet, lifts a crown of ivy and places it tentatively upon her head. In its echoes of both Napoleon’s crowning himself as Emperor in 1804 and, as Cora Kaplan and Angela Leighton have noted, the crowning of the famous woman poet, Corinne, at the Capitol in Rome in Germaine de Staël’s influential 1807 novel,<sup>1</sup> this is a scene which evidences Barrett Browning

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starting to address what fame might mean for a mid-nineteenth-century woman writer. For in that “most mature of my works”, as Barrett Browning termed her novel-in-verse,<sup>2</sup> she maps Aurora’s professional development onto an intricate and often combative interrogation of contemporary concerns, in what Aurora calls “this live, throbbing age”.<sup>3</sup> Such a focus for the text in which Barrett Browning imagined herself “running into the midst of our conventions [...] ‘where angels fear to tread’” is a skilful move which exposes an array of issues faced by the woman who sought to enter the world of letters, including what Aurora at one point terms “frivolous fame”.<sup>4</sup> The concerns raised by fame – how it is defined and how it might be achieved or desired – are clearly in evidence when Aurora, seeking to establish her career, works tirelessly in her archetypal Romantic garret in London. For here, on the one hand, she is forced to write conservative and undemanding poetry for the popular press (“book[s]/ Of surface-pictures”<sup>5</sup>) in order to make economic ends meet. She thereby performs that problematic cultural construct of the “poetess” which Barrett Browning (somewhat erroneously) identified with Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon and Eliza Cook, and which was often linked, to use Alison Chapman’s phrasing, with “hyper-feminine lyric effusions and domestic affections”.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, however, Aurora also produces writings which she considers more aesthetically and politically significant and which have considerable transformative potential. Like Barrett Browning herself, there is no doubt that being a poet is Aurora’s vocation. The word “work” is repeatedly used to signal this commitment and she evidently seeks fame for a particular kind of poetry which will stand up to that of her male contemporaries – those poets against whom she both judges herself and is herself judged. Aurora does not pursue fame for its own sake, therefore, but fame specifically for her new, original work (the work that Romney argues, with ironic insight, has “witchcraft in’t”).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, one of the many ground-breaking characteristics of *Aurora Leigh* – the subject of which was chosen after Barrett Browning had considered both Napoleon and Joan of Arc as her focus<sup>8</sup> – is the way in which Aurora’s writing destabilises and resists traditional expectations regarding textual closure. For as Dorothy Mermin rightly indicates, at the end of this challenging *künstlerroman* Aurora achieves “love *and* work *and* fame *and* independence *and* power”, and seemingly no one of these elements is to be sacrificed for another.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this position is available only at significant cost and with considerable anxiety regarding the nature and character of fame. For as Aurora reflects in Book Five of the poem, the section which contains her (and Barrett Browning’s) most sustained discussions on the role of poetry:

Fame itself,  
 That approbation of the general race  
 Presents a poor end, (though the arrow speed,  
 Shot straight with vigorous finger to the white,)  
 And the highest fame was never reached except  
 By what was aimed above it.<sup>10</sup>

In this intriguingly compressed image of the archery board, Aurora asserts that fame is an inevitable draw for “the general race” (a particularly strange deployment of that highly loaded term in the context of nineteenth-century imperial thinking) and that in order to achieve real, meaningful fame one has to reach higher – either in terms of ambition or, it might be argued, in terms of spiritual engagement. To be aiming for fame, this complex passage suggests, is always to be aiming for what appears unachievable.

In this article, then, I consider these ideas about fame in relation to works by three women poets from across the long nineteenth century. Alongside writings by Barrett Browning (1806–1861, hereafter EBB<sup>11</sup>), I examine poems by Emily Brontë (1818–1848) and Charlotte Mew (1869–1928) in order to tease out the ambiguities about fame which reside in their work as part of those wider concerns about women writers’ shifting relations to the literary marketplace from the mid-1820s (just after the deaths of Keats and Byron) to the mid-1910s. Fundamental to this analysis, of course, is what is taken to be the definition of “fame”. This is a category which is not always explicitly interrogated or delimited in the poems discussed here and certainly not one which is stable. Recent scholarship on nineteenth-century literary celebrity – for example, by Eric Eisner, Alexis Easley, Brenda R. Weber and H. J. Jackson<sup>12</sup> – has sometimes distinguished between “celebrity” (a term first used in 1831 in the context of a person<sup>13</sup>) and “fame” in relation either to the quality of the work produced (suggesting possible distinctions between “high culture” and “low(er) culture”) or the longevity of the recognition of the writer. In this model, “fame” has greater potential for more solid recognition than the more transitory and seemingly ephemeral “celebrity”. Nevertheless, as critics rightly acknowledge, these terms and their associations are distinctly porous, melding into one another and often being difficult to separate with any degree of exactitude. For the writers I consider in this article, the term “fame” is mostly connected with the notion of sustained recognition – often recognition that extends beyond, or is awarded after, death. Yet the concept of fame *per se* is also repeatedly complicated by the politics of (gendered) literary creation, public voice, visibility and decorum. The nineteenth century consistently grappled with the Romantic traditions of the educated male poet who functions as socio-political commentator on the one hand and, on the other, the poetess who was expected to write on “suitably”

conservative subject matter (heterosexual love, domesticity, pious religion and social conformism). Consequently, the pressures on women who wanted to write obviously robust, intellectually engaged poetry were immense and this is reflected in the poems I have chosen for discussion.

In particular, I am concerned here with how EBB, Brontë and Mew depict fame in terms of the body, sexuality and illicit eroticism, and argue that their constructions of fame articulate those conflicts between attraction and repulsion, seduction and resistance, which lie at the heart of both their creative thinking and lived experiences. I start with EBB's early poem, "A Vision of Fame" (1826), which, in contrast to her other work of this period, establishes those anxieties about fame which resonate with many women poets throughout the nineteenth century. Specifically, I highlight a tension in this poem between rethinking the conventional figure of the poetess in radical and specifically embodied terms and the concerns about fame which are figured as sexualised Gothic Other. I then turn to Emily Brontë whose poem of the early-1840s, "Riches I hold in light esteem" (also known as "The Old Stoic"), pushes this tension by modelling fame as that which is seductive but also that which has to be repressed in order to achieve intellectual, bodily and seemingly spiritual transcendence. Finally, I move to the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century in order to consider the work of Charlotte Mew and particularly her poem, "Fame", first published in *New Weekly* in 1914 and then in volume form in 1916. Mew was heavily influenced by both EBB and Emily Brontë (she wrote an important critical essay on Brontë's poetry, for example, which I discuss below). Moreover, the fundamental idea that runs through the poems by EBB and Brontë examined here – that of the complex figuration of fame in relation to an ambiguous sexuality and desire – returns with a vengeance in Mew's poem in ways which both directly echo and extrapolate those of EBB and Brontë. Consequently, I suggest that these three poets constitute at least a partial tradition of representation as they enter into dialogue with one another, both within and across generations, through their associations of fame with embodiment and sexuality.<sup>14</sup> As Isobel Armstrong has argued, nineteenth-century poetry had the potential to be risk-taking both in terms of form and language and in its ability to ask "more demanding and radical questions of its culture than other genres of the period".<sup>15</sup> Certainly EBB, Brontë and Mew, already often perceived as writing from the margins of nineteenth-century literary culture, were able to explore these processes of risk-taking in intriguing ways, including in their works about fame.

The anxiety regarding fame which I have suggested lies at the heart of *Aurora Leigh* runs throughout much of EBB's work, despite (or maybe because of) her early successes and rapid achievement of literary recognition. In many ways, perhaps unsurprisingly, this anxiety is intricately bound up with that constant examination of the role of the poet and the work of

specific eighteenth-century and Romantic poets which, as I have shown elsewhere, is threaded throughout EBB's writings over the five decades of her career.<sup>16</sup> What is particularly telling in this respect is the poem which closes her first commercially published (as distinct from privately printed) volume, *An Essay on Mind, and Other Poems*, of 1826.<sup>17</sup> The title poem, "An Essay on Mind", is a highly audacious piece, modelled on one of Alexander Pope's verse essays, where the self-educated, eighteen-year-old young woman assesses the claims to fame of scores of renowned scientists, historians, philosophers and writers spanning the classical age to the early nineteenth century. Significantly, the figures she interrogates across the poem's four books are all men – not even her esteemed Mary Wollstonecraft makes the list<sup>18</sup> – with the work culminating in an Anglocentric celebration of Isaac Newton, John Locke, Francis Bacon and Lord Byron as the "Mont Blanc[s] of intellect" in mathematics, philosophy, empirical scientific method and poetry respectively.<sup>19</sup> In a fascinating about-turn, however, the final poem of the *Essay on Mind* collection, the 24-stanza lyric called "The Vision of Fame", effectively serves to undercut what the title poem and the volume overall has emphasised and prioritised.

"The Vision of Fame" deploys much of the language and imagery associated with the medievalised ballad of the Romantic period as the speaker recounts a vision – initiated by a pastoral scene which, like many Romantic visions, blurs the boundaries between "dream" and "reality" – of a beautiful woman playing a golden lute. A figure of "peerless majesty", whose beautiful hair, "like to the hair of Berenice [...] wreathed her shadowless form", the vision appears a disruptive amalgam of both the improvisatrice and the sexualised *femme fatale*.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, her music and the "verse that flows gushingly" is distinctly seductive, while the language used ("gushing") links the creative production to the sentimentality traditionally associated with the Romantic/early-Victorian poetess.<sup>21</sup> Yet embedded in the vision's "chant soft and long", which is directed to an unidentified third person, is an argument that fame has more worth than love and that, in exchange for youth (there is invariably a cost), the addressee's words will live for ever and be part of a nation's memorialised history: "thy sepulchral stone,/Nations may raise".<sup>22</sup> This geopolitical impulse – a significant kind of fertility from death – is especially telling in its links to the transformative nation-building movements of the early nineteenth century in which EBB was intellectually invested (the philhellenism of the Greek War of Independence, the shifting politics of the countries of Latin America, and Giuseppe Mazzini's Young Italy organisation).<sup>23</sup> As the speaker observes the scene, however, the "ladye bright" begins to change into a "bleachèd skeleton" as her skin peels away, "[l]ike to a blasted scroll" – a phrasing that resonates with those associations between creativity (here, seemingly literary production), danger and fragmentation which have been established throughout.<sup>24</sup> As

the vision's now "boney hands" continue to pluck the lyre's "shuddering wires", the speaker realises, in the final line of the poem and, significantly, the last line of the *Essay on Mind* volume overall, that "THIS is FAME!"<sup>25</sup> With its emphatic capitalisation, this final phrase tellingly signals the speaker's complex psychological experience of astonishment and fear.

EBB's imaging of fame therefore uses the siren-temptress / *femme fatale* figure in order to reflect upon the ultimately illusive nature of the traditional poetess and the associated concerns about the nature of literary creation, women's public voices, and the complex burdens of tradition and legacy. As the vision's deceiving body is transformed, the warning is that what lies behind the seductive and sexualised performance of fame is a disturbing and all-consuming emptiness. Indeed, as Donald S. Hair suggests, the vision becomes nothing less than "a nightmare version of the muse", discordant and deadly.<sup>26</sup> What this means, then, is that at the end of EBB's first publicly published volume is a haunting of arguably her most Enlightenment-style poem ("An Essay on Mind") by its Gothic Other ("The Vision of Fame"). For a poet like EBB, who is rarely acknowledged as a Gothic writer, this is a pertinent example of her drawing upon the legacies of her Romantic forebears and near-contemporaries like Coleridge and Keats in order to address the gendered perceptions of the pursuit of fame.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, EBB here establishes a trope which Felicia Hemans, already nearing the high point of popularity in her career, was to use in her poem "Woman and Fame", published three years later in the Christian literary annual, *The Amulet* (1829). In this piece, Hemans depicts fame as a singer whose "thrilling tone" appears able to "bid each life-pulse beat", but whose song in reality only serves to mask the "hollow sound" of "mockery" directed towards the figure seeking renown.<sup>28</sup> As critics such as Susan Wolfson and Alex Grammatikos have argued, Hemans's shaping of her (in many ways highly successful) career rested precisely on those tensions between gender and fame that I have suggested EBB articulates in "The Vision of Fame". Hemans's need to establish herself as a national, domestic poetess for financial reasons meant that she was later forced to recognise, in Grammatikos' phrasing, that "the literary market, which had admittedly compensated her monetarily, also prevented her poetic growth and imposed a literary persona upon her which she could not easily circumvent".<sup>29</sup> Certainly, the model of the poetess's "fame" that Hemans embodied – on the surface level at least<sup>30</sup> – was one to which the young EBB was already sure that she was not going to subscribe. For as she would later write to Mary Russell Mitford, she believed that the moral tone in Hemans's writings was admirable but that her poetry overall was fundamentally characterised by a monotony of "smoothness" and "refinement" which "like the prisoner's iron . . . enter[ed] into [Hemans's] soul".<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, although EBB would not republish "The Vision of Fame" in her lifetime – it was absent from her

expanded and revised *Poems* of 1850 – the issues that the work raises about the complex sexualisation of fame, and the associated concerns about ambition and the role of art, would continue to resonate deeply for her and other women poets throughout the century.

In a letter of 12 July 1826, EBB's friend John Kenyon, to whom she would later dedicate *Aurora Leigh*, wrote to her about her future career referencing "The Vision of Fame": "Fame, I hope if you should persevere [in] seeking her, will not turn out to you what you have so poetically described her, and what in truth she has turned out to so many [sic]".<sup>32</sup> Significantly, within two decades of the *Essay on Mind* volume, EBB had negotiated the literary marketplace so effectively – and particularly with her game-changing 1844 volume, *Poems* – that she had established a strong international reputation and was far more admired than Robert Browning when they married. Despite the frequent criticism of her more politically engaged work, such as her experimental study of the failed *Risorgimento* uprisings, *Casa Guidi Windows* (1849/51), she occupied the central position in a network of important expatriate women writers in Florence and was seriously considered as the next Poet Laureate on Wordsworth's death in 1850. But for her near contemporaries, the Brontë sisters who were just embarking on their public careers with their ill-fated debut volume, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* of 1846 (a work that initially sold only two copies), concerns about fame and visibility were still very much to the fore.

Of the three sisters, it is Emily Brontë who is most concerned with these public-private tensions across both her life and work. The seeming invasion of Emily Brontë's authorial privacy by Charlotte Brontë's rummaging through her workbox and discovering her poetry, and Emily's subsequent anger at this, for example, has been much discussed by biographers and critics. Charlotte herself wrote after Emily's death that she "accidentally lighted" upon her sister's poems,<sup>33</sup> yet recent analyses have suggested a more determined intrusion. (Sally Wainwright's 2016 biopic, *To Walk Invisible*, albeit a highly dramatised adaptation, has an astonishing physical moment where Emily twice hits Charlotte on her forehead after she has discovered what Charlotte has done.) This combative stance has also been connected to Emily's seeming reluctance to publish any of her poems and, later, her refusal to make herself known to Charlotte's London publisher, Smith, Elder, when the sisters were trying to make clear their separate authorial identities. However, Emily Brontë's desire for literary recognition may not be as muted as has been suggested. She worked hard to prepare her poetry for publication, was evidently keen for the success of her novel, and reviews of *Wuthering Heights* were found in her workbox after her death.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the desire for personal fame appears to have been a different thing entirely. In this context, it is significant that one of her first



mature poems, “Riches I hold in light esteem”, composed in March 1841, includes one of very few direct references to fame in her writings:

Riches I hold in light esteem  
 And Love I laugh to scorn  
 And lust of Fame was but a dream,  
 That vanished with the morn –

And if I pray, the only prayer  
 That moves my lips for me  
 Is, “Leave the heart that now I bear,  
 And give me liberty”.<sup>35</sup>

The “peculiar music” which Charlotte Brontë identified in Emily’s poetry, and the “[m]onumentally sparing” quality which Angela Leighton has pointed to,<sup>36</sup> are both in evidence here as the speaker rejects economic success, emotional bonds and “lust of Fame” in increasingly sceptical manner. The association of fame with sexuality is again highly pertinent, taking us back to the linking of fame, the sexualised body and desire in EBB’s vision and suggesting an illicit *frisson* which is the opposite of the decorum expected of early nineteenth-century women. There is a particularly strange positioning here, too, for whilst “Riches” are not “esteem[ed]” and Love is “scorn[ed]”, Fame is “a dream/That vanished with the morn” – that is, seemingly something which, on one level, is sought after (to be dreamt about), even if it is ultimately unachievable (it “vanished with the morn”). Juliet Barker has suggested that these lines might have been spoken by a character from the complex Gondal saga of colonialism and war that Emily Brontë created with Anne Brontë principally across the period 1831–1846 and yet the “de-Gondalising” of the poem for publication leaves it significantly free of this particular context.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the anonymous speaker asserts that fame, like money and love, has the potential to become entrapping and demeaning. Fame should be readily sacrificed if it threatens the attainment of that personal liberty which she overwhelmingly desires and which Brontë’s writings repeatedly locate in nature, the imagination and the grave – those spaces where socially inscribed identities can be eradicated and a return to the “authentic”, pre-socialised self can be achieved.<sup>38</sup> For here the speaker articulates, with seeming iconoclasm, that “*if*” she prays (my italics), it could only be for freedom. Indeed, there is almost the suggestion of something beyond her control here, caught in the grammatical construction of the prayer involuntarily “mov[ing] my lips for me”. As that controversial promoter of Aestheticism, Algernon Charles Swinburne, would later write of this stanza in 1877, “[n]ot often probably has such a petition gone up from within the walls of a country parsonage”.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, this is a “petition” which is also ironically caught in the poem’s hymn-like structure. Even as the solid regular form contains the poem, the rebellious ideas push and strain at any sense of containment.

Significantly, in *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* this work was titled “The Old Stoic”, a phrasing that connects it with the Roman and Greek philosophy espoused by Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE), Epictetus (ca. 50–135 CE) and Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE). In its fundamental forms, stoicism places an emphasis on the individual achieving wisdom and happiness through virtue ethics, living in accordance with nature, and self-control/mastery of one’s “passions”. One of these passions is the “lust” (*epithumia*) that Brontë directly associates with fame in the opening stanza of her poem, the rejection of which is part of the considered (rather than impulsive) life that Stoicism promotes.<sup>40</sup> Given this, it is pertinent that in the ordering of *Poems* overall, “The Old Stoic” was given prominence by being placed as Emily Brontë’s final contribution (the poems were, in the main, regularly patterned – one by Currer, one by Ellis, one by Acton), a positioning which echoes that of EBB’s “A Vision of Fame”. This means that the final lines by Ellis in *Poems* are these, the third stanza of the poem:

Yes, as my swift days near their goal  
 ‘Tis all that I implore –  
 In life and death a chainless soul,  
 With courage to endure!<sup>41</sup>

Endurance might be the overriding experience here but it also comes with the possibility of “a chainless soul”. This is a phrasing that has echoes of Shelley’s poetry (which Brontë much admired)<sup>42</sup> and that gestures towards freedom from the destructive impulses of fame, money and emotional connection, both in the temporal world and, as the penultimate line suggests, beyond the grave (“In life *and death*”). The speaker thus seeks to rise above fragmentation and the body and also, by implication, the perceived “chains” of the afterlife. With its enigmatic resistances and focus on the outsider figure, then, this poem advocates that unsettling “self-sufficiency” which Margaret Reynolds identifies in Emily Brontë’s poetry and which arguably becomes one of the key strategies in women poets’ relationships with fame in the period.<sup>43</sup> In her denial of those mechanisms of fame and celebrity that Hemans had so effectively worked to her (monetary) advantage, and which she would have found represented in the literary annuals such as *Forget Me Not* in Haworth Parsonage, Emily Brontë was able to produce verse which, in Charlotte Brontë’s posthumous assessment, was perceived as “not at all like the poetry women generally write”.<sup>44</sup>

In a now famous letter written the year before the publication of the Brontës’ volume, EBB spoke of her sense of a lack of preceding women poets: “I look everywhere for [poetic] Grandmothers & see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you – witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!”<sup>45</sup> EBB’s positing of this absent legacy – of both bodies and bodies of work – is undoubtedly highly political for she was

clearly knowledgeable about her poetic grand/mothers (including Sappho, Katherine Philips, Anne Finch, Hannah More, Charlotte Smith and Anna Barbauld) as well as her female poetic contemporaries (Hemans, Landon and Eliza Cook). It seems evident, therefore, that EBB was looking to clear the literary field of other women in order to establish the originality of her own work, a poetics which is often both socially and politically engaged and inventive and experimental in form. Whilst Aurora Leigh laments, in more directly familial terms, the sense of “a mother-want about the world”,<sup>46</sup> the idea of a female predecessor was always problematic for EBB, as I have already suggested above in relation to “An Essay on Mind”. It is particularly pertinent, then, that by the end of the century both she and Emily Brontë had themselves become poetic mothers for the succeeding generation of New Women poets. This repositioning was enabled by EBB’s astonishing public career and, in Brontë’s case, the reprinting of her work and the publication of A. Mary F. Robinson’s 1883 biography, which linked Brontë to emergent New Women agendas and critically revised the marginal/Othered depiction of her in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857).<sup>47</sup> What EBB and Brontë also offered to the next generation of poets were two very different models of literary fame. EBB was a highly visible poet with international influence who had always pursued the public and critical recognition of her work, even if resisting personal fame *per se*. She had no desire to be the subject of a biography, for example, writing to Isa Blagden in 1853 of her horror at being “caught, stuck through with a pin, and beautifully ‘preserved’ with other butterflies, & beetles”.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, Emily Brontë was a writer whose identity and much of her poetic work was to remain invisible until after her death when Charlotte Brontë, acting as initial fashioner of her sisters’ literary legacies, published her “Biographical Notice” and a further selection of Emily and Anne’s poems in 1850. Despite these differences, both EBB and Emily Brontë were able to model fame in relation to success as a woman writer, even if only posthumously for Brontë. Moreover, they were able, albeit to varying degrees, to rewrite the inherited conventions of the “poetess”, revealing the possibility of the poetess becoming, in Chapman’s phrasing, “an unstable and transgressive conceit” whose poetry had “political agency”.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Tricia Lootens’ insightful analysis in her monograph *The Political Poetess* (2017) has emphasised how the idea of the “poetess” is a performance rather than a specific identity. Her “proper” domestic sphere is not removed from the politics of the public world but part of it, and therefore always intricately bound up with ideologies of nation, race and empire – even if, in some cases, the poetess performer functions to uphold or police those ideologies. Despite this important rethinking of the poetess role, however, those disturbing anxieties about fame which EBB and Emily Brontë had both revealed in

their poems in terms of ambiguous sexualities would continue to haunt women poets of the next generation.

To conclude, I turn to Charlotte Mew whose work was heavily influenced by both EBB (especially *Aurora Leigh*) and Emily Brontë, and who seemingly drew upon and reworked the unsettling sexualising of fame which her predecessors had depicted in their work. Moreover, as the century neared its end, these depictions would be complicated even further by the shifting relations between art and morality in the late-Victorian period and the wider sexual possibilities (especially what could be now termed queer sexualities) that were associated with the New Woman.<sup>50</sup> In part reflecting these shifts, Mew initially established her literary credentials as a short story writer in the 1890s, contributing work to the radical *Yellow Book* (where it appeared alongside fiction by Ella D'Arcy and Henry James) and the more established and conservative *Temple Bar Magazine*. Then, in the 1910s, relatively late in her life, Mew emerged as a powerful and incredibly innovative poet. Significantly, in the middle of these two stages of her career, Mew was to work on an important critical essay on Emily Brontë's poetry, published in *Temple Bar* in 1904, which, I would argue, was foundational to the shaping of her poetics. As Penelope Fitzgerald and Julia Copus have both noted, Mew was introduced to Brontë's poetry – along with that of EBB, Christina Rossetti and Alice Meynell – by Lucy Harrison, her teacher at the Gower Street School for Girls.<sup>51</sup> Given Mew's infatuation with Harrison and Harrison's lesbianism (she would move to North Yorkshire in 1890 where she was followed by her lover, Amy Greener, another teacher, with whom she lived for nearly thirty years), these poets might have become linked in Mew's mind with non-normative sexual desires and identities. Certainly, Mew's examination of Brontë's poetry in her essay enabled her to establish complex lines of thinking on the relations between gender, sexuality, creativity and fame. Originally intended as the introduction to a new edition of Brontë's poetry to be published by the important *fin-de-siècle* publisher Elkin Mathews – a project to which Mew was beaten by both Arthur Symons and Clement Shorter<sup>52</sup> – the essay reveals Mew's careful reading of what she terms the “rebellious and contending music” of Brontë's verse which, at its best, produces “concentrated force and purity”.<sup>53</sup> Although Mew admired the power of EBB's work and the control and restraint of Christina Rossetti's, to her mind neither possessed the passion of Brontë's poetry. This passion, in Mew's understanding, came from Brontë's ability to transcend both the social and the biological and thereby to achieve something “purely spiritual, strangely and exquisitely severed from embodiment and freed from any accident of sex”.<sup>54</sup> Significantly, too, Mew's assessment of Brontë as “a self-determined outlaw”, who uncompromisingly “lift[ed] such a cry for liberty as few women have ever lifted”, might be read as an astute response to Brontë's “Riches I hold in light esteem”.<sup>55</sup> It is clear that Mew found in Brontë a

model of the woman poet (rather than the poetess) which spoke to her own parallel artistic and political concerns with the exile figure, nature, religion and the otherworldly. Yet the sexualised body which Mew viewed Brontë as transcending was still to trouble Mew's own thinking about fame, reputation and voice.

Mew's first and arguably most important volume, *The Farmer's Bride*, published in 1916 alongside work by T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and late "Michael Field" (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), is remarkable both for its tackling of issues to do with women's sexuality, psychological violence and fragmented identity, and, stylistically, for its radical experiments in scansion and line length. The title poem, "The Farmer's Bride", placed first in the volume, is now Mew's most widely studied work, an innovative dramatic monologue which articulates the bride's resistance to heteronormative sexuality, motherhood and the power associated with socially endorsed models of masculinity (significantly, the bride never becomes a "wife"). But it is the work that comes directly after "The Farmer's Bride" in the 1916 volume that interests me here. The 24-line poem entitled simply "Fame" gathers together and intensifies many of the concerns that I have sought to draw out in this article. Written in 1913, apparently after Mew had attended a poetry reading at a salon presided over by Mrs "Sappho" Dawson Scott<sup>56</sup> and first published in *New Weekly* in May 1914, "Fame" is a strange and challenging monologue of the kind that Mew was to make her own. In foregrounding its enigmatic nature from the start, the poem opens with many of those standard images of the *fin de siècle* which Mew had already employed in her short stories for *The Yellow Book* and *Temple Bar*:

Sometimes in the over-heated house, but not for long,  
Smirking and speaking rather loud,  
I see myself among the crowd,  
Where no one fits the singer to his song,  
Or sifts the unpainted from the painted faces  
Of the people who are always on my stair ...<sup>57</sup>

This first part of an extended sentence – which draws the reader across twelve complex lines – expresses the manifest anxiety of being unremarkable in the crowd, of not being recognised as the "singer" (the writer, the poet), of one's face not being distinguished from others. The house is "over-heated" as the speaker associates herself with ideas of performance, artificiality ("painted faces") and discordance ("speaking rather loud"). This, then, is the symbolic imaging of fame for Mew's speaker, a claustrophobic version of the *fin-de-siècle* hothouse. Moreover, the speaker is problematically torn between the ambivalences of this life and, the poem proceeds to suggest, a previous non-urban, more pastoral and seemingly more innocent life. Yet whilst the speaker recognises that the "old known things" she remembers

– the gorse, the larks, the trees – still remain attractive, they nevertheless “know[ ] nothing of what we do” and “do not care”.<sup>58</sup> The former solace in nature, bound up with the complex legacies of Romanticism in the wake of developing industrial capitalism, has been destroyed in the pursuit of fleeting, illusory fame. Indeed, it is at this point of tension that the speaker, like the speaker of EBB’s 1826 poem (nearly a century earlier), conjures her own vision of fame as seductress:

Yet, to leave Fame, still with such eyes and that bright hair!  
 God! If I might! And before I go hence  
     Take in her stead  
     To our tossed bed,  
 Our little dream, no matter how small, how wild.<sup>59</sup>

The previous relationship with Fame has seemingly been one of queered sexual desire in the “tossed bed”, the imagery of seductive “eyes and [...] bright hair” echoing both the figure of Berenice in EBB’s poem and the threatening fetishisation of hair at the close of “The Farmer’s Bride” where the farmer’s breathy repetition, “her hair, her hair!”, gestures menacingly toward the possibility of marital rape.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the imagery of the “tossed bed” – highlighted by the short rhyming lines after the previous extended, hypermetrical lines – effectively functions as a signifier of that “close association of fame and scandalous sexuality” which Eric Eisner suggests was “especially risky” for nineteenth-century women writers in pathologising ways.<sup>61</sup> As is often the case in Mew’s work, desire is simultaneously attractive and potentially destructive, its queerness reflected in complex and wide-ranging representations of the body and sexuality. Now, weary and anxious, the speaker of “Fame” seeks to revive just a “little dream” of the public recognition that she still desires. As the poem reaches its shocking conclusion, however, this dream of fame, bound up with ambiguous sexuality and pertinently imaged as an inversion of the Blakean lamb, is evidently unachievable:

Just now, I think I found it in a field, under a fence –  
 A frail, dead, new-born lamb, ghostly and pitiful and white,  
     A blot upon the night,  
 The moon’s dropped child!<sup>62</sup>

Mew’s most explicit poem on fame therefore takes the anxieties articulated by EBB and Emily Brontë to an extreme but seemingly logical conclusion, captured in lines which again reveal Mew to be, in Eevan Boland’s phrasing, “a headstrong and wonderful technician”.<sup>63</sup> The tensions concerning the sexualising of fame examined by Mew’s predecessors do not disappear, but are rather reworked with startling intensity in the final, dense image of Mew’s poem. Over three broken lines and through the piling up of multiple adjectives both before and after the noun, the speaker reads the product of her

encounter with fame as a miscarriage or abortion. This is, of course, a significant image in writings about women's literary production, which Mew would deploy again in "Saturday Market", published in 1921, and which EBB had used to refer to Aurora Leigh's seemingly lifeless early verses.<sup>64</sup> Like EBB, Mew has often been omitted from accounts of women poets' engagement with the Gothic. For instance, she has no place in John Paul Riquelme's account of modernist Gothic.<sup>65</sup> In reconsidering her writings within these frameworks, however, their complexity and intensity are again brought to the fore. The Gothic elements of "Fame" are crucial to establishing a distinction between publically endorsed creativity – which may be perceived in terms of "acceptable" fertility and sexual activity, presumably in the marriage bed – and the private and concealed pain of the "failed" quest for fame/creative recognition. To pursue fame, in the logic of this poem, is to pursue that which is perceived as "unnatural". The product of the queer or illegitimate "tossed bed" shared with fame is consequently something which is concealed, "ghostly and pitiful", seemingly in shame and outside of society's disciplinary vision.

"Fame" was the work which Mew said she liked better than "anything I have done, though I don't know why".<sup>66</sup> The poem's complex ambiguities, unsettling imagery and challenging poetics are a telling vehicle for Mew's reflections upon what fame might mean, whilst also echoing back to the previous works by Brontë and EBB. These three poets variously linked fame in complicated and multiple ways to networks of creativity, visibility and morality, and, crucially, to the perceived dangers of sexuality and desire. In their repeated return to, and modifying of, an imaging of fame in these terms, and a consciousness of how their predecessors and contemporaries (including the "poetess") lived with or denied fame, EBB, Brontë and Mew form a fascinating tradition of women poets seeking to engage with, and interrogate, what fame entails. Significantly, this idea of tradition is also bound up with a repeated experimentation with form as EBB modifies the ballad in "The Vision of Fame", Brontë subverts the hymn form in "Riches I hold in light esteem", and Mew pushes towards the formal and syntactical challenges of modernism in her dramatic monologue. It appears that attempting to express the intricacies of fame necessitates reworking traditional structures and conventions as well as establishing innovative language patterns and probing lines of argument. For at the heart of these works, both individually and as a group, there resides a sense of fame's double-edged nature, as something which may be enthralling and tempting in terms of sexual desire, yet potentially silencing and threatening to the intellectual and creative life of the poet. These poems collectively demonstrate that succumbing to fame is something which must be resisted at all costs in order to maintain personal and poetic integrity. Certainly, in their recourse to the imagery of seduction, lust and the "tossed bed", EBB, Emily Brontë and Charlotte Mew

demonstrate their acute awareness of the tenuous and potentially all-consuming nature of fame. Whilst women poets of the long-nineteenth century might initially be drawn to “[t]he din, the scuffle, the long stare” of fame, as Mew phrases it, the poems examined here clearly reveal that fame’s allure ultimately leads, as Mew anxiously notes at the close of her text, to nothing more than a stillborn dream, a blank landscape, a “blot upon the night”.<sup>67</sup>

## Notes on contributor

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## Notes

1. Cora Kaplan, “Introduction” to *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (London: Women’s Press, 1978), pp. 17–22; Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 30–4.
2. “Dedication” to *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996), p. 4.
3. *Aurora Leigh*, Book 5, l. 203.
4. Letter to Robert Browning, February 1845, in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, ed. Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson, Scott Lewis, et al., 29 vols (Waco, TX: Wedgstone Press), 10: 102–3; *Aurora Leigh* Book 3, l. 235.
5. *Aurora Leigh* Book 5, ll. 130–1.
6. Alison Chapman, “Achieving Fame and Canonicity”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women’s Writing*, ed. Linda H. Peterson (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 77. It is interesting, too, that the poets which EBB dismisses here were, for differing reasons, driven to achieve some kind of celebrity status in order to gain financial security.
7. *Aurora Leigh* Book 2, l. 78.
8. See *Brownings’ Correspondence* 5: 170.
9. Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 215.
10. *Aurora Leigh* Book 5, ll. 64–9.
11. I use the now standard “EBB” in the main body of the text (an abbreviation she used herself) to avoid the constant slippage between Elizabeth Barrett and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.
12. Eric Eisner, *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Celebrity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alexis Easley, *Literary Celebrity, Gender and Victorian Authorship, 1850-1914* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011); Alexis Easley, *New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer, 1832-1860* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Brenda R. Weber, *Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century: The Transatlantic Production of*



- Fame and Gender* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); H. J. Jackson, *Those Who Write For Immortality: Romantic Reputations and the Dream of Lasting Fame* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).
13. See OED, entry 1.b: [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/celebrity\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#9913378](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/celebrity_n?tab=meaning_and_use#9913378) (accessed June 2024).
  14. Janet Gezari has detailed how feminist recovery work on nineteenth-century women's poetry has left Emily Brontë's poetry marginalised as it is often perceived as ignoring those socio-political concerns with which other women poets engaged (*Last Things: Emily Brontë's Poems*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 11–12). My treatment of Brontë here argues against this perception.
  15. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. ix.
  16. Simon Avery, "The Shaping of a Poetics", in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Writers and Their Work* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2011), pp. 1–26.
  17. EBB's first major poem, a four-book epic called *The Battle of Marathon* which she composed principally in 1819, was privately printed by her father for her birthday in 1820.
  18. See *Brownings' Correspondence* 9: 291 (24 December 1844): "Mary Wolstonecraft! [*sic*] – yes, I used to read Mary Wolstonecraft – (the "Rights of woman") ... when I was twelve years old, & quite agree with her. Her eloquence & her doctrine were equally dear to me at that time, when I was inconsolable for not being born a man".
  19. "An Essay on Mind" in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson, Marjorie Stone, Beverley Taylor, Rita Donaldson, et al., 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), Vol. 4, pp. 84–113, l. 70.
  20. "The Vision of Fame" in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Vol. 4, pp. 161–3, ll. 21; 25–7. The reference to Berenice here is to Queen Berenice II of Egypt (ca. 269–222 BCE), the wife of Ptolemy III. When her husband was away at war, Berenice promised Aphrodite that, should he return safely, she would cut off her abundant hair as a sacrifice to the gods.
  21. *ibid.*, l. 51. For the idea of "gushing" and sentimentality, see Isobel Armstrong, "The Gush of the Feminine: How Can We Read Women's Poetry of the Romantic Period?", in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Counter Voices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 13–32; and Tricia Lootens, *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of the Separate Spheres* (Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 116–49.
  22. "The Vision of Fame", ll. 38; 69–70.
  23. EBB's early fascination with nationalism and nation formation is found elsewhere in the *Essay on Mind* volume in "Riga's Last Song", "Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron" and "On a Picture of Riego's Widow".
  24. "The Vision of Fame", ll. 88; 87; 84.
  25. *ibid.*, ll. 91; 92; 96.
  26. Donald S. Hair, *Fresh Strange Music: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Language* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), p. 81.
  27. For her occasional use of Gothic, see EBB's later poems "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" (published in *Finden's Tableaux*, 1840; revised for *Poems*, 1844), "The Romaunt of Margret" (published in *New Monthly Magazine*, 1836; and *The Seraphim, and Other Poems*, 1838) and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (published in *The Liberty Bell*, 1847; and *Poems*, 1850). In these works the

- Gothic provides another significant dimension to her political analysis, exposing the dark underside of socio-political issues. For discussion of EBB's engagement with her Romantic forebears and contemporaries, see Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 49–93.
28. "Woman and Fame", in *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, ed. Gary Kelley (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 351, ll. 13–14; 19–20.
  29. Alex Grammatikos, "'The Nothingness of Fame, at Least to Woman': Felicia Hemans and the Price of Celebrity", *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 10.3 (2014), [accessed June 2024]: <<https://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue103/grammatikos.html>>. See also Susan Wolfson, "Men, Women, and 'Fame': Teaching Felicia Hemans", in *Approaches to Teaching British Women Poets of the Romantic Period*, ed. Stephen Behrendt and Harriet Kramer Linkin (New York: Modern Languages Association Press, 1997), pp. 110–20.
  30. Tricia Lootens has astutely challenged the way we read Hemans by emphasizing the often subtle questioning of dominant ideologies in her poetry. See "Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine 'Internal Enemies,' and the Domestication of National Identity", *PLMA*, 109.2 (1994): 238–53; and *The Political Poetess*, esp. Chapter Four.
  31. Letter of 23 November 1842, in *Brownings' Correspondence* 6: 166.
  32. *Brownings' Correspondence* 1: 256.
  33. Charlotte Brontë, "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell", in *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Ian Jack (Oxford World's Classics, 2009), p. 301.
  34. See Edward Chitham, *A Life of Emily Brontë* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 224–6. For more on the contents of the Brontës' workboxes, see Deborah Lutz, *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), chapter 9. It is important to remember that these accounts of Emily Brontë's reticence are not from Emily herself, but mediated through Charlotte Brontë's "Biographical Notice" (1850), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) and subsequent biographies.
  35. "Riches I hold in light esteem", in *The Brontës: Selected Poems*, ed. Juliet Barker (London: Everyman 1993), pp. 61–2, ll. 1–8.
  36. Brontë, "Biographical Notice", p. 301; Angela Leighton, "The Poetry", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 64.
  37. Barker, *Selected Poems*, p. 124.
  38. This concept is articulated in the complex dialogue poem, "The Philosopher", also published in *Poems* (1846), where there is a shared desire between the speaker and the philosopher for "the time when I shall sleep/Without identity" (ll. 7–8).
  39. Algernon Charles Swinburne, "A Note on Charlotte Brontë", in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 398.
  40. See Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*. Edward Chitham has identified some of the classical writers that Brontë read in "Emily Brontë's Latin", *Brontë Society Transactions*, 21.6 (1996): 233–6. Gezari has also noted Brontë's possible access to Epictetus through her reading of a translation by Elizabeth Carter (*Last Things*, p. 133).
  41. "Riches I hold in light esteem", ll. 9–12.
  42. See Chitham, *A Life of Emily Brontë*, pp. 72–3.

43. Margaret Reynolds in *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Angela Leighton and Reynolds (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 198.
44. Brontë, “Biographical Notice”, p. 301. In 1842, Charlotte Brontë gave Ellen Nussey a copy of Hemans’s *Songs of the Affections* (1830), suggesting again her familiarity with work of the “poetess” tradition.
45. Letter to Henry Chorley, in *Brownings’ Correspondence* 10: 14.
46. *Aurora Leigh* Book 1, l. 40.
47. A. Mary F. Robinson, *Emily Brontë* (Eminent Women Series, London: W.H. Allen and Co, 1883).
48. *Brownings’ Correspondence* 18: 349.
49. Alison Chapman, *Networking the Nation: British and American Women’s Poetry and Italy, 1840-1870* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 99.
50. For a general discussion, see Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 122–49. For a more specific point of comparison, see the recent work on “Michael Field” (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) in *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns*, ed. Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2019).
51. Penelope Fitzgerald, *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends* (London: Flamingo, 1992), pp. 22–9; Julia Copus, *This Rare Spirit: A Life of Charlotte Mew* (London: Faber, 2021), pp. 42–9.
52. *Poems of Emily Brontë*, with an introduction by Arthur Symons (London: Heinemann, 1906); *The Complete Works of Emily Brontë*, ed. Clement Shorter, 2 vols (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910–1911).
53. Charlotte Mew, “The Poems of Emily Brontë”, *Temple Bar*, 130 (1904): 153–67, pp. 162; 154–5.
54. *ibid.*, p. 161.
55. *ibid.*, pp. 155; 167. Mew appears to continue her reflection on Brontë’s “The Old Stoic” when she writes “The world counted for nothing; all it could offer she [Brontë] passed passionately yet coldly by. Riches and fame and love – such undesired futilities were things for which she watched weak mortals strive with distant pitying disdain” (*ibid.*, p. 158).
56. Nelljean Rice, *A New Matrix for Modernism: A Study of the Lives and Poetry of Charlotte Mew and Anna Wickham* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 57. “Mrs Sappho” was Dawson Scott’s pseudonym when she published her novel, *The Story of Anna Beames*, in 1906. She had published an epic poem called *Sappho* in 1889.
57. “Fame”, in *Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Val Warner (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2013), p. 3, ll. 1–6.
58. *ibid.*, ll. 12; 14–15.
59. *ibid.*, ll. 16–20.
60. “The Farmer’s Bride”, in Warner, pp. 1–2, l. 46.
61. Eisner, *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Celebrity*, p. 5.
62. “Fame”, ll. 21–4.
63. Eevan Boland, “Introduction” to *Charlotte Mew: Selected Poems* (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 2008), p. xiv.
64. “I ripped my verses up,/And found no blood upon the rapier’s point;/The heart in them was just an embryo’s heart/Which never yet had beat, that it should die” (*Aurora Leigh*, Book 3, ll. 245–8).

65. John Paul Riquelme, "Modernist Gothic", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 20–36.
66. Quoted in Copus, *This Rare Spirit*, p. 213.
67. "Fame", ll. 10; 23.

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