

## **The Hall of Warped Mirrors: The Role of the Auditor in Browning's "The Laboratory"**

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The Victorian Era witnessed the emergence of a new form of poetry, the dramatic monologue, which poets used to achieve goals they could not reach through the soliloquy-style strivings of lyric poetry, nor gain through multiple speakers. By exposing the sentiments of an often-deranged speaker to a silent listener, the dramatic monologue complicated the reader's poetic experience. The dramatic monologue creates an intricately precarious relationship between the speaker and auditor, as well as between the reader and the poem. As the reader learns more about the speaker through the auditor's lens, he or she also becomes enlightened about the listener's role beyond the limits of the poem. The auditor in Browning's "The Laboratory" demonstrates how the sometimes-warped relationships within dramatic poetry can affect the reader by creating a sense of intimacy through opportunities for reflection. Although the apothecary acts as the silent witness, his active role in premeditated murder, as devised by a woman, complicates the reader's experience; "The Laboratory" reveals an apt metaphor for how the role of the auditor affects the reader in a dramatic monologue: a hall of mirrors that reflects the twisted relationships among the speaker, auditor, poet, and reader.

Understanding the role of the auditor within dramatic poetry necessitates an exploration of the motivations of the speaker because of the potential reflective relationship between the speaker and listener. By "overhearing" (Kaiser, "The Dramatic Monologue"; Maynard) the speaker's words through the auditor, the reader views the scene as reflected by a multi-faceted mirror that provides information about the listener as well as the speaker. In "The Laboratory," Browning's speaker, a version of the Marquise de Brinvilliers, rambles about her ambitions to the listener, a poison-maker. Although lucrative, since the speaker gives the listener her store of jewels and gold, poison-production would not appear to be the listener's sole form of funding; in her perusal of his laboratory, the speaker comments on several items that may not be poisonous and expresses distress that her purchase does not have the "enticing and dim" quality of a phial she admires (line 26). The speaker's comment indicates that the listener may be an apothecary, one who creates medicines and herbal remedies as well as illicit poisons. From her eager scrutiny of the listener's laboratory, the speaker reveals her current neophyte status as a murderess. She also reveals the listener's apparent distaste for his complicity in the work, or to her eagerness in her grisly plans, when she admonishes him to "be not morose" (line 41) in response to her command to remove her mask so she may see the results of his labor.

By their nature, dramatic monologues require an implicit or, in the case of "The Laboratory," explicit listener or witness to the speaker's words. If the poet felt it necessary to provide a listener as a lens for the reader, the reader must judge and prioritize the content through

what the speaker reflects about the listener. How the speaker interacts with the listener through the impartation of the information provides more clues to the relationship between the two. While the apothecary focuses on protective gear, creating the poison, and his fee, the noblewoman talks of dancing, her rivals, and her straying lover. Her flippant comments regarding the tools of death, ruminations about poisoning methods, and the rivals she hopes to kill demonstrate a bloodthirsty nature. She feels nothing for the lives of her future victims and wants to ensure the listener does not misunderstand her: “Not that I bid you spare her the pain;/Let death be felt and the proof remain:/Brand, burn up, bite into its grace--/He is sure to remember her dying face! (lines 37-40). Although her language is that of a frivolous noblewoman, her comment that she wants her victim’s death-pains to be etched upon her face and within her former lover’s mind demonstrates her callousness as well as feelings of superiority about the apothecary. The speaker may feel her payment of her “whole fortune’s fee!” (line 43) as well as a kiss on the mouth will guarantee the listener’s silence, but she may also be so used to getting what she wants from those she sees as inferior, in the habits of the *Ancien Regime*, that she never even considers he might tell all she divulges.

Browning’s grammatical choices emphasize the relationship between the speaker and the listener. The predominance of end-stopped lines stress the rhyme, giving a sing-song quality to her voice and an indication that she says whatever pops into her mind. In comparison to the enjambed lines of Browning’s “My Last Duchess” that indicate that speaker’s practiced nature in regard to the subject and his potential effect upon the listener, the speaker in “The Laboratory” appears imprudent or thoughtless with her comments. The use of tricolons throughout the work indicates the speaker’s haste and her eagerness. When she says “Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,/pound at thy powder,--” (line 9-10), the speaker indicates a slight familiarity with the machinations of a laboratory, but she belies her statement “I am not in haste!” (line 10). Most of the examples of tricolon usage demonstrate how the speaker rapidly ponders the poisonous possibilities as the listener continues to diligently –and silently- make the poison. The listener’s silence intrudes between the stanzas filled with her hasty language in a constant reminder of his presence. Wagner-Lawlor indicates the silence allows the reader space to interpret the reasons for the auditor’s silence (293): is the apothecary just busy, or does he express acceptance or condemnation even as he is complicit in the future crimes?

The gender of the speaker in relation to the genders of the poet and listener further complicate the reader’s experience. A male poet who creates a female speaker’s words heard by the reader through the a male apothecary creates a poetic situation that intentionally exacerbates the loop of infinite reflections and relationships found in dramatic poetry. That the speaker was based upon a historical figure adds another level of reflection. Browning took poetic license with the Marquise de Brinvilliers’ motives: the speaker in the poem wishes to destroy her romantic rivals, as opposed to murdering her family for their goods with the help of her lover (Dumas). That the speaker’s motive stems from her status as a scorned lover continues to warp the layers of reflections within the work, as this reason for seeking revenge appears to emanate from a

stereotypically feminine response. However, the speaker's flippancy concerning murder demonstrates her insanity; she indicates that her motives for murder make perfect sense.

The concept of the mask is a central metaphor within criticism of dramatic monologues. Many critics of Victorian dramatic monologues express that the mask of the speaker allows the poet to be personal while maintaining objective distance. Some critics assert the reticence of some poets necessitated the theatrical safety of a persona or guise of a speaker through which to act as a ventriloquist (Shaw, "Projection..." 315) and submerge most of their personalities. Garratt proffers a double-mask theory, one in which the speaker is one mask and the interaction between speaker and auditor is another (116). The double-mask theory recognizes that Browning has not eliminated himself from the poem; it also identifies how the second mask, the mask the persona wears in communicating with the auditor, complicates the reader's experience (118).

Theories about the necessity of the theatrical persona within the dramatic monologue contain valid points, but the terminology is inadequate. The role of the apothecary as the auditor transcends the mask or double-mask theories, not because the theories do not pinpoint key elements of dramatic monologues, but because the terms seem inadequate. Although "The Laboratory" includes the persona of the speaker as well as the listener, the apothecary as auditor allows Browning to reveal more deeply than what the word "mask" implies. The listener in this poem is no mere witness to the potential crimes but draws the reader into murderous complicity. Although psychologically apt, the mask metaphor denies the cyclical relationships among the speaker, listener, poet, and reader. The poet does not merely wear a mask like a costume; he or she becomes the speaker and the listener to reflect ideas onto readers; the readers recursively reflect upon the poetic themes, the relationships of the speaker and listener, and the connection of both to the speaker's spoken content as well as underlying content. Though brilliant and well-detailed by many learned critics, the mask theory is inadequate when applied to the layers of reflection within "The Laboratory," a poem, ironically, not given much credence by Browning himself (Shaw, "Projection..." 330). The work demonstrates how the auditor's role catalyzes reflection; the phraseology associated with the mask theories unintentionally imply that the roles of speaker and auditor are products of artifice, constructs to don on a whim. The connotation of the term "mask" minimizes the sacrifice involved in the sublimation of elements of self as well as laser-like focus required to develop a persona to explore the content of a dramatic monologue.

Like speakers in dramatic monologues, poets have something to say; the listener/speaker relationship reflects the reader/poet relationship. Browning searched for the perfect auditor; John Maynard notes that Browning's "problem was not finding complex things to say about the meaning of life but keeping the discourse at a level where others could understand it" (108). Creating a speaker-listener situation allowed Browning to look into a split mirror and reflect himself as speaker and listener. Mermin notes that Browning was "concerned less with the inadequacies of the vehicle than with those of the audience" (145). By creating dramatic monologues, Browning constructed listeners who invited the readers into their roles. The forced intimacy and sympathetic identification through the auditors of Browning's dramatic monologues disturbed Victorian readers because of the constant madness and sexual violence of

his speakers (Gregory 497). However, dramatic monologues were no mere academic exercises or theatrical games from which a poet would experiment with a persona; they explored content.

Browning's "The Laboratory" emerges as a possible comment from a male poet on the situation of emasculation of poetry as a profession. The work demonstrates an example of how a male Victorian poet might attempt to recapture poetry as a masculine art form while indicating a fear of femininity (Kaiser "Tennyson and Rosetti"). In "The Laboratory," the speaker, a woman, appears to exemplify agency: she is the eager potential murderess, and she has the power of expression within the poem. However, the laboratory itself, the symbol of agency as well as interiority, belongs to the male listener who, rather than remaining an objective witness, actively creates during the poem. That the male figure is the creator allows the reader to ponder how Browning may provide commentary on the subject of masculinity within Victorian poetry. Although the female speaker demands the poison's creation and pays for the work, she possesses an unreliable worldview because of her insanity. The listener, who reflects the speaker for the reader, may also reflect the poet as the creator. If the listener, rather than the speaker, represents the poet, the only possible representation of poetry is the poison, a stereotypically female form of murder. The result of the entirety of the work during the poem results in a grimly-colored "delicate droplet" (line 43) with the potential to destroy the creator as well as the intended victim. In addition, the poem's subtitle, "old order," may refer to the old order of the subjects and styles of Romantic poetry to equate feminine agency with insanity and demonstrate masculine power over interiority. The flippancy of the female speaker and her rambling subjects, in relation to the constancy of the silently creative auditor, may also comment on the subject matter of female poets versus that of male poets.

The reader's experience in the hall of mirrors of dramatic poetry, as exemplified by the complications in "The Laboratory," demonstrates the change in the relationships between readers and poetry in Victorian literature. The reader held a more important role in relation to the speaker because of the creation of the listener since the reader would have to consider the effect of the words on the listener (Maynard). The reader had to be an active reader of the poem as opposed to a passive reader or consumer of the work (Kaiser, "The Dramatic Monologue"). For Browning's works, in particular, responsive readers are essential (Mermin 145). The addition of the listener, instead of isolating the reader from deranged speaker, can create an intimate relationship between them (Shaw, "Masks..." 439). In "The Laboratory," not only does the reader learn about the speaker through the lens of the auditor, he or she also learns of the auditor's environs through the speaker's observations; the work reveals reflections of reflections for the reader to consider. Not only does the reader have to ponder how the speaker presents herself and her motivations, the reader also has to interpret the speaker's observations of the listener and his setting; the reader has to debate the levels of unreliability within the speaker's comments to the listener. The reader also has to decide whether the silence from the listener is of intimidation, censure, or acceptance (Wagner-Lawlor 290). The role of the auditor complicates the reader's experience in "The Laboratory" because the reader must not only view the speaker through the lens of the listener, he or she must also evaluate the strength of the relationship

between the listener and the reader when the listener is an accessory to murder. The reader must look into the hall of mirrors and decide if the reflections are accurate.

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