Where are the women?

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The dramatic monologue form used by both Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold in their poems My Last Duchess and The Forsaken Merman, respectively, serves to comment upon the condition of a woman without physically introducing a female into the scene. Despite both poems taking place in domestic situations, inside a house and during childcare, no woman is physically present. This may represent a Victorian increase in male domesticity. Yet the dramatic monologue has further purpose: It allows the poets to access traditionally feminine situations through male eyes, without the accompaniment of a female. Such an absence demonstrates the male-dominated attitudes of Victorian writers. Browning's poem My Last Duchess is a classic example of the dramatic monologue. The speaker, presumably modeled after Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, speaks of a portrait on the wall to a presumed listener whom he urges to " sit and look at her" (Broadview, pg. 280-281). Arnold's The Forsaken Merman places the speaker as a merman longing for a mortal woman. Although other voices are quoted throughout the poem, they are quoted by the speaker. In both poems, it is the male voice that is heard by the reader. Furthermore, that male voice is speaking directly about a woman in both instances. Browning's narrator speaks about what appears to be his dead wife, while Arnold's merman speaks of a woman who has left him. In both cases, the woman is long gone. Interestingly, while Arnold's merman mourns the loss of his woman, a long-standing literary tradition, Browning gives his reader something very different. Browning's narrator seems to have been involved in the death of his wife. " This grew; I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands/ As if alive" (Broadview 281). Although not explicit about his involvement, the poem's tone helps establish a slight distrust of the narrator. Browning's use

of rhyming couplets gives the speaker a jovial tone. Yet Browning does not end stop his lines, providing the reader with rhymes that are syntactically internal in the speech. If one were eliminate the line breaks, then one would read the rhyme in the middle of the sentence, not the end. The result is that Browning's poem hides its rhyme more than its otherwise obvious rhyme would allow for. The reader, if not already suspicious due to the homosocial nature of the arrangement, begins to wonder what else is being hidden by the speaker. On the other hand, Arnold's The Forsaken Merman contains a very loud rhyme structure, similar to a nursery rhyme. Arnold often end stops his line to add to the effect. In fact, there is only one line that does not end in a punctuation mark throughout the entire first three stanzas. The effect is not aimed at making the reader slow down and appreciate the line but, rather, to create a youthful tone. The listener is supposed to be a child. Therefore, Arnold is effective in making it believable that this is targeted at the child in the poem. He thus is able to have his speaker address the children without any infringement on his masculinity. After all, despite the split of the merman and Margaret, the merman, not the mother, is the one with the children. The reader must assume that Margaret is the mother, " Children's voices should be dead/ (Call once more) to a mother's ear" (Brownview 435). Furthermore, the reader knows that Margaret is still alive through the planned visit to the town at the end of the poem; this is not just a case of the father taking over the parental responsibilities after their mother's death. For a male to care for children was seen as a " feminine," and therefore circumspect, act. Although the Victorian period saw the " creation of a new ideal of fatherhood," in divorce cases " it had become morally accepted that it was only right to grant custody of young children to

their mother” (http://www. victorianweb. org/authors/collins/tsw1. html 2002). Thus, Arnold’s use of youthful-sounding rhyme makes the scene appear more natural. An attempt to create a natural tone is also apparent in Browning’s poem. Browning’s speaker is not speaking to children. Instead, Browning’s speaker is modeled after a duke, making grand language expected. The poem succeeds in accomplishing this through the use of iambic pentameter. Iambic meter is the rhythm for which normal speech would appear most under scansion. By keeping a regular meter, Browning gives the impression of an educated, prepared speaker. This impression lends credibility to the idea of the male speaker attempting to persuade another male about taking the hand of his listener’s master’s daughter. Furthermore, Browning breaks his iambic pentameter in interesting places in order to emphasize certain areas of the poem. There are only two lines in the 56-line poem that are metrically different than the rest. The first, “ Would draw from her alike the approving speech”, is easy enough to spot with its eleven syllables (versus the ten syllable standard) (Brownview 281). The second, “ This sort of trifiling? Even had you skill,” is harder to spot, yet metrically contains a spondee at the end of the line. The two variations come at moments when the speaker is talking about speech itself. Browning has put the emphasis on the power of rhetoric while demonstrating how rhetorically his speaker can get away with murder, literally. The second variant, line 35, makes the connection between his trifling with his late wife and his skill in speech. The reader becomes more suspicious of him as he denies, in perfect iambic pentameter, that he has any skill in speaking. Browning’s meter once again allows us to know the true nature of the narrator. Browning’s imagery serves to further reveal that true nature. The

narrator believes it absurd that his late wife could compare his gift of “ a nine-hundred-years-old name” to any other gift (Broadview 281). It is the female honor to take her husband’s name. Such a view represents the same idea that Sara Grand comments in her essay, “ The New Aspect of the Woman Question”. “ The Woman Question is the Marriage Question”, she writes (Broadview 97). The conquering of the woman through marriage is seen in Browning’s concluding metaphor where his speaker asks for his listener to “ notice Neptune, though/ Taming a seahorse, thought a rarity,” (Broadview 281). After having read so much into the first painting of his late wife, the reader must read into the appearance of a second statue at the very end of the poem. Here Neptune is enslaving a seahorse to do his bidding. The reader must make the connection that that is the attitude of the speaker toward women, as well. The purpose of his dramatic monologue has been to persuade his listener that he should get the hand of the master’s daughter. In other words, he wants another seahorse. While Browning uses art to insert a female figure, Arnold creates two separate worlds, the earth and sea. These separate spheres represent very much how Victorians viewed the roles of men and women. Sarah Stickney Ellis writes, “ the sphere upon which a young woman enters on first leaving school…” (Broadview 97). Woman were to be the fairer gender in morality and appearance. Here, that opinion is ramified by a woman who upon being in the male sphere, the sea, loses her soul. In order to avoid going back to the soulless land, she refuses to look at the merman. Instead, Margaret’s eyes “ were seal’d to the holy book” (Broadview 435). Arnold’s imagery reflects the long-held idea of religion as a source of chastity for woman. Yet, despite the merman’s attempts, he cannot bring his woman back into his world. She instead “ sits

at her wheel in the humming town/ Singing most joyfully” (Broadview 435). She is content in her female sphere. Without the actual presence of women in their poems, both Arnold and Browning manage to describe the Victorian views of the “ fairer sex”. Through use of dramatic monologue, both poets speak of woman without ever developing a female tone to their passages. The use of rhyme, meter, and imagery all serve to lend credibility to the duke and the merman. Yet, of course, it still leaves the reader asking, “ Where are the women?”