

7-10-2020

The Implicated 'I': Fictitiousness, Fury, Form

Cornelia D.J. Pearsall
Smith College, cpearsal@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/eng_facpubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pearsall, Cornelia D.J., "The Implicated 'I': Fictitiousness, Fury, Form" (2020). English Language and Literature: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
https://scholarworks.smith.edu/eng_facpubs/13

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in English Language and Literature: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

The Implicated “I”: Fictitiousness, Fury, Form

CORNELIA PEARSALL

“**H**ow explain the anger of the professors? Why were they angry?": Virginia Woolf arrives at these questions in her 1929 polemic *A Room of One's Own*, after recounting an extensive research project from which all she has “retrieved” (32) is “the one fact of anger” (33). She quotes from a range of self-appointed male authorities on women, and formulates a composite Professor von X, whose representative book—also a composite and as such titled *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*—conveys chiefly that he is “very angry” (31). “With the exception of the fog,” she writes of a universalized male figure, “he seemed to control everything. Yet he was angry” (34). Woolf circles round and round this word: “the professors—I lumped them together thus—were angry. But why, I asked myself . . . why, I repeated . . . why are they angry?” (33). Her repetitions lead to a revelation. Woolf notices that her own “sketch of the angry professor had been made in anger. Anger had snatched my pencil. . . . But what was anger doing there?” (32). She concludes, “I had been angry because he was angry” (34).

ABSTRACT: This essay considers some of the ethical implications of intersections of anger and gender in the genre of the dramatic monologue. Drawing from Virginia Woolf's observations in *A Room of One's Own* and an essay on EBB, I link Woolf's meditations on the fictitious “I” to the problematics of its use in EBB's “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point.” Although the features of the genre can still cause productive debate, the “I” is the pedestal upon which all dramatic monologues stand, absolutely and inevitably, and I argue that we have not yet fully come to terms with the ethics and ontology of this speaking subject, the implicated “I.” The Runaway Slave articulates for herself, in the course of her speaking, a form of discursive self-possession, of human *being*, and yet the poem also enacts the speaker's racialized displacement from the genre itself.

CORNELIA PEARSALL (cpearsal@smith.edu) is a Professor of English at Smith College and the author of *Tennyson's Rapture: Transformation in the Victorian Dramatic Monologue* (Oxford, 2008), as well as essays on W. H. Auden, Charlotte Brontë, and Sylvia Plath, among others. She currently is completing *Imperial Disappearances: Tennyson and the Expansion of Empire*, and *Firing Lines, War Poetry and the Force of Form from Tennyson to Plath*.

“But what was anger *doing* there?” This particular phrasing of Woolf’s seeks not only to understand the active presence of authoritative male anger, but also its active processes; that is, not only its affect but also its effects. Woolf’s own anger at that moment is repetitive, reactive, and, she recognizes, potentially ineffectual. Far from changing Professor von X’s opinion, it might affirm it, or even amuse. In an interview published recently in *The Guardian*, the actor Lupita Nyong’o was asked, “What is the worst thing anyone’s ever said to you?”; her answer is instructive, and chilling: “I like it when you’re angry” (Greenstreet n.p.).

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf eventually attempts to escape from the professor’s destructive recursions of fury through the concept of the androgynous mind, but she also consistently suggests that if gender essentialism cannot be escaped, at least for the present, then it must be strategically employed. In the dynamic Woolf sketches, inexplicable male anger leads to explicable female anger. Yet other vital questions emerge. How to recognize anger’s destructive circuitry but not reproduce it? How to repel or reject it, and, more, possibly reform it? How not to reiterate the aggressive fury of these male authority figures, but redirect those energies? How to make anger productive, transformative, even reparative? For insight into questions of anger, gender, and genre, Woolf looks to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Part of what I’m interested in here is the long reach of the Victorian dramatic monologue: both authors strategically employ the resources of differing monologic genres that are each hybridized from their inception—what Barrett Browning calls the novel-poem, Woolf calls the play poem, and we call the dramatic monologue—to explore the ethics and potential efficaciousness of anger.¹

As Woolf’s insistent questions about the professors suggest, anger has a way of repeating itself, reproducing itself. Here, she questions first the male professor’s anger, and then her own. Anger management is one of many tasks she sets for her influential essay on women and writing, which was deeply rooted in that emotion and its analysis. Writing to the composer Ethel Smyth in 1933, Woolf explains why, despite feeling “wound to a pitch of fury,” she has eschewed sending to a newspaper “a long letter” in which she considers her “I” to be “large, and ugly as could be” (qtd. in Lee 594-95).² She explains that conversely, in *A Room of One’s Own*, “I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary,” imagining, “well theyd [sic] have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would have taken me seriously” (Woolf qtd. in Lee 595).³ *A Room of One’s Own* tracks the damage to women writers of exclusion and of internalized anger, positing, for example, the distorting effects for Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot of “that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them . . . admonishing them . . . to keep within certain limits” (78).

Woolf too, as she recognizes, has not been “let . . . alone.” “I can hear them as I write,” she tells Smythe, anticipating her male critics, perhaps including those angry professors (Woolf qtd. in Lee 595). In later publications, however, she distinguishes a Victorian woman poet, Barrett Browning, from her female novelist peers. Woolf’s 1932 essay on *Aurora Leigh*, for example, voices admiration for the work’s “speed and energy, forthrightness and complete self-confidence . . . qualities that hold us enthralled” (204), concluding that it “commands our interest and inspires our respect”—not a common critical view in Woolf’s day, as she acknowledges (208).

To be taken seriously as a woman with, indeed, many axes to grind, Woolf internalizes and self-inflicts “force” in order to keep her self-figuration “fictitious,” rendering, I would argue, *A Room of One’s Own* itself an extended dramatic monologue (qtd. in Lee 595). “‘I’ is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being,” she declares at the outset (Woolf, *A Room* 4). She adds parenthetically “(call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance)” (5). As Woolf is well aware, however, the decision to perform the “I” as a persona, especially the female “I” with an “axe to grind,” is a matter of radical importance (qtd. in Lee 595).

I want therefore to focus here particularly, if briefly, on the status and ethics of the performed “I.” The “I” is the pedestal upon which all dramatic monologues stand, absolutely and inevitably; in a genre whose features can still cause productive debate, this is one about which we may all agree. Criticizing its constant over-use by male authors who “had never been thwarted or opposed,” Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* implicates the “I” as the inescapable mark of privileged identity: “it is a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’ . . . Back one was always hailed to the letter ‘I.’ One began to be tired of ‘I’” (103). In the majority of Victorian dramatic monologues, the apparently masculine “bar” might be better characterized as both straight and *white*, potentially barring numerous other kinds of representation. And yet Woolf makes use of the elasticity of identity that this typographical shape affords, as had a range of Victorian women poets before her. To counter her exhaustion, Woolf hails three Marys (Beton, Seton, and Carmichael) to develop a fictitious female multiform “I” whose fury is founded in fierce opposition to the “I” of unopposed male subjectivity.

The fictitious “I” is a vexed and vexing creation, with whose ethics we have not yet come to terms. As an example, we might look to another poem of Barrett Browning’s, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” drafted in 1846 and first published in the American abolitionist gift book *The Liberty Bell* in 1848. The dramatic monologist reflects on the dynamics of rational ire and

imputations of insanity, culminating in her assertion, “I am not mad” (218). Her pivotal recognition in her infant’s face of “a look that made me mad! / The *master’s* look, that used to fall / On my soul like his lash . . . or worse” suggests that her anger is “made” in response to the white male master’s “lash” (143-45). The poem thus proffers anger as a sane response to an insane injustice: for the speaker, feeling mad serves as a guarantor of not being mad. At the monologue’s end, she turns from this or indeed any affect, leaving the “White men” (252) she addresses with her final word, “disdain,” adumbrating a refusal to engage with them and effecting a form of escape from their angry affective economies (253). As Melissa Valiska Gregory’s compelling contribution to the roundtable in this issue argues, however, the dynamic limned by the monologue—that is, a movement to and through anger—is seriously compromised by the perspectival limitations of its white authorship, and the genre’s founding in “the white performance of blackness” (XXX).

I have argued elsewhere that a generic hallmark of these poems is that speakers seek “to perform or effect some goal in the course of the monologue’s temporal development” (Pearsall 19). A radically transformative fiction they forward is that of ontology, of the existence of a speaking subject who, in speaking, forms a self as subject “in the course of the monologue, by way of the monologue” (20). The monologic “I” casts a shadow, like that of any being. The Runaway Slave forms for herself, in the course of and by way of her monologue, a selfhood, a separable being or existence—both in and *from* the monologue.

The speaker of “The Runaway Slave” thus enacts, with every iteration of her “I,” discursive self-possession, a form of autonomy however fictitious. And yet her non-naming in the very title of the poem suggests from the outset the monologist’s displacement from her own genre, her racialized location outside the sphere of what Calvin L. Warren in *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (2018) calls “recognized ontologies” (48). The poem pursues the genre’s general aim of articulating some form of personhood, of human *being*, but in attempting to take representational possession of an enslaved woman’s subjectivity it exemplifies the fact that an antislavery agenda is not necessarily an antiracist one. We are only beginning to take adequate account of the ethical dilemmas inherent in the genre of the dramatic monologue in all of its registers, and one of the crucial questions raised here is how to represent injustice without reproducing it.

“What was anger *doing* there?” To end where I began, what might Woolf’s response to the inexplicable fury of Professor von X, or of any privileged self-authorizing authority, teach us about the Victorian dramatic monologue and the profound implications of gender, race, sexuality, and other contested

categories to the experience and articulation of rational anger, of madness that is not mad? What anger can do, or at least attempt to do, is re-form our analytical frameworks regarding empathetic as well as exploitative relation, and school us in a rededicated ethical commitment to anger's transformational possibilities, including the potential communal labors as well as limitations of the implicated "I."

Smith College

NOTES

My thanks to Emily Harrington and Melissa Valiska Gregory for their invitation to join this vibrant roundtable, and to them and Monique Morgan for their thoughtful comments on the draft.

1. Barrett Browning uses "novel-poem" in a reference to the work that became *Aurora Leigh*, in a letter to Robert Browning before their marriage (27 February 1845) (*Letters* 31); the term is discussed substantively by Woolf in her 1932 essay "Aurora Leigh" (203). Woolf coined the term "play-poem" in reference to the series of soliloquys that constitute her novel *The Waves* (1931) (*Diary* 139).

2. Woolf was to reconcile herself to the angry personal "I," however "large" or "ugly," in her antiwar *Three Guineas* (1938).

3. "Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her," Woolf observes of Barrett Browning ("Aurora Leigh" 202). Woolf's *Flush* (1933), centering on Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel, at once satirizes and honors both poet and pup.

WORKS CITED

- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, edited by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds, Blackwell, 1995, pp. 80–88.
- Greenstreet, Rosanna. "Lupita Nyong'o: 'The worst thing anyone's said to me? I like it when you're angry.'" *The Guardian*, 12 Oct. 2019, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/oct/12/lupita-nyonggo-wanted-to-be-botanist.
- Gregory, Melissa Valiska. "Race and the Dramatic Monologue." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2020. pp. XXX–XXX.
- Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.
- The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning 1845-1846*. Edited by Elvan Kintner, Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1969, vol. 1, p. 31.
- Pearsall, Cornelia. *Tennyson's Rapture: Transformation in the Victorian Dramatic Monologue*. Oxford UP, 2008.
- Warren, Calvin L. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Duke UP, 2018.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963.

- . "Aurora Leigh." *The Second Common Reader*, Harcourt, 1986, pp. 202–213.
- . *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie, vol. 3, Harcourt Brace, 1980, p. 139.
- . Virginia Woolf. *Flush: A Biography*. Harvest/HBJ Book, 1961.
- . Virginia Woolf. *Three Guineas*. Harvest/HBJ Book, 1966.
- . Virginia Woolf. *The Waves*. Harvest/HBJ Book, 1978.