The Female Identity and Sexuality in Victorian Poetry
A Literature Study of Four Poems in Four Different Voices

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Introduction

To have gone to such great lengths to exclude women from the public life and its discourse, to have attempted to strip her of her power and bereave her of an identity independent from men, to have alienated women from even their own sense of self, the Victorian age has left a surprising amount of texts featuring women as protagonists in all their shapes. Some of the women encountered in nineteenth century poems hold supernatural powers that allow them to shape the world and imprison men, some of them speak despite the expectation of silence. The nineteenth century is an interesting period to study. Numerous studies about this apparent contradiction have been published by feminists, historians, sociologists, and a great many different points of view have been defended. Many theses contradict each other but must not always be contradictory if approached from a different angle. One thing is constant. Today, it is a given that the Victorian period was a patriarchy in which women were submitted to their husbands. Discourse had and has assigned to them a life in the domestic sphere. Another thing that returns is how this is always connected to their sexuality. Not only their spirits, but also their sexuality must be kept enclosed in the homes they live in. Marriage is what keeps them there. Despite all this, women have also been objects of fantasy even in that restrictive climate, and perhaps even especially there.

What is female identity then? How can a woman develop a sense of self in a world where she exists only through her husband and how can women in general know what it means to be a woman? What is the definition of womanhood in Victorian society? To come to an answer to that question I will look at some of the answers that have been given to these questions before me, but I will also confront the different views about what being a woman is with each other and draw my own conclusions. I wish to do that by taking a closer look at her sexuality and how it was allowed to exist in literature, because instrumental to having and shaping your identity is the gendered idea of sexuality. Sexuality is what biologically distinguishes men from women and in a society in which the family and continuity of generations was so important it is almost impossible to imagine it differently. The reoccurring connection between identity and sexuality will be noticeable at many instances in this paper and explained more extensively. Of course that leads me to the real question. How is it possible for a woman to maintain a sense of individuality and define herself and her gender if that sexuality is denied or recognised only in as far as it is productive in her marriage?

I have selected four poems I will take a closer look at. Two of them are by female authors, two of them by male authors but all four feature a woman as the main character. By taking a closer look at both the poems and what the texts show us, and the lives of the authors and the context in which
the poem was written each time I will lay bare several strategies the Victorian used to treat the subject of woman and her sexuality. Identity and sexuality will remain central, and especially how society handled these issues. Not only society though, but also the women themselves. How did they speak, where did they find a voice and how do they perceive the conventions forced on them? Do the women look at these issues differently than men and do they manage to break free from the discourse instilled in them?

The poems I have selected will all offer partial answers. To represent the women, I have chosen Eliza Keary’s “Little Seal-Skin” and Augusta Webster’s “Circe”. The remaining poems are Eugene Lee-Hamilton’s “The New Medusa”\(^1\), and the last is Lord Alfred Tennyson’s “The Mermaid”. Each author will fit female desire and sexuality in his worldview differently and this is what I will explore. By taking a closer look at the language, content and meaning, I will unveil some of the most frequently reiterated answers to the complicated woman question and additionally, attempt to come to a synthesis of what may appear to be conflicting ideas at first sight. For instance, despite the spread Angel in the House doctrine, no other period has managed to produce so many images of seductive women both in literature and other art forms. Instrumental before I move to a closer reading of the poems, is a short introduction on some of the most important past treatments of this subject in its many appearances. To question how judgements were formed, is necessary before these judgements can be accepted or criticised, after all.

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\(^1\) Because this poem is not available online and included in selected published works only, it can be found in the Appendix. Both Keary and Webster’s poems are available online on the Indiana University Victorian Women Writers Project website.
1. Worlds of Myth-Creation

1.1 Modern Cultural Myths: The Victorian and The Woman

“Feminism”, Cora Kaplan writes, “has, I believe, changed the field [of Victorian studies] in ways that cannot be easily undone” (45). Not only have female authors who never received a place in the previously male canon been uncovered from beneath the dust and been newly appraised by feminist critics, another important line of work has been the adoption of new reading strategies to understand how issues like sexuality, masculinity and femininity function in a piece of prose and poetry. (47) This certainly is true. In the history of Victorian studies, a few trends can be observed with regard to how scholars have interpreted the existence and place of sexuality in the Victorian society. Following Kaplan’s reasoning, feminism taught Victorianists to value female authors’ works differently by acknowledging the intellectual context in which these lesser known female writers lived and the educational means they had access to, resulting in invaluable insights. It allowed for broader perspectives and less exclusive literary analysis, not so much in entirely reshaping the canon - minor writers have not suddenly emerged from obscurity to invade the stage and take over the spotlight - but in having devised a much wider base for comparison, creating a better understanding of authors’ views, background and culturally determined ideas. Being able to read for instance Charlotte Brontë’s work and lay it next to a lesser known writer’s work helps “to understand the agendas of both writers better” and on a higher level, helps us “grasp why certain narrative and symbolic elements ... recur in the late 1840s and 1850s.” (Kaplan 46)

There are a number of works that have left their mark on how sexuality and female sexuality are perceived in Victorian studies in today’s academic output. In his The Making of Victorian Sexuality, a work that has been cited and discussed many times since its publication, Michael Mason notices the emergence of a strong anti-Victorian attitude from shortly after queen Victoria’s death onwards, an attitude in select academic circles that has rapidly evolved to a general condemnation of the prudery now ineluctably connected to the period of Victoria’s reign. (9) Anti-Victorian, in that sense that the stance towards our nineteenth century ancestors is without a doubt hostile but, according to Mason, perhaps not entirely justified. On what grounds does this outspoken disapproval of an era that does not lie that far behind us in the past rest? “I would suggest that to hear something baldly referred to as ‘Victorian’ must convey the idea of moral restrictiveness, a restrictiveness which necessarily and even primarily applies to sex” is the answer, and indeed, in the discussions about the age sexuality and morality are the two hot irons that always (re)surface. (Mason 3) Mason partly explains the root of this attitude.
“It makes good sense if the nub of our hostility to the Victorians is their supposed sexual morality. Tolerance and candour about sexual matters are for most people key elements in their sense of attachment to our modern culture, features of the moral climate which they are definitely pleased with, not to say smug about - and which make them think the present is an improvement on the past.” (3)

Indeed, it is an axiom amongst historians that to be capable of interpreting events of the past or present objectively, historical distance is a requirement. In this case too emotional involvement influences our judgement. As Mason pointed out here and Foucault has written extensively about in his The History of Sexuality, we pride ourselves on our moral climate with tolerance and an open mind as keywords. Still, why judge the nineteenth century so harshly then? It would be hard to uphold our own ideologies “without the notion of an ideological enemy brought into play” (Mason, 3). We are not the first to do it either. One look at a chronological survey of historical eras reveals enough. Opposite the expressionism and passion of the romantic age stands the clear-cut rationality of the enlightenment, just as stark a contrast as popular opinion sees between the oppressing climate of the middle ages and the liberal fresh winds the renaissance brought. It is a constant flux between utter polarities or, more concretely applied to this case is Mason’s metaphor: a pendulum of sexuality swinging backwards and forwards between moral restriction and ideological freedom. (4 - 5) Moral restrictiveness and prudishness serve as characteristics of the nineteenth century which only emphasise the twentieth century sexual liberation that is part of the twentieth century identity. It is an attitude that explains, defends and legitimises the present. Of course, history cannot be divided so grossly. Delineating periods in history is dangerous as, firstly, mindsets evolve gradually and furthermore, “the Victorian” we judge does not exist.

In order to be able to speak about the nineteenth century and its contemporaries and to have a focal point from which to direct our research and theses, we work with a construction or rather, several constructions. That means there are mental constructions of Victorian femininity born from the literary presence of the virgin, the fallen woman, the prostitute and the angel in the house and constructions of masculinity. The danger of these constructions is that one generalises too much and therefore, it is important that one realises the distance between research and subject and the artificiality of these constructions. Historians and anthropologists warn for this and have discussed their methodology since long², as they too work with similar sources and similar approaches.

² I’m referring especially to the debate between anthropologist Geertz and historian Buc. Buc warned that it is dangerous for the historian to try and form an image of a social group or people by relying on his sources. They are,
Working without constructs is impossible, as the object of study is absent, but like the historian, the victorianist too must remember he looks in a mirror and grasps at shadows instead of actual flesh and blood humans. Temporal boundaries divide him from his subject and keep him firmly in the realm of theory, and that is what must be understood. As opinions alter and adapt, these construction change as well and this is exactly what Mason and Foucault speak about. To be faithful to the Victorian in our readings of Victorian society and literature in as much as such a thing is possible, a certain distance is needed to see clarity. What Mason attempts to do in his *Making of Victorian Sexuality* is break through the stereotyped construction of the prudish Victorian and create a more nuanced image, one in which the myth of prudishness is partly lifted and from which a different kind of Victorian emerges, one who does not defend the practise of clitoridectomy and recognises the female orgasm as important for reasons that have today scientifically been declared void, but nevertheless acknowledged sexual pleasure for women, even if this was considered necessary for conceiving.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault urges the reader to see through this construction by recognising that speaking of repression only allows us to uphold a myth forced on us by the past and hide our own hypocrisy. More so, he says, keeping the myth of repression alive allows us to consciously be subordinate by talking about sex. (6) John Maynard says explicitly that in “‘modernizing’ their own discourse on sexuality, writers of the early twentieth century [have] initially created a myth of Victorians’ prudery and anti-sexuality that located their discourse somewhere very close to Augustine’s” (34). A part of the myth of the prudish Victorian then is a twentieth century construct. Michie found numerous explicit sexual jokes about queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert in popular publications of the day, an idea that does not fit in the traditional modernist image of the average nineteenth century man or woman. In reading the poems I have selected and in analysing them, I will undoubtedly fall back on constructions. There is the idea of the pure, morally unblemished woman which I will regard as an ideological Victorian construct of womanhood, there is the newly emancipated woman of the autobiographical person Augusta Webster, there are the evil monstrous women with their dangerous passions as Joan in “The New Medusa”, but all these constructions of women are interpretations. I need them though to come a little closer to the idea of woman as it existed in its many appearances throughout the

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7 In fact, he dismisses it as a marginal occurrence. Gynaecologist Isaac Brown who defended and performed the practise was in fact shunned and banned by his colleagues for doing so. (Mason 197)
confusion in the nineteenth century, and as it exists today. As Foucault was one of the first to imply after all, nothing says as much about our mindset of today as a historical study and how we interpret and explain what we find. Feminist literature readings helped breaking the myth of the Victorian as the early modernists created it, as John Maynard wrote (See Supra), just as much as the studies of Foucault and Mason did. They are responsible for the creation of a wider horizon in which Victorian women gained a place of their own. Not only killed by silence from their contemporaries, they also had to conquer the twentieth century prejudice as well. It is thanks to the opening up of the canon by feminism in academics that I am able to study two female authors as well as two male authors and give their lives meaning and standing in the Victorian society.

Despite the historical details and attention for historical developments, this is not a historical study but a literature study but to make an analysis as open and true as possible, this short introduction was necessary. One thing all poems I study share is how the women are always placed in a mythological setting. A first thing I need to do then, is take a closer look at this usage of foreign lands and stories instead of the writers’ choice for a direct representation of their own society in their poems - even though a literature study has to break through so many barriers in its analysis that a direct representation is never possible. Some of these barriers I have touched upon here, others will be looked at in the short overview on the different stories and places imported in Victorian poetry that follows. The reader’s own cultural background determines his judgement, but mythology hides some of the author’s psychological barriers that in turn, influence the reader’s analysis as well.

1.2 Back to the Roots. Mythology: Hiding or Identifying?

1.2.1 Here and There: Different Realms in Storytelling

Mythology, strange worlds, fairy tales and fantastic characters, they are everywhere in Victorian poetry, and these are not just famous characters we know from Roman or Greek mythology but much lesser known figures or cultures feature too. Where do they come from and how do they function? Eliza Keary and her sister knew mythology and its imaginative power from a young age onwards from their family life and they used it in their own storytelling. (Ellis, 388) Their children books bore titles as The Heroes of Asgard and Little Wanderlin and Other Fairy Tales, thus continuing to evoke fairy lands and realms of imagination for their audience as they had once done for themselves. In her poetry, Eliza Keary does not deviate from this habit. Not only “Little Seal-Skin” draws on the world of storytelling, but so does every poem in the collection.
“Asdisa”, for instance, goes back on an Icelandic myth and “Presentiments” mentions the Norns from the Norse pantheon. The poems read easily, recounted in an easy free verse or simple rhyme scheme, very much resembling the simplicity of a children’s story. Criticism that attempted to reduce the poems to nothing more than simple children stories was wrong though. Beneath the surface of the simple and attractive verses, much more serious stories hide.

The mythologising of subjects pertaining to reality is not an unusual thing to find in Victorian poetry. In fact, it is no coincidence at all that all four poems I chose to treat in this thesis similarly draw on mythologised subjects. “Little Seal-Skin” draws on an episode from William Morris’s “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon”, part of a longer narrative poem titled “The Earthly Paradise”, albeit that Keary places the female protagonist in a considerably more sympathetic light than Morris does, making her an obvious victim of man. (Ellis, 399) Augusta Webster’s “Circe” and Eugene Lee-Hamilton’s “The New Medusa” both draw on classical myth, and Tennyson makes use of the mythical creature of the mermaid and her underwater world in his similarly titled “The Mermaid”; and all feature women who are, in one way or another, women who would never be allowed to live as they do in the Victorian society. Their sexuality is not passive, as was expected, but active. These poems are by far lone representatives in the genre. The Victorian habit of recounting classical and medieval myths in poetry is a frequent subject to be encountered in scholarly writing, and poetry was not the only artistic discipline in which the nineteenth century fascination with older stories and their imaginative powers can be found. The pictoral arts have a fair share of discussion material to offer as well, with their mythological women and demonesses as central characters. The Pre-Raphaelites and their artistic heirs left an impressive oeuvre behind with dangerous and dominant women often as main figures. Dante Rossetti’s “Persephone” is famous, as is John William Waterhouse’s “Circe”. Real women, the figure of the prostitute for instance, were often depicted in mythologised settings as well. Was this ongoing fascination with different and other realms a construct to transform contemporary issues into something they could handle?

1.2.2 The Subconscious at Work

A word that has many appropriate meanings in this context is Otherness. This is one of the functions of mythology after all. Elements that cannot properly be fitted in the fabric of social conventions and as such render the individual uneasy because man’s boundaries are challenged are labelled as different, Other, but they cannot be entirely ignored either. The use of mythology allows for the creation of a clear distinction between the real world and another, hidden and safe world, clearly separate from the one the spectator, reader or artist lives in, a world of invention and
imagination where these subjects that are too sensitive to be faced directly can safely be banished to, creating a safe space to discuss them or leave them open for interpretation, hidden behind metaphor to guarantee distance. This ploy offers protection, perhaps, against society’s reaction, but certainly protection against one’s own inner inhibitions. The individual’s own boundaries are as instrumental in the process of myth-creation as society’s are, even though the two determine each other. Myth-creation should here, perhaps, be read as myth-use, but in another context creation is correct as well. The image of the femme fatal has become a myth of her own, after all. The subconscious needs a playground but the moral beliefs ingrained in a person from birth on by education and society in general need to be taken into account. The realm of the fantastic does not only offer grand metaphors then for what is desired and sparks the interest but must not be said directly lest one wishes to avoid scandal and scorn, but it also allows to hide the inner self from what mentally would constitute as being harmful.

A similar mechanism is noticed by Elisabeth Bronfen, as she encounters it at work in the many representations in both literature and paintings of dead women. She writes extensively about this in Over Her Dead Body. Those attributes and characteristics that are difficult to directly understand, explain or be faced are kept contained in the sphere of the mythological, in this case the representation of a dead woman, but much more than meets the eye hides behind these pictures. She uses Freud’s theories of the subconscious to explain this iconographic representation and apparent fascination for the dead female body, and emphasises his often repeated explanation that our subconscious simply cannot imagine its own death as it is an idea too painful to conceive and therefore needs an object that can be seen as Other, not self, to give an outlet to this anxiety. The theme of the three caskets is instrumental here. That which our conscious mind cannot handle directly, is in our subconscious converted into something beautiful, its opposite. This allows man to perceive himself as the victor. (Bronfen, 62) In King Lear, Freud explains, the king leaves the battlefield with the dead Cordelia in his arms whilst this really must be understood as a metaphor for Cordelia in the role of a goddess of death leading the king off the battlefield, yet such a thought would be too frightening to hold. Therefore the mind inverts this idea into something it can handle and which asserts man’s position of power. The idea of the three caskets definitely will also be relevant in the discussion of Lee-Hamilton’s “The New Medusa”, but now on a more general note it can be concluded that myth provides the individual with a metaphor to hide those subjects that are too frightening behind and thus put the subconscious at ease. Mythology allows for the creation of a safe zone to protect the consciousness from ideas that would be too painful for the mind to embrace at face value. Conflict between what the mind has learnt to understand as true and absolute to be able to survive in the social reality, and what still occupies man yet defies every previous notion is
handled by creating a distance between the real world and the world of mythology. Everything that challenges the mind, in this case sexually outspoken women, is placed in this mythological environment.

As I indicated at the very beginning of my argument, both paintings and poetry of the pre-Raphaelites frequently use mythological places and characters. Bullen notices how by the end of the 1850’s female sexuality in both painting and poetry is increasingly depicted in the mythologised forms of on the one hand Guenevere, the queen known for her adultery, and on the other hand Dante Rossetti’s famous temptress from his painting “Bocca baciata”. He observes a struggle between the spirit and the flesh, moral values on the one hand and desires on the other hand. How is this constant flux between the wish and need to conform and the corporeal desires expressed? According to Bullen, through the frequent return to the depiction of dangerous and fatal women. (4) Mythology serves to channel what is desired and wished for yet feared at the same time. It allows the artist to express what he wishes to give a voice to, yet fears to do so because it belongs to the domain of the forbidden. The sexualised woman enters Victorian culture quite violently, according to Bullen, in the 1850’s, “and the discourses in which she appeared were always excited, or heated, and confused.” (Bullen, 49) The representation of the body then was always “demonized either as an object of delicious but guilty pleasure or as an object of degradation and rejection.” (Bullen, 49) Again, Lee-Hamilton’s “New Medusa” will illustrate this perfectly.

As Bullen himself continues to explain and as John Maynard explores in much more detail in his study about the connection between sexuality and religion, the constant ambiguity between desire and guilt has always been present in Christian culture. The experience of sexuality and religion have always been coupled and Christianity has done its best to incorporate sexuality in religion. (Maynard, 6) The myth of woman as man’s subordinate in the sexual culture, can be traced back to religion as well because “the patriarchal system, ... both creates and is empowered by a parallel sexual system which is made [...] central to ritual and belief.” (Maynard, 22) It is no miracle then that the sexual woman is deemed to be unnatural and always exudes an air of danger. Religion itself has supported this discourse since the middle ages. “In some sense the religion has appropriated the mystery of female sexual power for a male end. The female’s power in nature is ignored or slighted and attention is redirected to a male power above, as if to make males the central creative force in the universe.” (Maynard, 23) This discourse instilled in people over the course of several centuries in combination with the specific social, artistic and economic conditions of the nineteenth century then, has created this always ambiguous form of expression that relies on mythology to depict woman in her natural state in which she can be a sexual creature, even though
her sexuality needs to be contained or demonised. A woman who demands to exert her power goes against what has been inculcated by society in society, after all. She has been banished from regular discourse, and not only that, but she has been forbidden to participate in creating it. Freud’s motif of the three caskets comes back on the stage again here. That which is most feared must be transformed into something the mind can cope with. Lee-Hamilton’s Medusa needs to be killed, but what we really read is how she has devoured man instead. Her sexuality is the force that drives the poem to its climax and to keep that powerful female force quelled, she is forced into the terrain of the terrible, mythical creature. Man ends as the victor because the alternative cannot be conceived by the Victorian mind.

The big word still needs to fall of course. The fallen woman above all has become the representation of unbridled female sexuality in the nineteenth century context. She herself has become a mythologised concept, glorified and abhorred at the same time. Her representations differ very much in nature but one thing is consistent. She is a woman who has transgressed the boundaries of what is expected from women and ineluctably this is connected to her sexual nature. The first fallen woman was Eve of course, which proves once again how strongly entwined religion is with the discourse on sexuality. Still, Bullen asks to make a distinction between the fallen woman and the sexualised woman. Whereas the presentation of the fallen woman “is one which takes place on the margins of the bourgeois home”, whose “myth is the product of the contemporary society”, the sexualised woman “is rarely portrayed as a contemporary phenomenon, and her myth is located in societies remote in time or distance.” (Bullen, 50 - 51) In the representation of the fallen woman despair, suicide or an opulence of riches is involved, having contributed to the creation of the myth of the fallen woman. Her myth is one of fatality, an expression of transgressing thoughts and unmistakably the unspeakable other. (Bullen, 60) She has definitely been marginalised from society and purged from it. When it comes to the sexualised woman though, temporal and spatial boundaries have been put in place. She does not directly belong to the Victorian culture as the setting makes clear, but she certainly inspires curiosity and fascination in her audience. (Bullen, 51) Danger and transgression are implied as well and they all exhibit characteristics of female desire that was not accepted in contemporary culture. The sexualised woman is even more forbidden than the fallen woman and mythology offers a safe route to portray her and continue to explore this subject.

1.2.3 Women Transgressing Social Reality
There are many other functions mythology serves and it is a discussion that still has not come to an end. More sociologically and less psychologically inspired, myth simply offers “a medium through which the modern condition [can] be expressed, understood and confronted.” (Ellis, 388) Then I have reached my first point again which I skipped earlier, where I suggested that mythology also offers protection against society’s scorn. Words which could never be formulated in an acceptable way when placed in a realistic setting suddenly gain the capacity to reach their intended audience without shocking them too deeply when disguised in different stories. Eliza Keary’s critics painted her poetry off as something trivial for ladies. In this light, we may ask ourselves if she succeeded in that endeavour and if perhaps she did not dress up her words in too soft cloths, as her poetry was laughed away as simple and labelled domestic. Then again, had she retold the story of “Little Seal-Skin” undisguised, the message would have been hard to ignore and a storm of protest or censure would quite possibly have followed.

Isobel Armstrong wrote how the use of mythology in Victorian poetry was not an easy process for the author, as myths’ variable contents allow “only certain readings” for “particular subject positions.” It also becomes a “site of change” and a “means to ... power.” (Ellis, 388) Paul Ellis himself then argues how Keary used myth more as an ideological exploration in how myths construct realities instead of as a reproduction of a socio-economic and political reality. Through myth, he writes, she offers those who have no voice a way to express their opinion. Myth explores “the means by which this denial of voice is achieved, by whom and for what purposes; and they also suggest how myth may enable the voiceless to speak about their lives.” (389)

Ellis is right about two things. Keary does indeed use myth more to take a closer look at an ideological system than as a mirror of the social reality, and through her use of mythology she does offer a voice to the woman who otherwise lives a repressed and mostly silent life. Women do not speak directly though. The reader learns about her fate and yearnings through an impersonal narrator who sometimes allows her to speak a word directly, but what she really feels and how she suffers is told us by a narrator. The impression of a fairy tale for children is always kept alive, but the serious message lies underneath. The poem following “Little Seal-Skin”, “The Legend of Thora”, also uses mythological elements in a similar manner and helps to clarify this idea. Here it is only through an element of fantasy that Thora has a voice to speak and be remembered, because after she was silently killed by the jealous mountain troll, who would not let her make her own choice for a lover, it is only because one curl from her head managed to escape and be a testimony of her sad fate. The curl is carried around the world on the wind and thus her story is told. Mythology allows women to speak in Keary’s poetry then, but never directly. It is only thanks to
this mythological system implemented in her poetry that they gain a voice. Perhaps she was too careful and disguised her message too well, but Webster did not do that. In “Circe”, mythology works differently. Circe addresses the reader directly and mythology functions as the setting, not the device. It is of course the setting which allows woman, embodied by Circe here, to speak freely, but not as with Keary where Thora only can speak through magical elements, a deus ex machina of sorts. Circe does not need magic to tell her story. Formally, she is freer than Keary’s women, she can tell her story directly. Keary adds an extra barrier between the sea-woman and the audience in the form of a narrator who tells her story in her stead. Thora is even held captive literally. Her voice can only be heard through a sad testimony of one curl of her hair that is left free to roam the earth.

On the level beyond the metaphor, both Keary and Webster’s women are all captured by the same conventions. They are all kept bound in the world of storytelling, so while mythology gives them a freedom they otherwise could not have, it also holds them bound. Armstrong’s words are very much true. It is the transformed reality of the myth that gives Circe and the other women their power. As nineteenth century women, they would never be able to speak as loudly as they do now.

This tells us how myth may be used by authors to give a voice to opinions that otherwise have to remain unspoken, both for women and for men. This also reaches back to the concerns Angela Leighton expresses. Women have been pushed to the background of spiritual matters. As writers, they have to legitimise themselves to be recognised as such. (Leighton, 3) The domain of the intellectual belonged to man, the material of the domestic environment to woman. Women were, according to de Lauretis, “excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it.” (Michie, 4) Women were “excluded from a realm implicitly defined as masculine because [women were] imprisoned within a limiting definition of femininity.” (Michie, 4) The criticism Keary received on the publication of her poetry is a good example of how men attempted to continually cast women out of this male world to the sphere of the domestic by capturing her in the discourse associated with women. Men were considered “the central creative force of the universe”, and women had to find a way to fit into this world. They had to gain a terrain of their own in more than one way then. First, they had to find a place for themselves in this male world. Then they also had to find a definition of femininity whilst being forced to partly abandon that femininity so as to be able to function in what was male space. Keary and Webster managed to create female characters with a strong wish to experience their femininity through the use of mythology. Femininity is forced to exist in the “other” realm again, as there seems to be no other way to reconcile society with a strong, independent woman, but at least mythology can function for female authors in a similar manner as it does for male. Here, woman gets a voice.
Mythology serves several functions then. What it certainly does is offer an alternative way for the Victorian artists to sketch their own social reality. Myths work as a mirror of their society. Those subjects that cannot be talked about, either by society or by the subject’s own inhibitions, namely doubt and guilt, can be portrayed thanks to mythology. Women also can gain power through the employment of mythology where they otherwise have no voice. Generally, mythology offers an escape route but at the same time confronts with those unpleasant subjects much more effectively than an undisguised portrayal of reality could do. Sexually strong women are almost without an exception placed in a world of myths because they have no right to exist in the Victorian society. They inspire fear but also curiosity in their audience. For women, a mythological world offers a means to speak out or be much more liberated than they can be in the in the social hierarchy.

I hope this short overview has also given a first basic idea of the different conceptions the four poems I have chosen to analyse have of female sexuality. Their differences will allow me to explore some contrasting strategies and the differences in how women were portrayed by both genders. Keary and Webster will both prove to take a stand against the constraints the male society lays upon female sexuality. Tennyson and Lee-Hamilton then are the male voices I will compare with the female authors I look at. Whereas Tennyson’s “Mermaid” will prove to kindle double feelings on some subjects - as is the case with some of his other poems as well - Lee-Hamilton’s “Medusa” will prove quite revealing in respect of the male narrator and his role in woman’s oppression. Comparing and contrasting these authors’ stances is not my only objective. I also wish to delve deeper and find out more about the Victorians’s attitude towards this subject as well as symbols and strategies that were used to express or talk about female sexuality. Taking a closer look at the role mythology plays in this was a first step, my analysis of all four poems and the theoretical questions this brings forth the next.
2. Eliza Keary and “Little Seal-Skin”: Not So Domesticated?

2.1 Keary: Woman Writer and Woman

Why did I choose Eliza Keary, a poet who has received attention by feminist critics only in so far that she contributed to giving a voice to a far underrepresented category of authors? I will answer that question by quoting Angela Leighton, when she defends her own selection of female poets in *Victorian Women Poets*. Leighton chooses to include two particular writers’ work because “it constantly sets women’s imaginative experience at cross purposes with social and sexual morality.” (Leighton, 3) Admittedly, her explanation justifies a selection that possibly oversteps the temporal boundaries of what is historically seen as Victorian whereas mine wishes to explain why I picked a poet who is not so well-known at all today and leans much closer to obscurity, instead of one comfortably established in the canon, however, the argument remains the same. This is true for Keary as well. Known best as an author of children’s stories in collaboration with her older sister, she has also published one volume of poetry. (Lustig) After negative criticism, she probably never published poetry again. Writing as a woman she definitely fulfils these conditions as well. She addresses the fate of women in nineteenth century England and confronts it with what women want and deserve. Keary definitely dares to challenge the established patriarchal order in her work.

Leighton explains why it is important to take a closer look at these female poets. In a world where femininity was protected and placed on a pedestal by excluding women from all affairs of the world, a female sensibility was disabled and a female insensibility emerged. What was meant to make women icons of a pure and virginal womanhood, closed them off from their own sexuality and eventually gendered identity. Writing from the heart became for women a matter of writing against the heart in order to be able to gain recognition. (Leighton, 3) This makes studying female poetry not an easy business. Not only in male poetry about women is ventriloquism at work then, but also in female poetry this must be kept in mind. What do women really think? How do they experience the world? Do they write from the perspective that is culturally forced on them or are they liberated enough to have broken free from these constraints? These questions must be asked once and again when confronted with this literature and will be formulated and answered several times in what follows.

Inferred from what we know now and will become clear in the next part, choosing Keary is not that illogical a decision at all then, in the end. As Lustig writes in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Keary belongs to that category of poets who has begun to receive an increasing amount
of critical attention in the last couple of decades. One must keep in mind then what Cora Kaplan said about feminist writing: not only has criticism of this nature been essential to discover the works of women poets which are as valuable as those of several better-known male authors, finding out about the existence of these women and what they had to say has also helped shape a better understanding of the Victorian female identity and world view. Keary is an interesting presence in this context. She was not a traditional victim of Victorian domesticity as she never got married and as such, never was a conventional dependent housewife. She lived on her writing and probably travelled in and outside Europe with her sister whom she helped with research and cared for as the latter was chronically ill. (Lustig) In studying the presence or, equally important to interpret, absence of female sexuality in Victorian literature then, it is more than useful to include a voice of such a woman: forgotten by the canon despite being very outspoken.

“Little Seal-skin” is the opening poem of the volume Little Seal-skin and Other Poems, published in 1874. Concerned with women’s plight and place in the world and embedded in a mythological setting in general, the poem is a good representative and strong opening of the volume. As mentioned above, Keary and her sister’s stories always were steeped in mythology and fantasy and Eliza Keary’s solo poetry effort is no exception to that rule. (Ellis, 388) It is this opening poem I have selected to discuss. Written by a woman about a woman, it does exactly what Leighton describes in the quote given earlier. Its imagery and the story it tells confirm the suppression of female sexuality by men while challenging these binds by giving this woman a voice. Keary does not do this directly though but rather offers the reader a look at her suffering under this captivity. The story ends well for the woman as she is returned her freedom by an undisguised escape from domesticity. Contrary to Augusta Webster in her poem “Circe”, which I will discuss later, Keary does not offer a direct voice to her female protagonist, an interesting fact to keep in mind on itself. She does liberate her female protagonist at the end of the poem and offers her the freedom of the world, but it must be noted that this happens only by the good graces of the man who held her captive and not through her own devices. Keary did not publish any other poetry in a similar form or with a similar subject matter to that of Seal-Skin after this first poetry volume, and it is quite possible that this was due to the negative criticism it received. It was described as “lady help”, according to Ellis “an unofficial seal to domesticity”. (387) It is a pity then that her poetry never received the criticism it should have elicited and never managed to provoke a serious contemporary reaction from her male audience and thus, was quietly forgotten while she addresses such important themes. Today however, she is slowly but surely being re-evaluated and recognised as a Victorian poet important in her own right. This fact may help to strengthen the belief in the
existence of the strong independent Victorian woman, whose existence is often forgotten, and may help create a broader horizon for feminism.

2.2 “Little Seal-Skin”

“Little Seal-Skin” is a very interesting poem for feminists and scholars in general to study, but due to the subject matter it is not surprising that especially feminists, apart from cultural historians, showed an interest in the poem. (Lustig) I wish to study the imagery but also the attitude the male and the female character display towards one another. Remarkable about this poem is that when the time comes that the woman gets the chance to choose between her domestic duties, including the care of her children, and her free life in the sea, she chooses the second one. She throws off the chains imposed on her without a second thought. This fact emphasises her unwillingness to be caught in her role as mother and housewife and stresses that she is held a captive without any say in the matter. Water is universally known as the female element, symbol of life and life bearing, the element where women are in power. According to the story of the poem, the men and women of the sea come on shore one day every year. There they drop their seal-skins to explore the land.

Is this compulsion to visit the land a kind of curiosity? Does the sea-woman seek out what the land has to offer? Land and sea are clearly separated in this poem. The sea belongs to the woman and is connected to her freedom there, the land, on the other hand, is man’s domain and mostly stands symbol for the terrain in which he enslaves the woman with the chains of domesticity. It is curious that the fisherman tells us that all the other sea-women and men have returned to the sea already, except she. He too wonders why she has not left yet. Ellis supports the thesis that she wonders about man’s terrain and explores it, yet the fisherman shamelessly abuses this by capturing her. (Ellis, 390) She is without worries and the land does not seem to bear her ill will, nor is it overbearing in itself. Instead, she plays about in the “sweet sunshine / Amongst the cornfields, with cornflowers, / Wild roses and woodbine” (Keary, 2) It is man that transforms the land in a prison for the sea-woman, the land is not hostile of itself. The link with nineteenth century public societal life is very clear. Education and work are not harmful for a woman in itself, it is only because man excludes women that they do not belong in those domains.

The sea-woman is not meant to be kept by the land. By nightfall the sea-men and women return to the sea, “and they are gone”. (Keary, 2) The fisherman, however, steals her seal-skin, effectively preventing her return to the sea and enslaving her, despite obviously letting the reader know that he understands he should not do that, for it is not what the woman wants. Still he hides the skin,
enchanted by her beauty and wishing to keep her as his own. He hides the skin in “A secret hole in the thatch” (Keary, 4) which is according to Ellis a vaginal image which suggests that man, “in order to contain woman according to his desire, has hidden the means by which woman may discover her authentic identity.” (Ellis, 391) This prevents her from returning to her own domain.

There is more going on though. The sea-woman agrees to marry the fisherman and bear his children, because as long as she does not have her skin she cannot return to the sea. She asks “Who is there will take me in?” (Keary, 3) as apparently, it is impossible for the sea-woman to live alone on the land. A woman needs a man to survive in his realm, and her own world is blocked by him. Translated to reality, women were both locked out of the male world but also kept from their own identity. Their sexuality was labelled as unnatural and the pursuing of it was cause for a medical examination. They were allowed to blossom only in the confines of marriage, not as separate beings. Man holds woman a captive in his house efficiently then. His domain is constructed so that she cannot live there on her own and is forced to find his protection and become his wife. What does this mean, when translated to the Victorian society? It is true that it was expected of women to marry. Earning an income as a woman alone certainly was not easy. Once married, a respectable woman was to give up her own identity and sexuality. Her sexuality was allowed to exist only in function of her fertility and by extension, the continuity of society. She is to become the Angel in the House, a term we are so familiar with thanks to Coventry Patmore’s poem.

Sexual pleasure was not denied to women. Orgasm was allowed or encouraged, but indeed only as long as it helped to conceive. (Mason, 200) Uncontrolled sexual activity or an excess of sexual energy in women still was seen as dangerous. Hysteria and uterine affections were connected to excess sexual activity, a condition labelled as nymphomania for which the most diverse and often vague treatments were prescribed. (Groneman, 3) The Victorian society did not keep women as ignorant about sexual matters as popular belief has it, as stimulation of the clitoris was known to incite pleasure in women and this was not discouraged, but it was kept under control and limited. The female identity and her sexuality were as such still seen as separate entities and not allowed to merge. Just as the sea-woman’s sexuality is kept under the fisherman’s control - he has hidden her seal-skin under his own roof - woman’s sexual identity was only allowed to exist under man’s supremacy.

Why all these contradictory statements? Groneman explains this by the changing social and economic reality which also had its influence on women and their roles in society. No longer static elements in the community, women began to demand more autonomy in the form of education,
women’s rights and employment. Science at the same time, since the late eighteenth century, had fixed woman’s role in society as a domestic one by connecting her nature and character to her reproductive organs, thus determining her sexuality as passive. This means that there were grounds for behavioural transgressions to be considered as medical conditions and classified as marginal behaviour. Not only were there tensions between women’s presumed nature and actions in the social reality, these contradictions also existed when it came to women’s sexuality. To fit their passive role as mothers and thus protectors of the social order as they passed on morals and virtues to the next generations, their sexuality was assumed to be subdued and existing only in as much as marriage aroused it at the husband’s stimulation. However, contrary reactions and the existence of female desire not connected to their husbands was observed as well, which gave rise to on the one hand medical treatises attempting to map deviations in female sexual behaviour and on the other hand a recognition of the existence of a female sexual nature. (Groneman, 3) Still, the necessity of keeping this within bounds was always emphasised, as Mason shows: “It was sometimes said that women are less urgent in their sexuality than men, but quite a number of writers recognized (and a few lamented) the effect of social convention in this, especially premaritally.” (Mason, 196) There is then, a discrepancy between social evolution and the wish to preserve the morals of the past, resulting in a double and problematic attitude towards the female sexuality. Denying its existence was near impossible, yet the belief still reigned that it needed to be contained, if not for medical reasons, then for the protection of the social order.

Exactly to protect the social order, the sea-woman’s sexuality is contained as well. Without her in a domestic position, the children would not have been born and after she leaves the order in the house is disrupted. “Wife! wife! why don’t you come? / The children want you, and I’ve come home”, (Keary, 8) the fisherman exclaims when he comes home and finds the children crying on the ground, not tended to. The fisherman is the man in the house who works, the woman stays at home to look after the children. Without her, who will look after them? She is not happy as a housewife though. She had to give up the sea, which serves as a metaphor for her own identity, to be able to look after the children. This is what society asks of her and she works in its service now, preserving its values in her progeny to ensure society’s continuity. After the fisherman has freed her seal-skin, he hopes she will stay to look after the house, him and the children. She has left though, not fulfilling the hopes of her children that she would take them with her. The choice is clear. Either woman keeps her self intact, or she gives it up to be tamed by man and his world. There does not seem to be a middle way according to Keary. ““Mammy’s gone, Daddy,” said Harry -- / “Gone into the sea; / She’ll never come back to carry / Tired Baby Willie.”” (Keary, 8) Despite the pleas of the children, she does not wait to take them with her.
Still, it is not necessarily man personally who keeps woman’s identity imprisoned but society and the role society asks woman to fulfil. This means a construction of morals and ideals developed over a much longer period of time. Perhaps it is the suddenly fast evolution that the Victorian society underwent that brought these issues to light. The fisherman doesn’t know that the sea-woman is so unhappy all those years on the land, nor does she know it is the fisherman who has hidden her seal-skin away. Once he learns of her unhappiness he takes out the seal-skin for her and enables her to leave. Her choice to marry him was not out of love but out of necessity, as I mentioned before, just as much as her stay on the land is. Considering the roles society imposed on women to safeguard its established order, it is not as much the individual of the man that deserves blame but the entire patriarchal structure and it is this structure that Keary challenges in this poem.

The sea-woman is a strong and independent woman forced by the system to fulfil a role. She throws away everything to regain her freedom from the moment she is offered the opportunity. However, a few additional points must be made. Keary’s complaint loses strength because the sea-woman has no voice to speak for herself. Everything we learn is through the words of an impartial narrator, something which in fact only emphasises her captivity and does not support her liberation. Even though the mythological landscape of her story allows Keary to build up a strong metaphor, namely the strong contrast between the sea as woman’s dominion and the land as the patriarchal social structure, it also empowered her critics to ignore the complaint and dismiss the poem as literary insignificant and no more than a children’s story. As in so many cases, here too woman’s social role and sexuality are tightly interwoven. Symbols like the water, the white seal-skin and the hiding place of the seal-skin bear strong sexual connotations while the poem as a whole is a, albeit very soft-spoken, attack on woman’s containment and suppressed identity and in correlation, sexuality. This only goes to show again how complicated the relationship between the two is.
3. Augusta Webster and “Circe”: Women with Voices

3.1 Two Women, Two Poets, Two Different Voices: Keary and Webster

Two women, two poets, both of them concerned with the fates of women as society keeps them detained to the kitchen and children, and so they are alike yet in other aspects also very different from each other. Webster is the second female author I am going to discuss and so an analysis of her profile invokes the same concerns regarding the Victorian society that came to the surface in the discussion of Keary. I am referring to the realisation of the problems a woman encountered when trying to establish herself in a domain overtly designated as male. At the same time, she had to be able to reconcile this with her womanhood and find a way to express her identity as a woman. Both authors lived in this world and faced the same prejudices and hardships. They wrote from that experience and both of them found, in their poetry, ways to break some of the chains that keep woman captured. Still, some important differences between Webster and Keary will come to light.

First of all, there are differences between their positions and occupations in society and these lead, almost inevitably, to different reflections and portrayals of women and freedom for women in their poetry. When looked at from a biographical point of view and while I am fully aware of the dangers of a biographical reading in that it may be too limiting by attempting to fit everything into the details of chronology, these differences seem a logical consequence due to both women’s different experiences. As mentioned briefly in the previous part, Keary’s sea-woman is not as free as Webster’s Circe. Circe speaks for herself and complains bitterly about her fate whereas the sea-woman’s experiences are related to the reader by an impersonal narrator. It is a fairy tale told to the reader, one in which she has no direct voice to speak to us. I have linked the poems to their authors’ own circumstances and possible reactions from the target audience to explain these different narrators. To do that, it is necessary that I first briefly recapitulate reports of Eliza Keary’s life and connect it to the poem. Keary’s “Little Seal-Skin” seems less emancipated than “Circe” does, and not only Webster’s involvement in the strife for women’s rights but perhaps other biographical elements too may explain this.

In “Little Seal-Skin”, it is possible to find several analogies to Keary’s own life, making the poem a direct comment on her own experiences. In the previous section I looked at the poem mostly independently from Keary as a person, now I wish to compare her life to the story of the poem. She never got married and managed to earn money by writing as mentioned before, living as a mostly independent woman. Still, she was very familiar with the domestic life because of her role as a housekeeper for her nephews for many years. (Ellis, 388) Having known an independent life as
a writer away from such duties, the sea, the domain of the feminine, in “Little Seal-Skin” can be
read as a reflection of her own state of freedom, the possibility to dream up other places and
travelling more than we could have guessed. The metaphor continues to be valid. If this part of the
poem serves as a reflection of her own freedom, the land that keeps the sea-woman a prisoner in the
fisherman’s house is just as much a symbol of her state of imprisonment in the domestic chores in
her nephews’ house, opposed to the sea symbolising the freedom being a writer offers her. In that
case, it must be understood how difficult it was for women to be writers and be allowed that
freedom, because creativity and everything belonging to the intellectual domain were not meant for
women to be enjoyed or, indeed, experienced. Instead, marriage was promoted which effectively
cought women in the sphere of the domestic.

If one accepts the poem as a retelling of Keary’s own longings with a happy ending, it would
explain the impartial, unknown narrator as well. When writing about oneself, this is the ideal device
for storytelling if one does not mean to reveal too much personal sentiment and if one wants to
avoid explicitly calling a specific situation by name. It is a mechanism of protecting others as well
as one self. The fairy tale offers the ideal way out for a metaphor, guaranteeing anonymity.
Webster’s narrator in “Circe” on the other hand, is Circe herself. She explains her situation in her
own voice, characterising herself as an independent woman. In “Little Seal-Skin” the reader can
only infer the protagonist’s desires from what the narrator tells us. Circe constitutes a much stronger
character then. Contrary to Keary, Webster knew of woman’s plight and troubles as an active
member of the suffrage movement. She may not have written so much about her own situation
specifically, as well as of women’s fate in general. As Robinson writes, women like Webster
“looked to others profiting from their labors more than they would themselves.” (Robinson, 3)
Therefore, Circe serves as a voice for all women who are kept repressed in marriage and societal
beliefs and not just as a voice for a very personal account. If the sea-woman had been speaking
directly for Keary, it would have been a risky position and this explains the presence of an unknown
narrator. Not only that, but a personalised account would have diminished the poem’s expressive
powers as the audience would have been less inclined to translate the events to a social reality wider
than that described by the poet. As Ellis pointed out, Keary wrote for a mostly female audience. Her
fairy tale poems manage to capture that audience and allow them to draw parallels with their own
situation and life.

That is one of the major differences between both poems. Because Circe speaks for herself, and
the reader can therefore not be deceived by a narrator, she is a very interesting character to take a
closer look at. While both poets protest against a similar matter, they do so in different voices. Of
course, “Little Seal-Skin” remains valuable as a complaint against the Victorian double standards and moral beliefs that served as justifications for the need to keep women out of all matters worldly, but “Circe” gives, perhaps, a more direct view. Webster’s position as an activist concerned about the fate of many women differs from Keary’s as a woman who writes mostly out of her own experience. She may not have had the direct sources and contacts Webster had, and that may explain their different approaches.

3.2 Webster and Circe: Women Who Know What They Want

Contrary to Keary, Augusta Webster was a married woman. Despite this, she never was a housewife in the traditional Victorian sense. Instead she represented the new kind of woman that emerged in the nineteenth century, a woman who stood up for her rights and was influenced by a rapidly evolving economy in which it was no longer possible to keep such a significant group of the population confined to the domestic sphere and away from outdoors life. Standing at the threshold of change had its advantages, but for reforms to succeed, the period also required active and outspoken women. Webster definitely was one of them. She was familiar with the problems women encountered in society on a level that surpassed theory. Keary may or may not have followed the chronicles of woman’s fight for liberation in the form of equal rights to men, as her sister to whom she was very close kept herself informed about these matters (Ellis, 3), but Webster was an activist herself, engaged in matters such as the suffrage movement and educational programmes for girls especially. She also strove for women to gain the right to be awarded a university degree and was a member of the London School Board from 1879 until 1892. (O’Gorman, 450) Contrary to Keary, she did not stand on the sidelines but in the middle of the action.

Webster did not only write poetry but also offered articles for publication to The Examiner, which were collected as A Housewife’s Opinions in 1879. (O’Gorman, 450) The title of this collection is rather symptomatic of the age’s problems and Webster’s progressive position. A housewife was not supposed to have opinions, hence the irony in the title. What is it that makes Webster’s poetry so interesting and challenging to look at? Especially the duality comprised in the title of these bundled articles is part of the answer. Bonnie J. Robinson phrases the solution to this ambiguous matter very well when she explains the tensions when reading nineteenth century women poets’ works, much in the same vein as Leighton did but her words will prove especially reflective of Webster’s position and “Circe’s” contents. “These women, then,” Robinson writes, “wrote with and of tension - between high expectations and modest hopes for change: “Grant in a
27 million years at most” (Amy Levy, “A Ballad of Religion and Marriage,” 1. 25). A great deal of the tension they labored under occurred from the very fact that they wrote with individual voices, writing poems that, in many ways, could be grouped with trends in male poetry. Consequently, they contradict female stereotypes by resembling their male contemporaries - in the ways that their poetry celebrates the individual, explores alternative religions, transgresses or transcends moral values, or offers Utopian visions.” (Robinson, 3) Not only does this quotation reflect the problem of a woman’s identity in a man’s world, something Webster certainly succeeded in doing, it also underlines those subjects that are important motifs in “Circe”. By giving Circe a voice, she is portrayed as a very individual person with outspoken opinions. Circe definitely transgresses. As a woman she is open about her sexuality. She challenges conventions by speaking out loud about her wish for transgression, much as Webster herself did by writing and publishing articles. This Circe is very much like her creator. Just as Webster gave a voice to women in her non-fictional works, Circe speaks of these problems too, and just as women in Victorian society were victims of moral values, Circe too is a woman who is a slave to men and their lusters, her own sexuality dependent on what she is allowed.

“For women poets, writing on Greek myths was helpfully transgressive - culturally, Greek language and literature was the preserve of men for much of the century - enabling intervention in contemporary gender and sexual politics” (O’Gorman, 450). Everything Circe says, can be read as a comment on Webster’s own world. “Augusta Webster’s ‘Circe’ (1870) allows a Greek female’s voice, marginalized by traditional history/myth, to be imaginatively recreated” (O’Gorman, 450). In the Odyssey, Circe recognises Odysseus’ superiority as a hero and a man of high status and as such, nobility. In this poem that certainly is not the case, on the contrary even. She describes the men on Odysseus’ ship as hypocritical, in that they first bemoan their fates and that of their poor women and children far away at home, but allow their animalistic instincts to take over the next, all concerns forgotten. (Lines 142 - 168) She blames them for trying to bend her will and fulfil their wishes, probably of a sexual nature:

Too cruel, am I? And the silly beasts,
Crowding around me when I pas their way,
Glower on me and, although they love me still,
(With their poor sorts of love such as they could)
Call wrath and vengeance to their humid eyes
To scare me into mercy, or creep near
With piteous fawnings, supplicating bleats.
At the same time she expresses her own sexual desires and decries her fate as a lonely woman without a lover to share her passions, but on a more equal footing than Odysseus and his men have in mind. Enchantress and a famous and fatal woman as how she may be known as in the Victorian consciousness, she stresses her status as a very human woman: “Oh me, I am a woman, not a god;” (Webster, 65). Even though Webster has used a figure from popular mythology, taking a distance from reality in this way, she still stresses this fact and makes Circe a figure much more real than the Circe from the Odyssey, frighteningly real from a Victorian perspective. Just like Webster, she wishes to claim rights that go straight against everything patriarchal culture still upholds. Not only with the figure of Circe does Webster break into the male domain however, but also with the form of the poem.

3.3 Individuality and Inner Conflicts from a Woman’s Mind: The Dramatic Monologue

3.3.1 The Form: The Dramatic Monologue

“Circe” is not Webster’s most often discussed poem, that honour probably goes to “The Castaway”, yet it has points enough to be discussed in depth. One of them is how Webster employs the form of the dramatic monologue to enable Circe to speak directly to the audience. It is unusual in nineteenth century literature, for a female protagonist to speak out, especially for a woman who does not in any way conform to the values conventionally attributed and looked for in women. This makes Webster rather unique, as Sutphin points out, and “Circe” is not the only poem in which she gives an unconventional woman a voice. (Sutphin, 514) “A Castaway” features a prostitute who gets the chance to speak and “Medea in Athens” is another poem in which a sexually strong and desiring woman speaks out. In Eugene Lee-Hamilton’s “The New Medusa”, the next poem I will discuss, Medusa is without a doubt the figure around whom everything revolves, who stands constantly in the spotlights and on whom the audience’s attention is focussed without waning for one minute. She is more interesting than the narrator and main character and is the constant focus point of the reader’s interest. The story is narrated by a man, however, and the narration of the story is skewed in her disadvantage. Keary presents the audience with a woman who does want her freedom and throws off the chains of domestication at the first chance she gets but she has no direct speaking right. Circe, however, does.
The dramatic monologue is a form practised regularly in Victorian poetry. It has even become a distinctive genre of the era, called “the flagship” of the era by E. Warwick Slinn. (Slinn, 80) He describes the dramatic monologue as a hybrid genre drawing from techniques from poetry, with its expressive language, the drama, the form of the speaker who is not the author, and from narrative with its attention for mimetic detail and retrospective structuring. (Slinn, 80 - 81) “Circe” definitely fits in this category. ‘Circe’s rich language draws the reader in, and characteristic of the dramatic monologue is her attempt to persuade the reader and make him understand what she thinks and feels. The speaker is indeed not the author, and the mythological setting and story line enlarges the distance and makes sure that the reader would not mistake Circe for Webster. Circe does, however, reflect Webster’s own ideas about female sexuality and women’s place in society. The dramatic monologue is the perfect form to do this and get the audience to sympathise with the character then. Langbaum has conducted extensive research to uncover the audience’s role and reaction in reading the dramatic monologue, and he speaks about the power of the dramatic monologue to inspire sympathy in the reader. How does this work? It is the dynamic characteristics of the dramatic monologue that is responsible for this, especially “those which separate speaker from poet and thence reader from speaker” (Slinn, 82). This distance is what allows the public to sympathise with the speaker, in which this sympathy takes the form of sympathetic imagination, helping the public understand unfamiliar perspectives, and not sympathy in the form of fellow-feeling or moral support. (Slinn, 82)

What does this mean for Circe’s message? Her words are very persuasive and she does her utmost best to try and play on the audience’s emotions. It is not hard to imagine the reader to sympathise with her. Her arguments are reasonable and her desire for a lover to break the monotony and loneliness of her days a moving plea. The distance between poet and character enables the audience to relax. It is not expected to pronounce a moral judgement on a mythological character and this creates a feeling of safety. It is this safety which allows them to feel sympathy as their own society and, by extension, values are strictly separated from the character’s. How can “Circe” reach its goal then? It is this distance which allows Webster to deliver critique, yet this same distance works in the other direction as well. But does understanding not pave the way for acceptance? If the audience is willing to sympathise with Circe and follow her in her reasoning, they cannot but understand Circe’s argument as to why she changed the men in pigs and feels no remorse over it. She explains her actions. “Too cruel am I?” (Webster, line 177) It is typical of the dramatic monologue to anticipate what the audience might think or how they would react. Creating the atmosphere of a dialogue between speaker and public strengthens the bond between them and is a strong instrument of persuasion. She does not literally ask for their understanding but considers
their questions and explains her actions. Understanding for her position is enough. References to the problematic contemporary issues Webster alludes to are still recognisable and she has managed to create a character capable of gaining her readers’ sympathy despite standing on the other side of what was considered appropriate. Webster did all this with a character usually seen as one of the stock characters of the evil seductresses, much like Lee-Hamilton’s Medusa, who speaks to the imagination but certainly does not inspire sympathy. She took a character imagined by men, and transformed her into an absolute woman. After all, Circe reminds the reader, she is a woman, not a god. (Webster, line 66) Reviewers took Webster’s work most seriously, and with strong texts like this one that comes as no surprise, though they did not always agree with the views she expressed. (Sutphin, 514)

I used the word “unconventional” to describe Circe and purposefully avoided the concept “fallen woman”, even though Circe technically is a fallen women when held up to Victorian standards. Sutphin points out that when a woman was considered fallen, she was a prostitute in Victorian society and the definition of a prostitute was very wide. A woman who puts her charms to vile uses is considered one, according to Mayhew/Hyming, but I cited Bullen on this in a previous chapter and will repeat it here: no one would consider Circe as a prostitute here. The word has connotations that belong to the nineteenth century streets, not a foreign mythological setting. Not only that, but also the sympathy she earns from her readers plays a role here. If anything, her description of Odysseus’ men speaks about fallen men as she describes their debauchery and untrue desires, if such a thing can be said. Her sins fall into the water in comparison to theirs and she is their victim, not the other way around as she describes it. So even though she manages to gain her readers’ sympathy and understanding for her actions, that is not to say that when translated to nineteenth century reality, Circe would get the public’s approval. She would still be a transgressor, be considered to endanger the order of society, and prove a likely candidate for a full medical examination - with all the consequences.

3.3.2 The Woman: Individuality and Reflections

Circe welcomes the storm. Since long has she tired of the monotony of her loneliness and even though she knows the storm will leave destruction in its wake, destruction wreaked on the perfection she lives in, she welcomes it and with her lengthy description of that storm that contrasts so strongly with the calm and silence she lives in, she even seems to invite it. The storm is a symbol for the arrival of Odysseus’ men and the disruption they will cause in Circe’s life of course, as are the calm, bright sea, blue sky and overall beauty of the island symbols for Circe’s own undisturbed
existence and by extension, her purity and virginity. As the night falls with his coming, so it stands opposite the shining sun during the long period of her loneliness on the island. The storm will ruin the roses - flowers that are above others symbols of beauty and femininity - and “rend [her] bowers”. The bower is a frequently returning image in Victorian poetry as a woman’s sanctuary, a sanctuary from all male intrusions. To rend a woman’s bowers constitutes rape, if not literal then certainly metaphorical. Circe knows the consequences of Odysseus’ coming, and yet she prays for it. Why? Because she is tired of “the sickly sweet monotony” and “weary of this long bright calm”.

In spite of knowing how much destruction men would cause to her status as a woman if she would fall for their advances and would allow them to have their way with her, she still wishes for it. Society banishes her from her sexuality after all, and that unblemished perfection is the monotony she speaks about. She finally wishes to be a woman in every sense of the word and not just in that part she is allowed to let blossom. That is not all though. Victorian society did not simply disapprove of sexually emancipated women, but the pure and unblemished woman, the calm sea with the eternal blue sky and bright sun, was held up as an icon of almost sacred status. That is not realistic, says Circe. Instead “change and growth” must be allowed. A perfect image cannot be preserved forever, women are human after all.

Give me some change. Must life be only sweet,
all honey-pap as babes would have their food?
And, if my heart must always be adrowse
in a hush of stagnant sunshine, give me then
something outside me stirring;
(Lines 48 - 52)

This is what she says. Pain may follow, but women must still be allowed to be women, experiencing life the same way as men do. Circe is bitter that she is kept in a shrine, unable to be touched or to touch in return.

What fate is mine who, far apart from pains
and fears and turmoils of the cross-grained world,
dwell, like a lonely god, in a charmed isle
where I am first and only, and, like one
who should love poisonous savours more than mead,
long for a tempest on me and grow sick
of resting, and divine free carelessness!

(Lines 58 - 64)

“Like a lonely god”, she says, and that is true. The image of the virginal, unsexual woman is not that of a real woman. Women have an active sexual drive, no matter how much that idea is discouraged, and dismissing this notion only increases their longing for freedom and the experience of passions. Circe would rather taste the bitter end of freedom than not being able to experience it at all. What will happen in return though, is that maintaining this unrealistic idea about virginal women will no longer be possible. I deliberately chose the term virginal to draw the parallel with the virgin Mary. Just as in Christianity, women were expected to be ideas embodying the pureness Catholicism presupposes in Mary. Circe, however, only wishes to be human and to experience love. She wonders if a lover waits for her for whom she will be the woman he chooses above all others. She describes a state of utter infatuation and discovering the bliss of love means for her to step out of “the waiting shadows into life”, as if without having experienced this she has not truly lived. While wishing to take action and live as a human being and not as the unrealistic idea of Victorian womanhood, Circe is still passive in that she expects her lover to come and find her. She wishes for him to seek her out and take her away but takes little action herself. She is willing to surrender her pride for such a lover and acknowledge this lover as her master, despite her strength and magical talents. This is a very contradictory idea to the image of Circe we were confronted with so far. Gone are the strong, liberated words and instead she submits already. Her rejection of men through Odysseus and his men changes in meaning in this light. Those who wish to seduce her are bad, but the one who is to be her husband is praised to an almost divine status. This speaks against the idea of the liberated woman and undermines the reading of Circe speaking against the unfair containment of women in unrealistic ideals and merely confirms the traditional ideas again, in which woman is indeed to stay pure for marriage. These contemplations of her perfect lover continue until she spots Odysseus’ ship approaching on the horizon and she falls into strong disapproving words about all men’s natures. She compares them to beasts and accuses them of adultery. Strangely enough and speaking against the idea of the perfect lover here, she expresses doubt if there exists one man who could drink from her cup and stay unchanged, thus proving to be of a noble nature. No, she says, “which of them has even shown the kind / of some one nobler beast?” (Lines 194 - 195)

She does not believe in absolute perfection of women and does not believe that men can be honourable and noble, but at the same time she still defends the idea of a perfect marriage. Even if she never uses the term marriage or husband literally, she speaks of a union that would have meant
nothing but marriage to the Victorian reader. It seems an absolute contradiction. An icon for feminists with many of her words, here she undermines exactly that which she seems to wish for first, namely autonomy and authority over themselves and their lives for women. She speaks without shame and without holding back in a manner that was very uncharacteristic for a Victorian woman, but these words lead to an impasse in the interpretation of the poem. What is the reader to make of Circe? She wonders why she would be beautiful and intelligent if no lover comes for her and explains that she is as powerful a woman as she is only for his sake, implying that the one whom she will give herself to will have to be as formidable as she is, but she also without ambiguity states that he will be her “master utterly”.

Why am I who I am,
But for the sake of him whom fate will send
One day to be my master utterly,
That he should take me, the desire of all,
Whom only he in the world could bow to him?
(Lines 109 - 113)

Contrary to these words then is that we must also keep in mind that at the same time she holds the power to submit men to her by changing them into beasts, and she uses that power without remorse. She is a woman who is not afraid to pass judgement in that manner and who dares to act similarly, but she is also very human and not just voluntarily cruel. She is willing to submit to the one who is worth her love. If interpreted like this, the paragraph about the lover only adds to her humanity. An added bonus is that it allows her to pass her message to the Victorian public, but also makes her very recognisable to those readers as she proves she is no stranger to their morals. The mythological context creates distance, but these words make it smaller again and wrench loose a deeper understanding and perhaps, acceptance of her psyche and actions in the nineteenth century public. Circe may have done a very good job, without losing her credibility as an icon of feminism even though the issue of her submission still raises questions.
4. Eugene Lee-Hamilton and “The New Medusa”

4.1. Lee-Hamilton: Perhaps not the Most Eminent, but Certainly Victorian

After these two poems I will look at something very different. Instead of offering women voices to cry for their liberation, this poem will clearly demonise female sexuality. It was written by a man, not a woman, and a man who represents the nineteenth century very well at that. He may not be as well-known as other, more canonical authors and scholars may not have devoted much time on his work, it is nevertheless of a standard high enough to have received positive reviews and more than enough praise in his own time. Not only that makes him interesting, but his work also very much breathes out the spirit of what we would consider Victorian. Not much contemporary criticism is available, nor have many modern editions of his poetry, prose and translations been published. Some anthologies contain several of his poems and MacDonald P. Jackson edited a volume which contains Lee-Hamilton’s biography and a selection of his best poems, but extensive analysis of his poems has yet to appear.

What do I mean by “Victorian”? First of all, formally, his poetry follows the trends popular and typical for the period. Best known and most praised for his sonnets, he meets this first set of standards. Another genre he practised was the dramatic monologue, as “The New Medusa” is proof of. Before the publication of the sonnet bundle Sonnets of the Wingless Hour his work was left mostly to obscurity, but for this collection he received the praise that, according to some, he should have received much earlier already. Fellow writers who visited him during his twenty years lasting confinement to bed due to a mysterious illness, found him an engaging conversation partner and admired his work. One of his stories was the inspiration, or rather instigation, for Henry James’s The Aspern Papers and Edith Wharton described him as “a poet of such quality”, that she was proud to have her own verse be praised by him. (Lee; Wharton, 130) His sonnets she described as “poignant verse”. (Wharton, 130) He was a Victorian then, writing in the forms of the nineteenth century and standing in the middle of the Victorian culture. The content of his poetry does not break with these characteristics. The ongoing Victorian fascination with the tradition of the gothic in literature is visible in his work as well, and especially “The New Medusa” is a testimony of that. Not only the gothic is a point of interest of Lee-Hamilton’s, but he frequently uses mythology or draws on the classic tradition in his work. Among the poems selected from his œuvre in the Blackwell anthology are “Laura to Petrarch”, “Carmagnola to the Republic of Venice” and “Fallopious to his Dissecting Knife”. All of them come from Imaginary Sonnets, originally published
in 1888, and they all reflect what is today called “Victorian poetry”, both formally and on the level of content.

When it comes to the subject discussed in this paper, Lee-Hamilton confirms several ideas about the archetypal Victorian patriarchy. “The New Medusa” illustrates this. A first point of interest is how the narrator is a man, designed as the embodiment of English civilisation and reflecting the morals and values of the Victorian society in his speech and storytelling. The poem obviously is based on the myth of the Gorgon Medusa, whose gaze was lethal until she was decapitated by Perseus, but the setting is much more recent. It is set at the beginning of the seventeenth century around Venice and Sicily, well beyond English grounds. Still, English national identity is incorporated in the narrator and is implicitly defined as rational and conscientious, opposite the irrationality attributed to the foreign nations. Despite its setting in the past, the poem still leans on a nineteenth century conception of the world. (O’Gorman, p. 545) This it does not do in its references to the need to understand and explain empirically versus the invisible and unknown alone, but also in its implicit incorporation of Victorian values and socially accepted norms in the narrator. In the poem female sexuality is strongly present, and the fact that the narrator is fascinated and drawn to it is not disguised. Due to the dramatic and expressive nature of the genre of the dramatic monologue, the reader is drawn in easily and shares the narrator’s admiration of her beauty and sensuality. At the same time, however, this sensuality is openly labelled as dangerous and evil. The transgression is clearly present, a distance between narrator and woman is constructed on several levels; spatial and cultural on one hand, as the Englishness of the narrator is opposed to the supposed Greek origins of the woman, and real versus mythical on the other hand. Whereas the traveller belongs very much to this world, she is labelled as Other, something unnatural and deviant. This otherness is considered to be dangerous and threatening to the narrator, which leaves him with no other choice but to eliminate it, not only to save his own skin, as he alludes to vaguely, but in the general interest of society. It is an unwritten law that evil must be eradicated and purged from a community to protect it and the human instinct follows this law that is ingrained in his being, that is the message the reader can infer from the text on a deeper level and it is the defence the narrator calls upon to justify his actions. It is fear that drove him to commit the deed he has done, fear of something that is not supposed to exist. It takes only very little imagination to understand what that otherness is: a woman who defies the order of things, an empowered woman who carries her sexuality as part of her identity and a woman who is passionate. This makes her a very interesting character to look at, even if she is written away to another realm and maybe even especially because of that. Therefore I will devote further attention to her character and characterisation first before
moving over to the narrator and the strategies he uses to persuade the public of his righteousness and conscientiousness.

4.2 Joan: Woman and Medusa

4.2.1 The Woman Banished from The Witch

The opposition of rationality and irrationality coupled to cultures has more implications. As I said, she is of supposed Greek origins whereas he is English. An element of mystery is connected to her identity from the beginning, as she has no past or name she divulges and instead asks him to give her a name. Not only has the opposition of reason versus the invisible, terrifying and gothic been connected to civilisation and foreign lands but also to gender. He defines himself as an ordinary gentleman of a kind and gentle nature. He saves her from a fate of slavery after all, and allows her to keep her life and past a secret. He asks nothing of her, according to his story, and gives her the benefit of the doubt. Even when he is about to strike when he has no choice left, he says, he feels remorse and doubt. When it comes to her, her strange origins are reflected in her characterisation. She knows secret knowledge that seems to border on witchcraft as he describes her skill and knowledge in the field of medicine, and she tells “such fantastic tales as tribes still rude / Delight to hear,” (Lee-Hamilton, lines 108 - 109). She sings songs from strange places, “Like gusts of moaning tempest wild and weird”, possesses a “strong, lithe beauty”, “the noiseless tread of a tame leopardess, / Docile, majestic, holding strength repressed.” (Lines 111; 100; 101 - 102) She has managed to make him fall deeply in love with her, and “each day my kisses grow more hot”, he says. (Line 126) From the very beginning she is described as other, strange, unlike any woman he has ever met. She enwraps him but even the way in which fate has bound them together has an element of the unnatural cast on it, exuded by her. When she is threatened with a life of slavery, she does not beg for another fate or mercy but rather she “looked around her with a queen’s contempt.” (Line 84) That hardly is the expected behaviour from a woman threatened with a terrible fate but instead, she acts as a brave warrior or perhaps, brave is not quite the word:

And then it was that suddenly her eyes,
Singling me out, were fastened upon mine
So searchingly, that all felt huge surprise;
And that, like one who by some secret sign
Knows that a strange command will be obeyed,
She cried, ‘Lord, buy me;’ and I paid her fine.
It seems suggested that she is the predator and not the prey. She singles him out, it is said, and seems to give “a strange command”. In this instance, she is not just an ordinary woman but instead, a commander of powers beyond the scientifically explicable. She is portrayed as a witch. The reaction of the sea merchants, her posture and how she seems to decide on him, a matter in which he seems to have very little say, everything is presented as if a supernatural occurrence of her design has just taken place. She is a woman in that she loves him, saves his life because of her knowledge of medicine and knows how to handle his temper. She satisfies his every need, ranging from daily and emotional requirements to those of a physical nature and in that proves to be a woman as a man would wish her to be like. At the same time, however, she is always connected to the mysterious and her posture radiates an element of danger which he first does not seem to notice and later, chooses to ignore. Because the story is told in hindsight, he could have added this later on without it being true. This dangerous element is connected to her passionate nature. Besotted as he is with her, he lets her wake him from his nightmare and kiss away his worry once he begins to suspect that all is not as it should be. However, the narrator does not allow her to be an ordinary woman and explains his strong infatuation and bond with her to a spell she has cast on him. This way he no longer is responsible for having fallen in love with her.

So she my slave, and I her slave was made,
She taking eager bondage from that hour,
And binding me in chains that never weighed.
She seemed contented with a latent power,
Keeping slave garb, and took small gifts alone,
As might an empress from some love below her.

She is a dominant woman, keeping him under her power with which he has no problem at first. This is not a normal situation though, these lines suggest, and even though she is technically his slave she seems to be the one who holds him under her power. The silent reaction of the sailors when she cries out to him to buy her is a testimony of the abnormality of the situation. Her proud posture scares them or at least puzzles them. Indeed, an English woman never would have behaved this way. It was not expected or accepted yet he is inexplicably drawn to her and her beauty and fiery nature keep him enchanted. They live together and travel together, in love with each other, but there is a constant tension in the relationship of who is in command. She is his slave but she seems
to have a say in many things. She likes to travel and move, just as he does, and so that is what they do. Socially, she is far below him but he is considerate regarding her wishes. The balance seems more or less evened out, however, she holds him in her thrall and her power over him is much stronger than he wants it to be. When he first doubts her, he allows these doubts to be cast aside in favour of his infatuation with her, even though infatuation does not fully express the strength of his passion. Is it witchcraft that gives her this power or simply her charm as a strong, independent woman? Is witchcraft the name he gives it to free himself from her power that has nothing to do with the supernatural? If we strip the story of its mythical nature and read it as a metaphor, then the answer to this last question is without a doubt yes.

The question is essentially if this poem tells us a gothic horror story of a demoness who casts her spell over innocent, decent men by seducing them and attempting to slowly kill them in their sleep or a story of a woman with a passion so strong it draws men in and makes them dream of the culturally unattainable. She breaks every convention, after all, inspiring awe but also fear. She is beautiful and passionate, and thus terrible, because how could he possibly resist her? She gives him no reason to call her insolent nor does she neglect her duty. In fact, she proves to be a caring woman, looking after him faithfully when his life is in danger and comforting him when he sleeps badly. It is not difficult to find the metaphor behind the dreams of strangulation. Perhaps he truly does feel threatened by a woman who holds such power over him. He fantasises about her and their nights are filled with passion and lust, going against the conventional beliefs of the purpose of sexual intercourse. In that sense, she truly holds him in her power, but how much of that can be attributed to the mythical status the author gives her? In every sense, Joan embodies the dangerous femme fatale so often depicted in Victorian art and poetry. Her sexuality proves to be irresistibly fascinating, a topic that needs to be explored but it has to be done safely. To prevent men from being overpowered by these women they need to be locked up in the discourse of the mythical and the terrible, in which it is legitimate to protect themselves from these sexually strong women. Once her grip gets too strong, she is stigmatised as a witch and needs to be eliminated. Female sexuality is only safe in as far as it is repressed by marriage and the gentle, passive nature of the woman as it is described and prescribed. In this way, she serves the community. Let free and named independently from man, female sexuality is dangerous and does not fit in the categories designed to protect the hierarchical order within the family that in its turn, is a micro-society and a reflection of society as a whole. As a result, the man is pictured as the victim of the woman here, fallen prey to her dangerous seduction instead of the other way around as we read in “Circe”.

4.2.2 Gagged and Decapitated
Summarised, free women as Joan threaten the established order of society. As active spirits standing on the foreground, they are hypnotising and a possibility that needs to be explored because by law of nature the female sexuality is bound to be fascinating, but society demands it to be controlled. Joan is a victim of the discourse of sexuality that keeps women bound and a victim of this narrator’s discourse who demonises her. In this poem, she is chained in two ways. On the one hand, her cultural background is used to explain her otherness. She is not as English women, that is why she does not conform to the definition of womanhood. This juxtaposition is a first distance artificially created, not only to separate Joan’s sexuality from what is considered normal and acceptable, but also to justify the narrator’s fascination. It is normal that she enchanted him, he was caught unaware because he was blinded by a different cultural perspective. He says as much when he introduces his story to his friend John:

Oh, I have sailed across a sea of fear,
And met new lands to add to Horror’s realms,
And shores of guilt whence none may scatheless steer.
A very world of jarring thoughts o’erwhelms
My cowering soul when I would tell what’s been
Since last I saw this Hall, these English elms.
(Lines 22 - 27)

The fear, horror and guilt that follow him are characteristics ascribed to the foreign lands he has visited. They are connected to these places and cultures, of which Joan is a representative as well, and in turn they are linked to her sexuality which is eventually considered to be as threatening as the environment. England is the opposite, the safe haven from all these strange events where normality reigns. The environment is a mirror of the events and moods in the story, as is typical of the gothic genre. The castle in which they sleep is another example. At this point of the story, Joan’s lethal nature manifests itself for the first time and the narrator describes the castle as a place inspiring fear in the villagers with many myths and legends connected to it. The association between these ragged and haunted places and Joan inevitably have an influence on the reader’s perception of her. She is demonised, considered as belonging to a category of the unnatural and abnormal dangerous to men and women who do not live in the dark margins of society.

Another chain that keeps Joan enslaved is the poem itself. She has no voice to speak with and is therefore inevitably caught in the narrator’s story and perception. What is true of the narrator’s
account and what is not, and in how far do the emotions conveyed by the poem do Joan justice? It inspires fear in its audience and preaches caution lest similar situations take control of your life and leave you scarred. The narrator says he is possessed by madness, after the events he describes, so it leaves a lasting blemish not easy to cast off, it marks the death of innocence and prevents the affected person from living an ordinary life. The traveller’s story serves as a warning against women like Joan and the consequences of being engaged with a woman like her, however enticing her company may be, are permanent. Men are threatened with marginalisation and women with a sexuality as outspoken as Joan’s are labelled as contagious. Their influence must be avoided and cast from society. However, who or what Joan really is, the reader will never know but it may be interesting to keep the myth of the three caskets as mentioned in the introduction in mind here as it may explain the mechanisms at work in the poem. The poem itself has two sides. It gives a voice to the preoccupation with women who have allowed their sexuality to be part of their identity but at the same time it warns against these women because this fascination would be disruptive for the order of society in which marriage and procreation were the stabilising factor that guaranteed a future for civilisation.

It is a story of many oppositions then, and all these oppositions serve one goal. They all contribute to creating distance between society and that which is expunged from it and forced to exist in the shadows by clearly separating what is considered normal and safe and what is not. Desire, passion and an outspoken sexuality with the active striving to fulfil it are labelled as Other and Other in its turn is labelled as evil. The story warns against aspiring these things. It is an ultimate representative and example of the creation of the myth of the dangerous, sexually empowered femme fatal. How real is all this? Literature can only show part of a period’s mindset, and never direct. Fact is that a woman’s sexual status influenced her social status greatly and the fear to lose it was real. There are numerous illustrations of women being warned against independence and what it led to, so women were urged to give up their freedom and find safety in marriage to avoid the undesirably fate of an outcast or in death. Joan’s story is not so much meant as a warning for women though, but as a warning for men against such women even though the implications for women remain unchanged. To continue to support women’s imprisonment, they were bound in discourse as this poem as well, thus creating a vicious circle from which escape seems nearly impossible.

4.3 From a Certain Perspective
I said “Joan’s story” but that really is not true. She has no voice in this poem and comes to us only through the narrator’s account which is, at its best, not trustworthy. First of all, he admits to be partial in his judgement:

My enemy is Madness: I have got his stealthy step behind me, ever near,
And he will clutch me if thou help me not.
(Lines 19 - 20)

Furthermore, he is influenced by his emotions, guilt among them. This especially may be cause for him to try to put himself in a more favourable light, to appease his, in the first instance, one person audience who is apparently a longstanding friend, but also to justify himself and be even with his own conscience. This gives cause to question the objectivity of his account. Another important reason for doubt is that the crucial facts that determine Joan’s gruesome fate all take place in the state between sleep and the waking world, blurring the edges of perception and once more providing a ground to be suspicious of the accuracy of his account. The most fundamental question of all is if he tells us the truth and what kind of truth. Stripped off the gothic elements, what would the audience have understood? When taking a look at what nineteenth century prescribed regarding acceptable sexual relations, it could very well be that he tells his own truth, regarded as veritable and acceptable by the nineteenth century public. The narrator clearly portrays himself as the victim in this history. It has affected him greatly and what we find here is an opposite history of another type of story we often find in nineteenth century poetry. Poetry with a female protagonist in a fairly realistic setting almost always confronts the reader with an account of a fallen woman or a prostitute. In such stories she is seduced and abandoned, an event that condemns her as fallen. Here he is the one who is seduced and finds himself under her control. One important difference must be noted, however. In the story of the fallen woman, she is both the victim and the guilty party. Here the man is the victim but he is in no sense found guilty. Contrary so even, because the woman is stigmatised as evil, a force come from hell that needs to be killed. The consequence is that the man of this story is, in the end, the hero who has done a good deed and deserves the public’s pity and without a doubt restitution in society. The conclusion I am forced to draw is that there is no such thing as a fallen man. It is female sexuality that is bound, not male, and female sexuality that runs the risk to fall into impurity and not that of the man. Victorian doctors’ reports on anti-conception and sexuality confirm these ideas. “A woman on whom her husband practices what is euphemistically called ‘preventive copulation’, is, in the first place, necessarily brought into the condition of mind of a prostitute”, appeared in an editorial in the medical journal *The Lancet* in 1869. (Nead, 21) Unmarried people were recommended to stay free from temptation.
(Nead, 21) There is made no mention of the position of the man. Female purity was supported in practically every layer of the population as a moral concept even though theory and practise were two different things, as Tennyson’s “The Mermaid” will illustrate. It is no wonder then that the public would have devoured this story without doubting the man’s tale. Modern readers can read this with different eyes though, just as a select public would have done then as well.

Interesting is how the narrator engages his public. He seems to be talking to a friend whom he trusts with a most personal story, this way addressing the public as his friend. His doubts in the first stanza of the poem and his eventual decision to entrust his secrets to John draws the reader in and creates the illusion that they are the confident of this narrator, and thus obliged to show a measure of sympathy and understanding for his predicament. A bond is forged between reader and narrator in these first lines, one which makes a continued reading all the more problematic. The narrator is, after all, not trustworthy. We only have his word, Joan has no voice to speak anymore. He tells the story in hindsight, which influences his choice of words and judgement, and by invoking the will and power of god versus Joan’s supposed hellish origins he lays down responsibility and calls on the supernatural instead. By refusing to recognise her humanity and transforming her into a demon, he justifies his own actions and makes it his duty to have killed her. In this light, his entire confession can be read as the words of, indeed, a madman seeking forgiveness for his crime. Fact and fiction intermingle constantly in this poem and the temporal distance makes an interpretation even harder. The events do not take place in the nineteenth century, after all, even though a nineteenth century public would read it as such because the incorporated morals, the setting and the progress of the story all very much appeal to such a public and look very familiar. All these facts combined give rise to several questions and answers. First of all, regarding the narrator, the author has crafted a personae that certainly manages to leave an impression on his audience. Despite belonging to an earlier period, it is obvious that the narrator has been constructed with a nineteenth century public in mind because of the morals he incorporates and the ideology he follows. The Victorian public would have followed his reasoning and probably felt moved by his account. The material was familiar to them, after all, and he fulfils all the conditions to have been regarded as a victim. Joan, on the other hand, is one of the dangerous, highly sexualised women as Bullen describes them (See 1.2.2), a woman not conforming to the Victorian definition of womanhood, and therefore the need to banish her is necessary. In Eliza Keary’s “Little Seal-Skin”, female sexuality is contained within marriage as was considered the right course of action but the woman manages to break free and regain her identity. In “Circe”, Circe complains how men bind women’s identity and take their right on liberty away. She verbally attacks this mindset and pleads for more rights. This then, is a poem which proves how long women’s road for these rights still was. Female sexuality is
shown here as it was looked at by the Victorian society at large, namely with distrust and caution, but it also irresistibly pulled them closer. Whether it be religion or social standards that attempted to reduce or lock up women’s sex and identity, it always continued to lure. Like a siren’s song.
5. Alfred Tennyson’s “The Mermaid”

5.1 Tennyson and Mermaids

I hope not to have created a too one-dimensional image and am aware of how close I have come to this with the selection of the poems I have discussed. So far, I let two women speak about their wish for liberation on the one hand and the male voice I included confirmed those clichés women fought and fight against on the other hand, thus having created an obvious polarity between female voices on one side and male voices on the other side. As I made clear in the introduction, it is part of my purpose to clear up some of the still popular conceptions but too superficial ideas about the Victorian prudery and double standards. Women did have knowledge of their own bodies and new opportunities for women arose gradually. A lot still had to be achieved and the old romantic ideals in which women fulfilled a passive role were kept alive and defended ardently. The domestic role of women was promoted and discussed more strongly than ever but it is very difficult to stop progress in a society come so far on that path already. Women as Augusta Webster would never have been able to write and earn money with it had this not been true. Therefore, I wish to nuance this image a bit and give a clearer picture of the ambiguity and confusion that reigned regally in every layer of nineteenth century society. Who better to study in this context than poet-laureate and praised poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, who, as none shall disagree with, is a Victorian writer praised in his own days and is still vividly discussed these days. He represents the period in all its versatility splendidly. He is a very interesting figure to study when it comes to the matter that concerns me in this thesis, because many of his poems have an obvious feminine quality in their sensibility and have been the cause of many discussions regarding his position on the woman question. “The Princess” might be most notable in this context, but the poem I have chosen is “The Mermaid” because it confronts me with the problem discussed more directly and uses, just as Eliza Keary did, the underwater world as a symbolic domain.

Let me take a closer look at Tennyson and what is known about his relationship with women first, because it certainly is complicated enough to answer and cause some questions. I spoke of a female sensibility, and that is what John Hughes notices as well in his article on “Tennyson’s Female Imaginings”, as he words it so beautifully. He writes that “Tennyson’s works, like his life and career as a whole, aspired to ultimately masculine positionings of self, but that his work was always animated by an encrypted but constitutive dimension of (what is best called) feminine sensibility that yearned ... for self-revelation or expression.” (Hughes, 96) In this article, he refers to
Cronin’s theory that the female voice in Tennyson’s work was merely Tennyson’s response to a rising trend in the 1830’s and thus an economically inspired decision, but Hughes himself prefers a reading in which the combating feminine voices of the private sphere and public male voices in Tennyson’s poetry represent an inner conflict. The female voice then stands for “the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of enacting this captive, exiled, subterranean, part of the self, this immured and proscribed female element” (Hughes, 97). These facts make a reading much more interesting. It is true that Tennyson displays an unusual cogitation, and affinity even, for women and their lots in his poetry in a verse that feels distinctly well-adapted to the female senses, but he also frequently returns to those images typically influenced by a patriarchal system that characterised Victorian England. Due to criticism, as I summarise here from Hughes’ study, Tennyson made a turn-about in his work and changed the tone and theme of his poetry to themes more closely aligned with the male identity, but female alter-ego’s and points of view signify the poet’s attempt to break free from the constraints of male identity on the other hand. (Hughes, 98 - 99) The matter of identity was not a problem for women alone then, but apparently for men as well. Seeing as how often Tennyson’s sexuality has been discussed - whether he was heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual – combined with the rising debate about homosexuality in the nineteenth century proves how closely entwined the matter of one’s sex and sexuality is with identity. Not just that is important to stress again, but also how identity and sexual identity were specifically gender-related. “[I]n the nineteenth century gender was a primary category in the regulation of sexuality”, Lynda Nead writes, and indeed men were allowed much more than women which was explained by the biological differences. (Nead, 6) This explains why this is a point that caused such a storm of criticism to erupt but also helps understand the extreme division between male and female sexuality. “[T]he male sexual urge was understood to be active, aggressive and spontaneous whilst female sexuality was defined in relation to the male and was believed to be weak, passive and responsive.” (Nead, 6) A female sexuality that is active and not passive then considerably blurs the differences between both genders and could give rise to identity crisis. This explains why a woman who actively seduces is so strongly rejected from society, as “The New Medusa” is a testimony of, but women refuse to continue being locked up in this discourse.4 Naturally, gender fluidity is a difficult subject to be raised then and this is one of the regularly returning themes in Tennyson-criticism. The nineteenth century was a period in which these issues began being discussed loudly in public and these notions were challenged. An excellent example is the trial of Oscar Wilde regarding his homosexuality. While it condemned homosexual behaviour, it also made people talk about homosexuality. Publicly denouncing it definitely brought the attention to the subject. Gender,

4 Even though by no means and at no point I meant to insinuate that the nineteenth century was the beginning of female emancipation. Liberated and outspoken women have always written against these forms of imprisonment.
sexuality and the connection between the two were topics everyone talked about yet no one dared to mention. Subconsciously, a lot of things were in motion and in an attempt to structure the world, people tried to form a coherent image of the world by casting everything in definitions, something not that easy. Not even today.

These ideas need to be kept in mind when reading “The Mermaid”. As I said, it is a poem that will lay bare a very different attitude towards female sexuality than “The New Medusa” did, but one must not jump to conclusions too hastily. Tennyson was not a feminist, and despite the many possibilities to interpret him as such when reading his poetry, there is an equal number of counter arguments available. He did live in a period in which gender was interpreted very strictly though, and he was a poet with a highly tuned sensibility.

“The Mermaid” usually is read alongside “The Merman”. Both poems were published as mirror images of each other as well, but I will focus chiefly on “The Mermaid” and her character and will mostly ignore its companion poem, except in this brief introduction. Both poems mirror each other both in structure and content, but some distinctions can be made between the two. “The Merman” comes first and is followed by “The Mermaid”. Characteristic of the poems is that both the mermaid and the merman seem to suffer from their loneliness during the day, as neither of them has a companion it seems, but different is how they mourn this loneliness and eventually find happiness. The first part of both poems expresses melancholy in their songs of loneliness. “Sitting alone, / Singing alone / Under the sea,” (Lines 3 - 5) we find in “The Merman”. The repetition of the sibilants and adverb emphasise the loneliness of the song, affecting the reader. The significant difference between both poems follows in the next stanza. The merman’s tone of voice changes in the first lines and from here, the poems differs very much in tone from that of the mermaid.

I would be a merman bold;
I would sit and sing the whole of day;
I would fill the sea-halls with the voice of power:
But at night I would roam abroad and play
With the mermaids in and out of the rocks,
(Lines 8 - 12)

The merman describes himself as bold and every previous trace of melancholy is erased by the proud proclaiming of his power and the attribution of typical male traits which transform his
loneliness into individuality. Strength is the keyword here, opposed to the mermaid’s continued loneliness and longing for it to end.

I would be a mermaid fair;
I would sing to myself the whole of the day;
With a comb of pearl I would comb my hair;
And still as I comb’d I would sing and say,
‘Who is it loves me? Who loves not me?’
(Lines 9 - 13)

Just as in “The Merman”, the personal pronoun I is abundantly present in the poem, but rather than stressing individuality and a strong sense of personal identity, here it only further emphasises the mermaid’s lack of exactly these attributes. Her defining quality is, after all, her beauty, and in her song she only wishes for love and wonders about who that person would be. This is not just accidental as even in her singing, an activity very much reflecting the self as song is both a medium of self-expression and a personal talent put into practise, she uses her song only to wonder about her self according to and in light of the outer world. Loneliness is in all senses negative here. The mermaid is described as fair, so instead of strength beauty is her greatest attribute. Beauty is also important mainly in its experience by the outer world and not as an independent characteristic, so again she is defined as a person mostly by how others perceive her. Apart from singing, her other occupation is combing her hair, an activity undertaken to sustain and enhance that beauty. All this means that, contrary to the merman whose singularity is recognised and emphasised, the mermaid is described not in terms of what defines her, but in words and glances from the world and how they see her. It seems as if she cannot have an identity of her own and instead, her identity is created and given to her by the lover who would recognise her existence. She does not seem to have the power to create herself. Her ontological value is based on how others experience her. She cannot live outside their perceptions because she is beauty and needs a lover to break her loneliness. Loneliness is for her a state of non-being. She needs a lover to affirm her existence and give her a function. Without being seen by others, she may just as well not exist at all. The recognition of her existence hinges on her outward appearance, and is in this way again linked to her sexuality. The implication of this idea is once more inevitably the connection between sexuality and identity, creating a complicated dialectic relation between the two. The female identity is determined by her sexuality and the recognition thereof, but sexuality must at the same time be controlled and contained. This means that the woman’s identity is submitted to the identity of the man and thus, her identity is effectively nullified. Outside the world of men she has no right or possibility to exist. The ideas of
identity before and after marriage in Victorian girls and women has been explored many times and may be helpful in this context as well, as this exploration certainly maps the meaning of female identity in the Victorian age, or at the very least attempts to achieve this partially.

“Before and after” already implies a transformation, but it is the mermaid’s search for a lover and her beauty as her only other given defining characteristic that offers a first point for discussion. One idea that leads to clarification comes from Sally Mitchell, who writes that “girlhood”, which means the time before marriage, “offered a time of gendered freedom between childhood and marriage that gave young women the chance to work, to earn money, to educate themselves.” (Gannon, 214) This idea stands opposite what “The Mermaid” shows the reader, and stands opposite what Nead writes when she says that women gained an identity upon marrying because at that point, they began to do what they were meant to do in Victorian society, namely being a wife and becoming a mother. Her identity only exists through her husband from that point on, but before she simply was not recognised as a solid identity of her own. A testimony of the transformation a woman went through is the changing of her name upon marriage, as Michie writes, because when marrying, a woman is given the name of her husband. “This gendered nominal transformation was often figured as a rebirth or, with only a slight shift in valence, as a death.” (Michie, 231) Woman’s existence before marriage is recognised. We find ourselves confronted with two contrasting visions then. On one side stands Linda Nead, mostly supporting the reading of “The Mermaid” in which woman only begins to exist after marriage, and on the other side we find a reading in which her identity is shattered after marriage because of the fixed role marriage forces her in. I choose to interpret this inconsistency as an opposition between ideology and reality, in which ideology means the invisible ideas, morals and values that keep society together. As has been shown before though, the Victorian society was a society in motion in which social reality fought these ideals. Women did begin to work and earn money and strove for access to education.

In any case, there is no doubt that the merman, contrary to the mermaid, is recognised as an individual who does not have to rely on the recognition of others in order to have an identity. Even more, he is portrayed as the one who gives meaning to the lives of the mermaid as he is the one who recognises their beauty. When put together, these two poems present the reader with an image that supports the traditional Victorian ideas about marriage and the need for women to get married. In fact, according to this poem woman seeks for it herself as it is the only way for her to find self-confirmation. This makes this poem a fine example of ventriloquism at its best then, but it is not as simple as this reading may have implied. The mermaid is not so easy to pin down at all.
5.2 The Mermaid and Tennyson

The mermaid is not the sublimated woman as I made her out to be entirely. Here I will put aside “The Merman” and focus solely on “The Mermaid”, as I announced earlier, and explore a different side of her. It is no coincidence that I chose this poem. As in Eliza Keary’s “Little Seal-skin”, here too we find ourselves in an underwater world, the ultimate symbol of femininity. This femininity must not be interpreted as following the Victorian definition of femininity, but rather this is woman’s kingdom. Here her laws are in effect. The domain of birth and life-bearing is essentially female. Throughout time and space attempts have been made to banish this too to the domain of the other, I think for instance of cultures in which the burying of the afterbirth is meant to work as an apotropaic mechanism to free the newborn of the taboo connected to giving birth. Still, giving life is and always has been a woman’s business. In the Victorian age woman was even reduced to this capacity alone. Water as life giving in general and of course as symbol for the fluid in the uterus in which the embryo grows, is a female element above the others, and in more than one way, the mermaid will exercise her power in her kingdom here too. By creating an underwater world, Tennyson already implicitly empowers woman in this poem. She may sing about a lover and wish for his presence, she will nevertheless chase for one and even though there is a mention of marriage, it is implied that her state is freedom and she is the hunter. She has the power to choose, as these words suggest:

They would sue me, and woo me, and flatter me,
In the purple twilights under the sea;
But the king of them all would carry me,
Woo me, and win me, and marry me,

Not only that, but she does not willingly give herself nor is marriage the end for her. Still, all life in the sea is “looking up for the love of me”, as she says, and all she has to do is “carol aloud”, and “All things that are forked, and horned, and soft / Would lean out from the hollow sphere of the sea, / All looking down for the love of me.” Marriage does not mean the end of her power then and instead it is suggested that this underwater world knows a matrimony in which she rules and men eventually obey to her whims. This means a reversal of the roles, which makes the merman’s strength not a symbol of personal strength but instead it becomes a characteristic of equal value and with a similar meaning to the mermaid’s beauty. Strength can be a physical attribute as well, after all, and becomes a symbol of beauty meant to impress the mermaid so he can woo her in turn. Just
as much as female beauty can serve to represent femininity and female sexuality, physical strength fulfils the same role for men, rendering the merman and the mermaid in this case equal.

A woman who tried to seduce was not considered a respectable woman. In this role too women were to take on the passive role and be wooed and chased but never were they to take on the role of the hunter themselves. This seems true enough for the mermaid, as she revels in her beauty which is sure to attract male attention. She is not so passive though and consciously seeks their attention, choosing the one worthy of being her king.

And I should look like a fountain of gold
Springing alone
With a shrill inner sound,
Over the throne
In the midst of the hall;
Till that great sea-snake under the sea
From his coiled sleeps in the central deeps
Would slowly trail himself sevenfold
Round the hall where I sate, and look in at the gate
With his large calm eyes for the love of me.

Even though she uses her beauty to gain attention, she does so on her own initiative with the intention of attracting glances and attention as these lines show. She uses her beauty as a weapon to ensnare every other creature in the sea, so it seems, making it an attribute of action instead of passivity. She does not wait for men to come to her, instead she chooses on whom to use her charms. She does so with success, as even the sea-snake is roused from his sleep. The language uses the sibilants to indicate its sleeping nature yet it is no competition for her beauty. She enchants even the sea monster. Compared to that, men are insignificant. It seems only logical that they too all love her, if even this creature wakes up and comes to see her. Like a queen she sits on a throne in a hall, and those who compete for her attention have as such become her subjects, as if they wish for an audience. The lines that follow enhance this queen-image, a queen beloved by her subjects.

And all the mermen under the sea
Would feel their immortality
Die in their hearts for the love of me.
This is not simply an image of men trying to court a woman, this is worship, as one would worship a queen. So where beauty is usually seen as the passive opposite of strength which is in its turn connected to an active male nature, here the roles are reversed and strength is translated to a physical attribute resembling the usual passivity of beauty. It is not only men that love her either. Women vie for her attentions as well, even though this is present in the poem in a much more hushed tone. Whereas all the “things that are forked, and horned” “lean out from the “hollow sphere of the sea”, all things “soft” do so as well. The conjunction could suggest that it concerns a different category from the “horned” things. It leaves no doubt that the adjective horned is a direct reference to the male phallus and therefore it seems only logical for soft to be an allusion to the female body, as that is a commonly accepted description of the female body versus the male. This only strengthens the idea of an empire in which matrimony rules. The mermaid’s song, which at first seemed to express her incapacity of loneliness, once again gains its expressive power and serves as the audience the queen gives her subjects.

In the third part of the poem she tells the reader how at night she ventures away from her throne and enjoys the life in the sea. She plays with the mermen then, still always keeping them on a distance. She does “fling on each side” her “low-flowing locks”, tempting and challenging them by playing hide and seek. From the moment one comes too close, however, she shrieks, and she refuses to allow all those who would wish to kiss her to let them do so. In one sense, she contributes to the image of the pure Victorian woman who keeps herself chaste for marriage, because the mermaid lets the mermen woo her but otherwise keeps them on a distance to spare herself for “the king of them all” who will eventually win her and marry her. A temptress, yes, but a respectable temptress who is innocent after all. But is her combing her hair in a “golden curl” not emphasised in the first stanza of the poem and further in the second part as well? In every Victorian representation of women we find long hair as an important feature, whether they be virgins or seductresses, but one thing they share. They all serve as symbols of female sexuality and almost always are unmarried. Paintings of John Everett Millais and Dante Rossetti are excellent illustrations of this. Ophelia, the lady of Shalott, and Bocca Baciata are only a few of the many that would make perfect examples. Married women, on the other hand, are portrayed with their hair much less prominently present, bound, just as their sexuality is bound now in marriage. The repeated emphasis on the mermaid’s hair is no coincidence then. She may not allow herself to be seduced by her admirers, there must however be no mistake about her nature. She is not only a woman of exceptional beauty, or so it appears, she also is a sexualised woman. She does not let the mermen kiss her, she says, but she does however play with them, “With the mermen in and out of the rocks.” The imagery in which the environment is described is very suggestive as well.
On the broad sea-wolds in the crimson shells,
Whose silvery spikes are highest the sea.

Not only do the shapes resemble respectively the female and male reproductive organs, the colours also raise the suspicion that the mermaid is perhaps not as innocent as she makes the reader believe. The shell seems a clear image for the vagina and the crimson colour may suggest her deflowering. In the same way, the “spikes” may be symbols for the penis and the colour silver can be a symbol of the completion of the act. The mermaid seems not so innocent after all. Even in choosing a husband she never comes across as submissive. She is in charge, she chooses and eventually decides whom she wishes to marry.

Tennyson paints a very contrasting picture. Submissive and conforming as the mermaid seems to be at first sight, there are many elements that cast doubts on this. Her active nature contradicts her first assumed passivity and her claim of chastity could very well be a lie, adding a note of irony if this situation was to be translated to real life in which this above all would be ultimate signs of Victorian hypocrisy. Tennyson gives in any case a voice to a female character here, and a song to sing with a very wide range. It is not difficult to read the mermaid as a strong woman but it is considerably more difficult to read this poem as a purely feminist poem. Without interpreting the double entendre it appears to defend the conventional Victorian values and shows only a very decent young woman who goes through the stages of struggling with her identity, discovering herself through wooing and eventually taking on an identity through marriage. Only a closer reading and analysis bring her feisty nature to the surface. Reading between the lines erases all doubt about the presence of these ambiguities but on the surface the poem is very clear as well. Whether this was a conscious decision or one inspired by possible criticism and economic consequences remains unclear and as my earlier remarks indicate, an issue that still is debated. Biographic details bring us no clearer answer to the question as Tennyson always had a love-hate relationship with women. One thing is sure though. There is too much evidence of the mermaid’s free nature for a more liberal reading to be ignored, resulting in a poem with a slightly problematic reading when trying to give it a place in the complicated discussion about the Victorian views on female sexuality and identity. I wish to interpret it as simply this, a testimony of a society in motion, struggling with its identity and place, welcoming and fighting against evolution and change as societies have a habit to do so. It would be a pity to drown the unique voice of this poem in extreme labels obliging the reader to pick a side. Instead, its diversity is much more telling and the questions it raises answer much more than would appear at first sight.
6. Conclusion

Four different poems have proven to offer four different views and experiences of sexuality. An unambiguous answer to the question of what exactly female identity was in the nineteenth century and how this adds up with her sexuality has not been given or even suggested at, and if it had been that would have been the unfortunate generalising of an extremely diverse culture. What has been made clear above all is that the Victorian society was one in movement, subject to a sudden rapid evolution due to economical developments. Industrialisation and mass production inevitably had their influence on the sociological organisation of society. Families and the sense of community were deeply influenced by the restructuring of society due to a faster pace of living and changing work conditions. That this would have its reflection on the attitude towards women is not so surprising, as women symbolically represented the continuity of the family. The only thing left to protect societal standards in the face of progression now was morals and values, passed on to the next generation by women, but on the other hand women wished to reap the benefits of the easier access to education and work as well. These contradictions culminated in the identity and definition of womanhood and are present in the literature and literary voices the age offers. The sometimes very differing expressions of female sexuality and the amount of freedom that women had, deserved and claimed to have a right on are testimonies of that, as these poems have shown. Augusta Webster’s Circe wishes for freedom and a new destiny for women equal to men but she also reaches back to the stability of marriage. Tennyson’s mermaid is a queen in her kingdom but eventually chooses a husband and marries him. The wish for continuity is, after all, in the human nature.

Still, it is clear that women do not accept the roles ideology casts them in. Keary’s sea-woman chooses her own, personal freedom over the care of the house, her spouse and children. Keary may have taken care of the household of her nephews but she never did marry herself, earned her money through writing and poems as “Little Seal-Skin” are her shout for a female identity free from male oppression. Webster was married but also an outspoken personality, giving a voice to women who lost their status in society due to their sexual lives, as in “The Castaway”, and she created possibilities for women to speak by fighting for equal rights concerning education and voting. Women wish for the right to construct their own identities equal to men, that cannot be denied, but it is natural that the fear for excesses that holds society in its grasp also has an influence on these women. To recognise women’s sexual nature would have its setback after all, no longer would the icon of purity be maintainable and this would endanger the order of the family. Part of the conflict lies in this fear, but it is also so that an order which submits women and excludes them from the public life is not a possibility either. Lee-Hamilton’s Joan cannot be killed forever for simply
wishing to be a woman. The contrast between what the mermaid says and what the poem’s imagery suggests is an ideal example of what forms the base for the story of Victorian hypocrisy and is a direct consequence of continuing to attempt to cast women in a passive, virginal role. A proclaimed ideology of female purity but flourishing pornography production and prostitution at the same time indicate that it is not so simple. Myths are created and maintained to explain and justify but most of all guarantee the continuation of generations and the societal order on a higher level. Progress is what undermines this and creates the dichotomy in discourse the reader is eventually confronted with.

Denied female identities eventually find their way in the male discourse and create from it their own. Using their territory eventually empowers them, even for women as Joan whose voices are smothered by men. The passing of time and the comparison with other sources, written and spoken by women instead of men, allow for different readings which uncover the mechanisms beneath the symbolic murder. Even captured in the male narrator’s story her power is clear to the reader. Her story shows that women’s sexuality needs to be recognised. It is everywhere, visible through its invisibility. Religion, medicine and psychology all have attempted to bind the female sexuality and still, men too continue to be fascinated by it. Foucault and Freud were right. Being silent about something, sometimes makes the most noise. Women learnt to discover themselves again as separate entities from this discourse, difficult as that often was. Rediscovering and often discovering their sexuality was a first step to the creation of their own identities. The mermaid and Joan are the proof of that. The division between ideology and reality was often there, resulting in contrasts as stark as that of the symbol of purity versus the fallen woman, but a society deserves time to progress. Feminism has cleared a large part of the road, but we are not there yet. As Foucault says, we are only on the path of lifting the veil of repression. (Foucault, 9)
Appendix

“The New Medusa”
Eugene Lee-Hamilton

Grown strangely pale? Grown silent and morose
In my three years of travel? Brother John,
Oh, once for all, why watch me thus so close?
When since my childhood was my cheek not wan,
My soul not moody, and my speech not short?
As nature made me, let me then live on.
Spare me thy questions; seek such noisy sport
As suits thy stronger frame and happier mood,
And cease thy preaching of this irksome sort.
It suits my whim to hold aloof and brood;
Go, medler, go! Forgive me, I recall
The word; it was too harsh, for thou art good.
O cruel heaven, shall I tell him all?
God knows I need a hand to cling to tight,
For on my path all Horror’s shadows fall.
I am like one who’s dogged, and who, as night
Is closing in, must cross a lonely spot,
And needs some staunch companion in his flight.

My enemy is Madness: I have got his stealthy step behind me, ever near,
And he will clutch me if thou help me not.
Oh, I have sailed across a sea of fear,
And met new lands to add to Horror’s realms,
And shores of Guilt whence none may scatheless steer.
A very world of jarring thoughts o’erwhelms
My cowering soul when I would tell what’s been
Since I last saw this Hall, these English elms.
Yet must the tale be told, and every scene
Gone o’er again. I fear some monstrous thing
From my own self, and on thy strength must lean.

So listen. I had spent the early spring
In Venice, till Ascension Feast - the day
On which the Doge casts in his bridal ring;
And had embarked, with pleasant winds of May
And gentle seas, on a Venetian ship
Bound for Palermo, where I meant to stay.
All gave us promise of a prosperous trip;
Yet, by the second day, mishap began,
And ‘tween two Turkish sail we had to slip.
From dawn to dusk before the Turk we ran,
Till, safe and breathless off Illyria’s coast,

We each thanked God to be a chainless man.
’Twas but the respite of an hour at most;
The weather changed with dread rapidity.
As in rebuke of Safety’s hasty boast,
God laid His mighty hand upon the sea,
Moulding at once a million liquid peaks
That ever round us tossed more furiously.
For three whole days the tempest blanched the cheeks
Of men whom years of storm had ill enriched,
And long familiar with the petrel’s shrieks.
It was as if the maddened ocean itched
Beneath the ship; so desperately it tried
To shake it off, and bounded, roared, and pitched,
And, like a lion in whose quivering hide
An insect burrows, wasted strength and wrath,
In rush on rush, by littleness defied.
At last, like one who no more hoping hath,
It ceased the strife; and we, at dawn of day,
Had set the helm to seek our long-lost path,
When in the offing, on the lurid grey,
Where tossed black waves, as if of ire still full,
We saw a something looming far away.
It proved to be a small dismasted hull,
To all appearance empty, which remained
Upon one spot, just like a sea-rocked gull.
On closer search we found that it contained
A woman, lashed to remnants of a mast,
Who seemed a corpse, but, slowly, life regained.
Her black, wet, rope-like locks she backward cast,
And in her troubled memory seemed to seek;
Then strangely, doggedly, concealed the past.
Her garb, her features, said she was a Greek,
But Tuscan she spoke well; and ‘tis that tongue
Which she and I in aftertimes did speak.
And as she stood amid the wondering throng,
And no account of home or kindred gave,
A murmur ‘mong the sailors ran along.
‘Keep her,’ they cried; ‘we’ll sell her as a slave;
She owns no kin that she should be exempt;
She’s common prize tossed up by wind and wave.’

She caught the words, but made no vain attempt
To melt their hearts by prayer and sobs and sighs,
And looked around her with a queen’s contempt.
And then it was that suddenly her eyes,
Singling me out, were fastened upon mine
So searchingly, that all felt huge surprise;
And that, like one who by some secret sign
Knows that a strange command will be obeyed,
She cried, ‘Lord, buy me;’ and I paid her fine.
So she my slave, and I her slave was made,
She taking eager bondage from that hour,
And binding me in chains that never weighed.
She seemed contented with a latent power,
Keeping slave garb, and took small gifts alone,
As might an empress from some love below her.
She bade me name her, and I named her Joan,
Feeling no wish to pry within her breast,
Or learn what name her former life might own.
With all the strong lithe beauty, she possessed
The noiseless thread of a tame leopardess,
Docile, majestic, holding strength repressed.
With wondrous insight soon she learned to guess
My gloomy temper’s ever-shifting mood,
And, fierce in love, was chary of caress.
Now wisely silent, she would let me brood
Until the fit was over; now she cheered
With such fantastic tales as tribe still rude
Delight to hear, the night till dawn appeared;
Now sang unto the lute some old Greek air,
Like gusts of moaning tempest wild and weird.
And other gifts she had, and arts more rare;
For when at Syracuse I once fell ill
Of a malignant fever, and her care
Preserved my life, she showed a leech’s skill
In mingling drugs, and knew how to extract
From long-sought herbs a juice for ague’s cure.
Oh she was strangely dowered, and she lacked
Nought that can rivet a man to woman’s side,
Nought that can win, or on the senses act.
But there were moments when a fear would glide
Across my heart, I knew not well of what,
And on the secret of what her life might hide
My mind would work; and yet she daily got
A firmer tenure of the love she’d won,
And felt each day my kisses grow more hot,
Even as those of the Sicilian sun,
Which made of winter spring, with fiery love,
Long ere the thaw had in our clime begun.

She loved, like me, from place to place to move,
And seldom long we lingered where mere chance
Had made us stop, but sought some lovelier grove,
Where, from deep shade, we saw the sunshine dance
On the blue sea which lapped the tideless coast,
And watched the sails which specked the blue expanse.
But when that happened which I dread to reach,
We were abiding where the owlet made
The night oft sleepless with his lonesome screech.
It was a sea-girt castle much decayed,
Belonging to an old Sicilian prince
With whom, when at Palermo, I had stayed.
He loathed the place, would go to no expense
To keep it up; but, loving town resorts,
Had left it in his youth, not seen it since.
It suited well my mood. The weird reports,
The legends which the peasants loved to tell
About its empty halls and grass-grown courts;
Its garden paths where unpicked flowers fell;
Its silent rooms where many echoes woke
And fancies came - all made me love it well.
Its furniture of carved and blackened oak
Looked ghostly in the twilight; while the walls
Were hung with shields and swords of mighty stroke.
Of mighty stroke? Ay, ay, my tongue forestalls
My hesitating thoughts as I relate,
And every item that I name appalls,
As I retreat in mind where monstrous Fate
Changed love to horror; every look I cast
Makes me all love, all horror, re-create.

One night - O John, I come to it at last -
One night I had a nightmare in my sleep
For vividness and terror unsurpassed.
Methought I felt a snake’s cold body creep
About my hand and throat, entwine them tight,
And o’er my breast a hideous mastery keep.
Awhile I lay all-helpless, in despite
Of agony, and felt the pressed veins swell,
Then forced a smothered cry into the night.
My cry awoke me, waking Joan as well,
When, panting still with nightmare fear, I found
That the black locks that on her bosom fell
Had crept about my throat and girt it round
So tightly as awhile to stop the breath,
While other locks about my arms had wound.
We laughed away me ugly dream of death,
And in the silence of the night that waned
We heaped up kisses, burying fear beneath.
I gave the thing no thought; but Hell ordained
That this same dream, before a week was cut,
Should be repeated, and its horror strained.
Once more the snakes encompassed me about,
Once more I woke her with my strangled cry,
Once more I found her locks around my throat.

Then I began to brood; and by and by
Strange things of God’s strong chastisement of crime
Recurred all vaguely to my memory.
I seemed to recollect from olden rhymes
Some tale about the hair of those who take
A many lives through poison; how at times,
When guilt haunts sleep, each lock becomes a snake,
While they remain unconscious of the change;
And turns again to hair so soon they wake.
Smile not, or I will throttle thee. The range
Of Nature is so vast that it hath room
For things more strange than what we call most strange.
I am not mad. I thought with growing gloom
How we had met her, tossed alone at sea,
And how Turks who rule those coasts oft doom
Their women to strange punishments. Might she,  
For some great crime, not have been made to brave  
The winds and waves by some such strange decree?  
And then I thought what proof she often gave  
Of skill in medicine and botanic lore;  
And how that serves to kill that serves to save.

I struggled with these thoughts - I struggled sore:  
With shame and self-contempt I cast them out,  
And looking on her beauty, loved her more.  
But listen, John. A month or thereabout  
Went by unmarked, and then there came a night  
Which seemed to put an end to every doubt.

I was awake; there was no sound, no light.  
Yes, there was sound: her breathing met my ear,  
The breath of dreamless sleep - low, smooth, and slight.  
But suddenly it quickened, as in fear,  
And broken words whose sense I could not tell  
Escaped her lips; my name I seemed to hear.  
Now listen, John. Methought she lay not well,  
But what my hand encountered was, O hell!  
No locks of silky hair: it met instead  
A something cold which whipt around my wrist  
Unholdable, and through my fingers fled.  
I groped again and felt two others twist  
About my arm; - a score of vipers twined  
Beneath my hand, and, as I touched them, hissed.  
There is a horror which leaves free the mind  
But glues the tongue. Without a word I slipt  
From out the bed, and struck a light behind  
Its ample curtain; then, unheard, I crept  
Close up and let the light's faint radiance hover  
Over the Gorgon’s features as she slept.  
The snakes were gone. But long I bent me over  
Her placid face with sickening, searching glance,  
Like one who in deep water would discover  
A corpse, and can see nothing save, perchance,  
The landscape’s fair reflected shapes, which keep  
Balking the vision with their endless dance.  
It seemed to me that in that placid sleep,  
Beneath that splendid surface lay concealed  
Unutterable horror sunken deep.  
And, seeking not to have the whole revealed,  
I fled that fatal room without a sound,  
And sought the breeze of night with brain that reeled.

How long I wandered ‘mid the rocks around,  
Like some priced outlaw - whether one, or two,  
Or three whole days I know not - fever bound  
A veil across my brain, and I’ve no clue  
To guide my memory through those days accurst,
Or show me what my misery found to do.
I recollect intolerably thirst,
And nothing more; until the night again
Enwrapped the earth, and with it brought the worst.
A mighty wish, with which I fought in vain,
Came o’er my soul to see once more her face,
And dragged me back, as by an unseen chain.
Where love and horror struggle, there is place
For countless fierce and contradict’ry tides
Of Will and Sense within one short day’s space.
With every hour the gale has shifted sides;
The needle of Thought’s compass will have leapt
From pole to pole, and chance at last decides.
So I returned, and like a thief I crept
Into the house, where every light was out,
And sought the silent chamber where she slept.

O brother, brother! I’m in awful doubt.
If what I saw, and what shall now be told,
Was a mere figment of the brain throughout,
Then will the sickened Heaven ne’er behold
A deed more monstrous than the deed I’ve done,
Though this old earth should grow again as old.
But if the thing was real, if ‘twas one
Of hell’s corroborations of great guilt,
My hand was an avenger’s hand alone.
So wonder not, if, with the blood I’ve spilt
Still on my hand, I fain would have thee think
That the great wall, which God Himself hath built
Between this world and hell, may have a chink
Through which some horror, yet unknown to earth,
And over great for us, may sometimes slink.
May not such strays from Hell have given birth
To poets’ fancies which the wise deride,
And olden saws of which we now make mirth.
Oh who shall have the courage to decide
Between the things that are and those that seem,
And tell the spirit that the eyes have lied?
Watch thy on face reflected in the stream;
Is that a figment? Who shall dare to call
That unsubstantial form a madman’s dream?
Or watch the shadow on the sunlit wall,
If thou could’st clutch it great would be thy skill;
Thou’lt feel a chilly spot - and that is all.
So may the spectres which, more subtle still,
Elude the feeble intellect of man,
And leave us empty-handed with a chill,
Be just as much reality. We spend
Life ’mid familiar spectres, while the soul
In fear denies the rest. But hear the end.

The moon was at the full; but o’er the whole
Vast vault of heaven was stretched a fleecy tent,  
Through which her baffled light but dimly stole,  
Save where the breezes of the night had rent  
On some few points that subtle woof o’erhead,  
That men might catch her glances as she went.  
And as once more I trod with stealthy tread  
Each silent, vast, and solitary room,  
Where, through the tiny panes, encased in lead,  
Of Gothic windows, moonlight broke the gloom  
So dimly that I scarce could thread my way,  
I seemed a ghost returning to its tomb.  
I neared the fatal bed in which she lay;  
Its sculptured columns had a ghostly look;  
Its heavy daïs, of faded silk by day,  
Looked stony in its tintlessness, and took  
The semblence of the marble canopy  
Above some Teplar’s tomb. Yea, every nook  
Of this strange room bred awe, I know not why,  
While dim mysterious gleamings seemed to thrill  
From swords and shields that decked the walls on high.  
With soundless step, approaching nearer still,  
I touched the sculptured oak, while love and fear  
Contesting in my breast suspending will.  
I saw her shape but vaguely, but could hear  
Her placid breath attesting, if aught could,  
A dreamless sleep and conscience wholly clear.  
Love in my breast was winning, as I stood  
And watched her thus some moments in her sleep;  
Her tranquil breathing seemed to do me good.  
But suddenly it quickened with a leap,  
Becoming like the fierce and panting breath  
Of one in flight, who climbs a rocky steep.  
The soul seemed struggling with the fear of death,  
While broken utterings in a tongue unknown  
Escaped at moments through her tightened teeth.  
I was about to wake her, when the moon  
Lit up the bed, and let me see a sight  
Which for a while changed flesh and blood to stone.  
All round the face, convulsed in sleep and white,  
Innumerable snakes - some large and slow,  
Some lithe and small - writhed bluish in the light,  
Each striving with a sort of ceaseless flow  
To quit the head, and groping as in doubt;  
Then, fast retained, returning to the brow.  
They glided on her pillow; all about  
The moonlit sheet in endless turn and coil,  
And all about her bosom, in and out;  
While round her temples, pale as leaden foil,  
And fast closed lids, live curls of vipers twined,  
Whose endless writhe had made all hell recoil.  
Long I stood petrified; both limbs and mind  
Refusing in the presence of that face
The customary work to each assigned.
But, all at once, I felt a fire replace
My frozen blood, and unseen spirits seemed
To call for an Avenger, and to brace
My arm for one great blow. Above me gleamed
A double-handed sword upon the wall,
Whose weight, till then, beyond my strength I deemed.
I seized it, swung it high, and let it fall
Like thunder on the sleeping Gorgon’s neck
Before her eye could see or her tongue could call.
And, O my God! as if herself a snake
Which, stricken of a sudden in its sleep,
Coils up and writhes all round the injuring stake,
She coiled about the weapon in a heap,
But gave no sound, while all the sheet soaked red,
Except a sort of gurgle hoarse and deep,
Which made me strike again, until the head,
Whose beauty death’s convulsion seemed to spare,
Rolled like a heavy ball from off the bed.
I held the dripping trophy by the hair,
Which now no more was snakes, but long black locks,
And scanned the features with a haggard stare.
And, like to one around whose spirit flocks
Too great a crowd of thoughts for thought to act,
I fled once more along the moonlit rocks.
Then Doubt, with his tormentors, came and racked.

Eugene Lee - Hamilton,
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Secondary Sources:


