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# Grave Passions: Enclosure and Exposure in Charlotte Mew's Graveyard Poetry

DENNIS DENISOFF

A LONG TRADITION EXISTS IN WEST EUROPEAN POETRY OF USING THE GRAVE site as a symbol for politicized distinctions between the living and the dead. These images of cemeteries, graves, and coffins traditionally reaffirm the status quo of either this world or the afterlife. In a number of cases, the affirmation of a coherent and just order to the afterlife is used as an assurance that a parallel structure underlies our seemingly chaotic and inconstant existence in the secular realm. The turn-of-the-century English writer Charlotte Mew, however, does not follow poetic convention. Instead, she has her imagery remain within a graveyard of the living dead—the hodgepodge of people buried, so to speak, through social demonization and marginalization. In her poetry, Mew envisions the site of entombment as a dynamic space that contests society's extension of the living/dead segregation to other cultural forms of exclusionism and discrimination. Her unique contribution to the genre of graveyard poetry encourages delegitimized and inchoate identities to push and to prod against the enclosures within which conventional society has attempted to confine them. Most consistently, Mew's depictions of entombment reflect the coercion of women into dependency on men for affection, erotic fulfillment, and economic satisfaction.

Mew herself was a lesbian, a woman whose strongest affections and attractions were for other women.<sup>1</sup> As Terry Castle has noted, in a spectral language appropriate to a discussion of Mew's poetics, lesbianism has for centuries been “ghosted” out of dominant discourses.<sup>2</sup> Castle goes on to argue, however, that “within the very imagery of negativity lies the possibility of recovery—a way of conjuring up, or bringing back into view, that which has been denied. Take the metaphor far enough, and the invisible will rematerialize; the spirit will become flesh” (pp. 7-8). Like Castle after her, Mew locates agency for ghosted desire within the space made manifest through its cultural denial. Although unrequited same-sex desire such as Mew's need not lead to poetry with a lesbian-centered social critique, the

symbolic connection between her works that overtly address gender-based issues, on one hand, and those that do not, on the other, reveals that her oeuvre in general does reflect a non-heteronormative vision. By situating her concerns within the context of previous graveyard poetry, I hope to distinguish this unique skepticism in her revision of the established symbology.

### Mew's Predecessor: The Gendered Gravity of Emily Brontë

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have observed that, for at least the last four centuries, the most powerful symbols in Western Europe have resided at the margins rather than the established centers of the social body.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that those elements of society that are traditionally deemed marginal function purely as symbols of anarchy and disorder, or that they are always part of a political strategy for subverting the status quo. Rather, these marginalized elements sustain a notably intense symbolic force, and this force can be used toward diverse and even contradictory sociopolitical purposes. Stallybrass and White add, however, that

a fundamental rule seems to be that what is excluded at the overt level of identity-formation is productive of new objects of desire. As new classificatory sets emerge with new forms of production and new social relations, so the carnivalesque and transgressive anti-structure of the emergent classical body will also change, marking out new sites of symbolic and metaphorical intensity in the ideological field. (p. 25)

Positioning their discussion within the context of desire, Stallybrass and White imply that, despite the unpredictability of the marginal, it functions in reaction—as a counter-structure—to the hegemonic order.

Michel Foucault's model of power relations suggests a similar mode of agency for marginalized people. According to Foucault, power is not something which certain social factions use against others, but a system of multi-directional interaction in which the pool of marginality is constantly shifting in accord with changing power relations. Individual agency in such a macro-structural context is not impossible, but it is hampered both by the momentum of these larger movements and by the fact that the individual has no vantage point from which to view them on their grand scale and thus from which to plan the most effective strategic action.<sup>4</sup> However, as the position that symbols hold in power relations makes apparent, the fluidity of such movements should not be over-emphasized. Despite the multi-purpose quality of symbols, they can also ossify into cultural icons, conventions, and clichés. Through the repetition of a potent symbolic equation—such as cemeteries signifying the confusion underlying society's façade of control—the correlation attains a familiarity that can lead to its essentialization as an assumed "truth." This means that macro-structural

shifts built around symbols are not random and chaotic, but that rough projections of their future developments are possible.

Mew taps into a generic tradition of symbolism extending back not only to Emily Brontë, but further to the male graveyard poets of the eighteenth century. Mew's work echoes that of the best known authors of graveyard literature—writers such as Robert Blair, Thomas Parnell, and Edward Young—but it also differs from their material in telling ways. Although these men were not a cohesive group in either their views or methods of representation, they precede Mew in conceptualizing the cemetery as a site of contestation between a sense of discord and a desire for order. Not allowing their ruminations to end in disheartened fatalism, these poets attempted to contain their anxieties within normative fictions of moral order and spiritual transcendence. They transvalued mortality into the basis for a kind of selfhood that conforms to and furthers the established social order. Eighteenth-century graveyard authors meditated on the fate of the body and soul as part of a widespread search by artists and intellectuals of the day for what Stephen Cox describes as “a philosophy of the self that can remove [the] anxiety about the ‘difference of minds’ and about the absence of a community of understanding based on objective knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> Although many graveyard authors' works emphasize the indeterminacy of both individual and collective identities, the sense of physical, spiritual, and intellectual disorder is encouraged and explored only to be contained by the ideological framework of providential teleology. This greater spiritual affirmation of the socio-religious status quo subsumes political dissidence within a narrative of conformity to traditional, conservative values. Blair, Parnell, and Young's imaginative euphoria eventually coheres to a fantasy of re-aggregation in a lost homeland through apocalyptic re-creation.<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely such an essentializing reaffirmation of the status quo that Emily Brontë did not believe could be attained through a meditation on the dead. Brontë was one of Mew's favorite poets, and one can find in Mew's work a reflection of Brontë's gendered representation of isolation and ambivalence regarding the dominant symbolic visions of death and the netherworld. A number of critics have addressed the feminist politics of Brontë's gendering of life, death, and the afterlife in her poetry. In “I see around me tombstones grey,” for example, the speaker describes heaven as a “land of light,” a “long eternity of joy,” and a “dazzling land above” (ll. 15, 22, 35).<sup>7</sup> The terminology, although initially seeming celebratory, ultimately creates an image of this other realm as a site where one's mind is desensitized of any sorrowful memories of earth. Within the context of the poem, the bedazzling splendor of heaven becomes an unemotional, impersonal emptiness which contrasts with the gentle “mother” earth who nurtures, loves, and “fondly smile[s]” on her suffering children (ll. 28, 32). As in

many of Brontë's works, this poem eventually turns away from heaven because it offers a less satisfying alternative to one's emotionally fulfilling, even if at times painful, life on earth.

Brontë's unwillingness to accept a model of the afterlife like that celebrated by eighteenth-century graveyard authors is partly due to her sense that such a formulation reinforces the existing secular hegemonic order that discriminates against both women as writers and women in general. Adapting a binary model that groups women, earth, and life on one side and men and heaven on the other, Brontë articulates a revision of graveyard literature's search for resolution through an other-worldly affirmation of the status quo. In her work, the assumed benefits of the afterlife are challenged by life on earth, which she personifies as a woman or goddess. As Teddi Lynn Chichester has demonstrated, the mythic character Augusta who appears central in so many of Brontë's poems frequently functions as an agent of death for a plethora of male characters, while she herself remains within the secular realm.<sup>8</sup> Noting the numerous depictions of severed heterosexual relations in the Gondal poetry, Chichester distinguishes Brontë's concerns specifically from her male Romantic precursors' celebration of the individual's isolated union with the sublime.<sup>9</sup>

Brontë's poem "F. De Samara / Written in the Faaldine Prison Caves to A. G. A." stands out in this regard because, rather than offering an affirming representation of a woman or a female earth, it focuses on a man who converts his religious uncertainty into misogynistic disrespect. The poem depicts an imprisoned lover voicing his concern that his demise may not lead to his feeling a sense of peace. Despite his liminal position, the speaker also sustains an antagonism to his lost love, Augusta:

Thy sun is near meridian height,  
And my sun sinks in endless night;  
But, if that night bring only sleep,  
Then I shall rest, while thou wilt weep. (ll. 1-4)

Instead of voicing pity for the living and faith in the afterlife, the speaker articulates anxieties and doubts about his future:

And say not that my early tomb  
Will give me to a darker doom:  
Shall these long, agonising years  
Be punished by eternal tears? (ll. 5-8)

Although acknowledging that he himself is unworthy of the heaven that he expects exists, his main desire is for some assurance that Augusta will also suffer: "O memory, wake! Let scenes return / That even her haughty heart must mourn!" (ll. 55-56). The vindictive lover is obsessed with Augusta's own end, proclaiming: "But if there be a God above / Whose arm is strong,

whose word is true, / This hell shall wring thy spirit too!" (ll. 74-76). His hellish, endungeoned cries, however, are highly problematic. Brontë has the very man who is symbolically conjoined to the afterlife challenge its primacy and coherence, an irony echoed in the poem's claim that the other realm does not resolve this split but simply offers another binary—that between heaven and hell.

This mise-en-abyme of irresolution is further destabilized by Augusta herself, who is either unable or unwilling to recognize the binary on which the speaker's position and the couple's relationship depend. The system of judgment that the male character assumes for himself and Augusta is, as Brontë's closing depiction of the heroine suggests, deflated by her refusal to acknowledge the speaker's value system. She listens, we are told, to a new lover sing while, in the sands of the Edermo shore, she sketches an image of the imprisoned man. The sense of transience evoked by the waves lapping near the heroine as she draws the man—his identity now only a copy of a memory that will ultimately be washed away by time—highlights the ineffectiveness of his accusations and threats. After all, even he has concerns about the essential basis of the hegemonic order. "But if there be a God above" (my emphasis), he comments in his final words—a considerably large doubt on which to build one's castle. In this poem, as in other pieces, Brontë associates the female with life and earth, and the male with the afterlife and heaven. She problematizes this equation, however, both by casting doubt on the eternal quality of the afterlife, and by essentializing the female and the secular as an amorphous and potentially immortal goddess. While highlighting the conventional binary used to separate men and women, she does so only to demonstrate a dissident means of revising that very convention.

Brontë's gender-based model of the mortal divide had an inevitable impact on the work of Charlotte Mew. Mew's essay "The Poems of Emily Brontë" tells us at least as much about her own writerly concerns as it does about her subject's. In Mew's view, Brontë's poems depict a more controlled and subtle writer than does *Wuthering Heights*, for which the author was better known. According to Mew, Brontë is "a self-determined outlaw," "a soul which scorns the world with masterful persistence and disclaims all comradeship save that of the 'strange visitants of air.'"<sup>10</sup> Although a recluse for whom "the earth [was] her passionate and only love" (p. 358), Brontë's poetry nevertheless is dominated by a

note of pure passion . . . , a passion untouched by mortality and unappropriated by sex—the passion of angels, of spirits, redeemed or fallen, if such there be. . . . Through the mist and sorrow of an ever-unsatisfied desire, she looked out upon the world, which the sad circumstances of her environment, together with the gloomy bias of her nature, showed so dark, with a curious indifference and mistrust. (p. 358)

Elsewhere in the essay, Mew elaborates on the androgynous quality of the poetry, “strangely and exquisitely severed from embodiment and freed from any accident of sex. Never perhaps has passion been portrayed as she portrayed it—wayward and wild as storm, but pure as fire, as incorruptible as life’s own essence—deathless in the face of death” (p. 363). Mew’s language belies a personal investment in the particular emotional context being described. What she depicts as Brontë’s androgynous passion, unrequited desire, and mistrust of her environment suggests a concomitant concern in her own work. While generally appropriate terms for a description of Brontë’s poetry, the specificity of the vocabulary and the peculiar incorporation of potentially erotic and sexually unconventional discourse into a description of isolation encourages one to recognize that Mew found something particularly relevant to her own sense of sexual isolation and “ever-unsatisfied desire.”

Mew also draws attention to the binary of mortality that permeates Brontë’s poems, arguing that both the earth and death, but not anything following death, were a comfort to the poet:

Nature under all aspects greeted her always with a face of tireless beauty, a breast of wide-sufficing rest. The motherhood of earth for her children—the love of death for its own, such communion she could taste and understand. One held the liberty for which she panted, and one the rest towards which she leaned; and both surveyed, unmoved as she, the trivial prizes for which men strive and die. (p. 366)

“She lived,” Mew tells us, “long enough to lift such a cry for liberty as few women have ever lifted: to give a brief but sufficient utterance to the soul” (p. 368). Mew makes clear in this essay that liberty is connected both to the living and to women’s souls. Death may be a comforter, an end to a woman’s struggle, but it is life within the secular realm that proves most fulfilling and most worthy of attention.

Defining the earth as Brontë’s “passionate and only love” and death as a friendly, “benignant power” (p. 359), Mew also points out that there is no sense in the poetry of “the mystery beyond, of judgement to follow” (p. 359). After she concludes that her predecessor’s lack of attention to the afterlife reflects a view of death as an elimination of all problems, Mew herself moves on to focus on the threshold between life and death, singling out a particular passage from Brontë’s poem “My Comforter”:

So stood I, in Heaven’s glorious sun,  
And in the glare of Hell;  
My spirit drank a mingled tone,  
Of seraph’s song and demon’s moan.

According to Mew, this passage, with its odd commingling of heaven and hell, is particularly “convincing.” Mew’s own writing straddles similarly

liminal sites, but it does not offer an exact copy of Brontë's symbology, and this distinction sheds important light on her own unique efforts to devalue such gender-based patterning.

### Charlotte Mew and the Grave Passion of Women

In her poetry, Mew offers a radical reconceptualization of the grave as a manifestation of the anxieties behind her society's efforts to classify, to categorize, and to contain gender- and sex-based minorities. In accordance with Stallybrass and White's depiction of the margins as ideological sites of particular symbolic intensity, her revitalization of the symbol of the grave demonstrates that the mimicry of cultural conventions can lead to a revision of heteronormative ideology. Judith Butler has argued that the denaturalization of gender introduces new areas of agency that are not accommodated by existing classificatory systems: "The reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed."<sup>11</sup> Mew's denaturalizing symbology, rather than arguing for the verity of an alternate, unacknowledged notion of identity or desire, challenges claims of originary authority in general, much as Brontë's heroine Augusta refuses to enter into an argument with her ex-lover. The poet represents the grave as a site that contests essentializing systems of surveillance and excision in order to destabilize established gender- and sex-based identity categories. Such a move questions not only a popular symbolic equation, but also the agency of diverse members of society, including those who are marginalized and those who are not.

Almost every poem that Mew wrote addresses the issue of death. Many—such as "In Nunhead Cemetery," "Madeleine in Church," and "The Narrow Door"—overtly depict cemeteries, graves, or coffins, while others—such as "The Farmer's Bride," "Rooms," and "Do Dreams Lie Deeper?"—find symbols for death in confined spaces, narrow doorways, and beds.<sup>12</sup> Mew was, of course, aware of the symbolic conception of the grave that was popular in her day. She was also familiar with actual death from a young age. In 1876, when she was seven years old, two of her brothers, Christopher and Richard, died of unrelated causes. Another sibling also died very young. Her interest in the grave and entombment, however, cannot be attributed solely to her personal experiences. Penelope Fitzgerald points out that in fact most of Mew's elegiac poetry was written years after the actual deaths which Fitzgerald considers to be their catalysts. A consideration of Mew's entire oeuvre suggests that her attention to the grave was not based on a concern with memorializing her dead relatives as part of a grieving process, so much as on a displeasure with the accepted



hierarchies of her society.

Rosemary Jackson has noted that, in twentieth-century western society, fantasy in general “does not invent supernatural regions, but presents a natural world inverted into something strange, something ‘other.’ It becomes ‘domesticated,’ humanized, turning from transcendental explorations to transcriptions of a human condition.”<sup>13</sup> In line with this secularization of the fantastic, Mew’s critique of social discrimination does not shift toward an inquiry into or celebration of a harmonious existence beyond, but retains a focus on the seemingly unseverable relation between the dead and the living. In “Madeleine in Church,” from her first and best known collection *The Farmer’s Bride* (1916), the eponymous heroine comments:

Here, in the darkness, where this plaster saint  
 Stands nearer than God stands to our distress,  
 And one small candle shines, but not so faint  
 As the far lights of everlastingness  
 I’d rather kneel than over there, in open day  
 Where Christ is hanging, rather pray  
 To something more like my own clay,  
 Not too divine. (ll. 1-8)

Madeleine prefers the sainted individual over the ephemeral divinity because his “taint” of humanness “brings him closer” to her lived experience (l. 12). The conventional teleology which depicts the fallen individual trying to move toward a flawless deity is redirected in this poem, with Madeleine not only perceiving a gap between the secular and the other-worldly, but also choosing to direct emotional energy toward other “tainted,” sympathetic human beings rather than toward the divine. “I think my body was my soul” (l. 64), the speaker comments,

And when we are made thus  
 Who shall control  
 Our hands, our eyes, the wandering passion of our feet,  
 Who shall teach us  
 To thrust the world out of our heart. (ll. 65-69)

The construction of God in this poem as a cold and distant force brings to mind Brontë’s own affirmation of the sympathetic earth. Meanwhile, the poem refuses to offer any extensive consideration or description of a nether region, and this focus on the site of entombment keeps the reader from sanitizing the imagery into a standard symbol.

The poem “In Nunhead Cemetery” similarly empowers the grave-site with an almost human agency, a political pull that refuses to allow the reader to box the symbol away into its traditional function.<sup>14</sup> The dramatic monologue—which, like a number of Mew’s pieces, has a male voice describing the loss of a female beloved—opens with the lines:

It is the clay that makes the earth stick to his spade;  
 He fills in holes like this year after year;  
 The others have gone; they were tired, and half afraid  
 But I would rather be standing here. (ll. 1-4)

The stanza immediately questions society's privileging of "the living" as exclusively worthy of legitimized identities. Even the poem's opening line undermines the narrator's authority over his buried beloved by encouraging the reader to conjecture as to what else it might be that is clinging to the grave-digger's tool; "It is the clay," the speaker assures both himself and us, "that makes the earth stick to his spade." And while it is perhaps the thought of alternate possibilities that has scared off the other mourners, the speaker remains transfixed, drawn toward the earth as if unsure whether the buried woman is dead or alive. This sense of persistent attachment across the mortal divide is enhanced by the opening alexandrine, the long line making the image of clinging clay that reaches from the grave all the more difficult to shake off.

Early on, the poem suggests an inevitable interdependence between the living and the dead. The speaker begins the second stanza of his ruminations with a blatant claim to the corpse that he has "nowhere else to go" (l. 5). While it might seem that this insight is especially appropriate for somebody mourning the death of a beloved, the lines immediately following the statement direct attention not toward the buried woman but toward society at large:

I have seen this place  
 From the windows of the train that's going past  
 Against the sky. This is rain on my face—  
 It was raining here when I saw it last. (ll. 5-8)

The mourner conflates his sorrow over the dead with the general downpour and then, by pointing out that it was raining the previous time he passed by on the train, extends the connection to society in general. He establishes in other words a liquid continuum that blurs the dead with the living. The train itself—with its passive passengers in uniform compartments in a string of rectangular boxes—becomes its own cavalcade of coffins. The boxes of the train and the boxes of the graveyard reflect each other, with the speaker ultimately inverting the two:

This is not a real place; perhaps by-and-by  
 I shall wake—I am getting drenched with all this rain:  
 To-morrow I will tell you about the eyes of the Crystal Palace train  
 Looking down on us, and you will laugh and I shall see what you see  
 again. (ll. 21-25)

Even as the speaker envisions himself sharing the grave site with his

beloved, he retains his attention on the now personified train, his new perspective being an inversion of his view of the cemetery with which the poem began.

Mew uses a similar strategy of confusion to undermine cultural binaries in a number of her other poems. In "On the Asylum Road," the assumedly sane individuals pass by and stare at the insane, while the insane do likewise:

The gayest crowd that they will ever pass  
Are we to brother-shadows in the lane:  
Our windows, too, are clouded glass  
To them, yes, every pane! (ll. 15-18)

The confusion of subject positions with regard to insanity was a highly personal one for Mew because two of her siblings were diagnosed as insane in later life. Mew apparently told Alida Monro that "she and her sister had both made up their minds early in life . . . that they would never marry for fear of passing on the mental taint that was in their heredity" (qtd. in Warner, p. xv). The marginalization of the insane thus accords, for Mew, not only with that of the dead (as depicted in "In Nunhead Cemetery"), but also with sexual relegation. The limitations placed on those who are insane extend to those who believe they may have a hereditary taint of insanity, and this very marginalization actually sanctions Mew's avoidance of a heteronormative life. The legitimized "deviance" of insanity gives Mew the agency to accommodate the unacknowledged "deviance" of lesbianism. And yet, throughout her work, such concerns about exclusion remain laced with uncertainty.

In "In Nunhead Cemetery," the mourner's only consideration of Christian benevolence is saturated with doubt and despair—"God? What is God?" (l. 6). The speaker finds his answer in a recollection of his boyhood Christmases, when it was only his excitement over presents that had caused him to "pray to Christ to keep / Our small souls safe till morning light" (ll. 72-73). The memory of material reward leads to a brief reference to a benevolent Christ, but this image is quickly subsumed by doubt and the speaker's stronger desire to lie with his beloved in the earth:

I am scared, I am staying with you to-night—  
Put me to sleep.

I shall stay here: here you can see the sky;  
The houses in the streets are much too high;  
There is no one left to speak to there;  
Here they are everywhere,  
And just above them fields and fields of roses lie—  
If he would dig it all up again they would not die. (ll. 75-82)

The speaker's imaginings do not shift into a scene of the couple re-united and passing into celestial glory. Although it is indeed a scene of peace and calm, he has refused to leave the earth. As the mourner notes, it is in fact among the dead that he finally finds a community to whom he feels he can speak, a community that understands his feelings of isolation.

The politics behind Mew's depiction of social alienation attains a more effective nuance in "Beside the Bed." This piece, which can be read as a distilled version of "In Nunhead Cemetery," opens with the lines:

Someone has shut the shining eyes, straightened and folded  
 The wandering hands quietly covering the unquiet breast:  
 So, smoothed and silenced you lie, like a child, not again to be questioned or scolded;  
 But, for you, not one of us believes that this is rest. (ll. 1-4)

Although assumedly dead, the subject is described through active adjectives such as "shining," "wandering," and "unquiet." It is in fact an external force that shuts the eyes, organizes the body, and generally "silence[s]" the subject. But, as in "In Nunhead Cemetery," the speaker undermines any separation between the living and the dead, noting that, if the speaker and subject were to lay their cheeks together, the latter would color and "smile at this fraud of death" (l. 8). The expected progression from life to death is stymied when the narrator comments, "Because all night you have not turned to us or spoken / It is time for you to wake" (ll. 9-10). Awakening is a common metaphor for Resurrection, but in this poem Mew outmaneuvers the traditional metaphor to emphasize not an accord but a distinction between the dead and the dormant. While a night of motionlessness and silence would encourage one to conjecture that the bed-ridden subject has passed away, the speaker concludes that such a long rest means the person will obviously be ready to return to the living. By first politicizing the scenario by defining the external forces as the cause of the individual's silence, Mew then challenges the symbolic convention by proclaiming that the subject is not dead but only sleeping, and that—as the speaker states in the final line of the poem—"This is only a most piteous pretence of sleep!" (l. 12). The desire to adopt the metaphoric conflation of sleep and death is left, at the end of the piece, as a site of contestation over two possible interpretations.

"Beside the Bed" is a central poem in Mew's writing with regard to the politics of death symbolism because it focuses on a subject that appears to have just died, marking the specific, awkward moment that the conventional symbology erases in its clear-cut separation. The piece emphasizes the blur between the living and the dead that is so crucial to Mew's gender politics, allowing the more blatant inversion of conventions in pieces such as "In Nunhead Cemetery" to segue with other works that address the issue

of gender- and sex-based oppression without overt depictions of the dead and the grave.

Mew's symbology of the grave and other enclosed spaces is paradoxical in the sense that it signifies not only the isolation and oppression felt by certain members of society, but also, more positively, an epistemological erasure, an escape from the symbolic system which otherwise categorizes and disempowers these individuals. In "The Farmer's Bride," a man describes his marriage to a woman who rejects his attention. She escapes one night, but the husband and other villagers pursue her until they find the wife among a herd of sheep—a poignantly ironic image in light of her failed attempt at nonconformity. The crowd then "caught her, fetched her home at last / And turned the key upon her, fast" (ll. 18-19). Enslaved thus by marriage, the woman performs what manual labor is expected of her, but only "So long as men-folk keep away" (l. 24). And to ensure her safety, "She sleeps up in the attic there / Alone, poor maid" (ll. 43-44).

Despite the fact that the husband describes the stairs to the attic as only a minor deterrent—"Tis but a stair / Betwixt us" (ll. 44-45)—Mew suggests otherwise. The poet uses stairs (and stares) repeatedly as a symbol not of escape but of hindrance. In "Fame," for example, the stairs are crowded with strangers (l. 6); in "The Narrow Door," we see a coffin "jerk-ing down the bend / Of twisted stair" (ll. 8-9); and in the short story "The Smile," men are drawn by some mysterious force toward a beautiful woman at the top of a tower, but the stairs of the structure are treacherous. Many die in climbing them, while others plummet bloodied from the heights. The woman in the tower ultimately falls in love with a baby girl and, when the infant grows into an adult, she too climbs "blood-stained and broken" to her love (l. 200), only to die in the other woman's arms. Although the relationship is unfulfilled, the love of the two women is not unrequited. In "The Farmer's Bride," the psychological counterpart to the physical stairs separating husband and wife is captured in the man's description of her "Lying awake with her wide brown *stare*" (l. 13; my emphasis). The woman's fear of explicitly male sexuality is made apparent, while he meanwhile sees her as having been wholly desexed by her fear: "Her smile went out, and 'twasn't a woman" (l. 7).

Unlike the women in "The Smile," the husband in "The Farmer's Bride" does not base his attraction on love. However, while the heroine's disgust with men is overtly stated, the man's lack of affection for his wife is justified through a cultural pragmatism. He notes that, although perhaps the woman was too young when he married her, one has no time during the harvest season for sensitivity and affection (l. 1). When he discovers that she has run away, he declares that she should "properly have been abed" (l. 11), a view that he apparently sees as justifying hunting her down and lock-

ing her up. He then complains about the fact that, after three years of marriage, they still have no children, his tone suggesting that the woman is at fault: "What's Christmas-time without there be / Some other in the house than we!" (l. 41). And if these examples of insensitivity were not enough to show that more than a few creaky stairs separate the couple, the glimmer of concern in his reference to the "poor maid" (l. 44) is quickly overwhelmed by the last lines of the poem, in which she becomes a purely sensual object of his desires: "Oh! My God! the down, / The soft young down of her, the brown, / The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair!" (ll. 45-47). One is led to feel sympathetic for the woman less from the farmer's description of her as some sort of frightened animal or "fay" (l. 8), than from the ease with which he blandly turns to cultural conventions to justify his abuse. The coincidental harvest season allows him to be insensitive at the time of marriage, and then the marriage itself justifies his treatment of her as a piece of livestock. His closing stanza hammers home the final nail, where the lament proves to be not for the extinguished young woman but for his unfulfilled urges.

The insensitive expectations of the farmer contrast tellingly with Mew's conception, in her longest poem "Madeleine in Church," of a female-centered economy of attraction and desire that gains strength both from the joy and pain of mutual affection. Val Warner has pointed out that Mew "focuses on women who are themselves objects of passion or romance, and on women who yearn after it: in both cases their male counterparts are rather colourless personifications" (p. xviii). "Madeleine in Church" offers a more politicized rendering of this emphasis by challenging a male-privileging, Christian teleology through the consideration of a woman-centered resolution. Like Brontë, the poet turns to an image of the mother/child relationship as encapsulating the uniquely earthly experience of sorrow combined with pleasure:

That joy and pain, like any mother and her unborn child were almost one.  
I could hardly bear  
The dreams upon the eyes of white geraniums in the dusk,  
The thick, close voice of musk,  
The jessamine music on the thin night air,  
Or, sometimes, my own hands about me anywhere—  
The sight of my own face (for it was lovely then) even the scent of my own hair.

(ll. 53-59)

Madeleine positions her experience of pleasure and pain within a secular context. Rather than encouraging a sense of union with the divine, the attention to sight, sound, and touch is situated within a relationship between mother and child that shifts ultimately to a sensual exploration of the self, where her hands traverse her own body and she admires her own

face and the scent of her own hair.

Even though Madeleine's imaginings return to the possibility of resolution within a traditional Christian model, such a move offers her nothing but a sense of confinement and painful solitude:

No one to sit with, really, or to speak to, friend to friend:  
 Out of the long procession, black or white or red  
 Not one left now to say "Still I am here, then see you, dear, lay here your head."  
 Only the doll's house looking on the Park  
 To-night, all nights, I know, when the man puts the lights out, very dark.  
 With, upstairs, in the blue and gold box of a room, just the maids' footsteps overhead,  
 Then utter silence and the empty world—the room—the bed—  
 The corpse! (ll. 148-155)

Madeleine connects religious oppression with a lack of human sympathy and the absence of basic friendship. The imagery gains gendered connotations with the probable reference to Ibsen's play *The Doll House*, which explicitly deals with the confinement of women, and which was popular among the suffragists and other women at the time.<sup>15</sup> This politicization of the symbolism is then followed by a description of a man snuffing out any glimmers of hope, leaving the heroine in utter darkness. Meanwhile, as in "The Farmer's Bride," the attic becomes the site both of the woman's banishment and her hope. The heavens become a "box of a room" in which only a woman offers any sign of life—a sign which would itself be extinguished if it were not for Madeleine's own rebellious voice.

The intense isolation created by this section of the poem is briskly conjoined to the heroine's private ardor:

For some of us there is a passion, I suppose  
 So far from earthly cares and earthly fears  
 That in its stillness you can hardly stir  
 Or in its nearness, lift your hand,  
 So great that you have simply got to stand  
 Looking at it through tears, through tears. (ll. 168-173)

This passage describes Madeleine's conception of her name-sake Mary Magdalene's passion, but the resulting kiss, described as "something altogether new" (l. 179) offered "in her own way" (l. 178), is equated with the rare affections of the heroine herself: "I wonder was it like a kiss that once I knew, / The only one that I would care to take / Into the grave with me" (ll. 188-190). Mary's kiss is delivered to Christ, and Madeleine notes indirectly that her kiss is also bestowed upon a man, but the overwhelming emotional and erotic connection remains between the two women who share the same passion and sense of alienation. "Madeleine in Church" thereby articulates a relationship between, on one hand, the gendered politics of religion and death and, on the other, a woman-centered economy of

desire.

Throughout her career, Mew returned to the site of entombment as the symbolic nexus of an interrogation into gender-based sociopolitical concerns. Her poetry repeatedly decomposes the extremely influential symbolism of the grave and coffin, whose essentialist segregation of the living and the dead she saw as reinforcing other modes of social delegitimation, erasure, and exclusion. In her poems, silenced and marginalized people gain agency from their ability to have influence on the status quo not simply despite the fact that their legitimation as members of society is denied, but precisely because of it. The characters adopt the site of erasure as a location of empowerment. This challenge to received norms is predicated on a symbolic revision that advances a radically altered conception of self-identification and social arrangements. Mew modified the genre of graveyard literature such that the symbology now refused to allow its readers to turn to some notion of stagnant bliss for a resolution of cultural dissidence. The idea of a harmonious afterlife—in which so much of society was heavily invested—is presented as the very phenomenon which blocks her own efforts at self-affirmation. Offering a more radical challenge than Brontë to a heteronormative, binary gender model, Mew formulates a graveyard symbology that allows a woman-centered economy of affection and desire to permeate essentialized and seemingly nonsexual social templates. Her unique configuration of “the grave” as a site of agency accords with a lesbian subject position from which men are viewed not simply as oppressive yet inevitable components of society, but as unnecessary for a woman’s emotional fulfillment or poetic voice.

## Notes

- 1 My definition of “lesbianism” as not limited to physical sexual interaction between two women derives, of course, from Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 227-254. I agree with those critics who have noted that such a description of lesbianism risks the erasure of sexuality. However, for two reasons this broader cultural conception of lesbianism is especially useful for a discussion of literature such as Mew’s that itself obfuscates same-sex female desire. The definition does not only bring attention to compulsory heterosexuality, but also emphasizes the diverse discursive means by which such desire could have been communicated at the turn of the century outside of the realm of scientific, medical, and juridical terminology. On Mew’s lesbianism, see Penelope Fitzgerald’s *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends* (London: Collins, 1984).
- 2 Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), p. 6.
- 3 Peter Sallibrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), p. 20.



- 4 Much has been written on the complications inherent in Foucault's notion of macro-structures and power. With regard to his consideration of individual agency and unofficial discourses, see Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991) and Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).
- 5 Stephen Cox, *"The Stranger Within Thee": Concepts of the Self in Late-Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), p. 24.
- 6 I would like to thank Michael M. Holmes for his insights and suggestions regarding eighteenth-century graveyard poetry.  
     George Eliot, in her essay "Worldliness and other-Worldliness: The Poet Young" (*Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney [London: Routledge, 1963]), takes Young to task for his "radical insincerity as a poetic artist" (p. 366), a judgment which she based on her evaluation of him as manifesting "the type of that deficient human sympathy, that impiety towards the present and the visible, which flies for its motives, its sanctities, and its religion, to the remove, the vague, and the unknown" (p. 385). Eliot's comments have had an enormous impact on the subsequent reception and study of Young and his graveyard contemporaries. As a result, "other-worldliness" has become a principal focus of graveyard criticism.
- 7 Emily Brontë, *Poems*, ed. C. W. Hatfield (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1941).
- 8 Teddi Lynn Chichester, "Evading 'Earth's Dungeon Tomb': Emily Brontë, A.G.A., and the Fatally Feminine," *VP* 29 (1991): 1-15.
- 9 Although a number of scholars have positioned Brontë's work within the context of male-defined Romantic poetry, her relation to eighteenth-century graveyard poets has to date not been analyzed. See, for example, Nina Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985); Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980); and Lyn Pykett, *Emily Brontë* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
- 10 Charlotte Mew, *Collected Poems and Prose*, ed. Val Warner (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981), p. 358.
- 11 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 147.
- 12 This symbology extends to Mew's prose as well. Examples of Mew's revision of the symbol of entombment in her short stories appear in "A White Night" and "The Smile."
- 13 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 17.
- 14 Mew's brother Henry, who had been diagnosed insane, was actually buried in Nunhead Cemetery in 1901 (Warner, p. xiv).
- 15 On Ibsen's *Doll House* and turn-of-the-century feminism, see Joan Templeton, "The *Doll House* Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen," *PMLA* 104 (1989): 28-40.