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THE DISCOURSE OF DESIRE IN VICTORIAN POETRY

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of

Ph.D.
in
English

at Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand.

Sarah Lee Frost

2004



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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the representation of desire in seven Victorian poems: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese; Coventry Patmore's The Angel in the House; Augusta Webster's Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet Sequence; Arthur Hugh Clough's Amours de Voyage; Alfred Tennyson's Idylls of the King; Robert Browning's Fifine at the Fair; and George Meredith's Modern Love. It focuses on desiring subjects, objects of desire, the pursuit of desires and the question of desire and its satisfaction.

Traditionally, Victorian love poetry has been schematised as a "poetry of relationships", and located within a matrix of conflict between duty and desire. This thesis argues that an enriched conception of desire, drawn from a range of theories that have been developing over recent years, can, when brought to bear on Victorian poetry, disclose new insights into and common interests between these poems that have not been apparent within the traditional interpretative matrices.

The picture of Victorian desire that emerges from this exploration is one of desire expressed in acts of self-creation and self-articulation. Affinities between the expressive, dramatic, and narrative poetry of the period appear. New tones, ironic, rueful, and humorous, are audible alongside the restrained and sincere avowals that have been argued to constitute the discourse of Victorian lovers. Desires are self-consciously pursued and performed within a context in which self-interest — both interest in self and according to that self's interests — predominates.

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NOTE ON EDITIONS USED

The following editions of the poems have been used unless otherwise noted:

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. Sonnets from the Portuguese. 1850. In The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ed. Karen Hill. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1994.

Browning, Robert. Fifine at the Fair. 1872. In Robert Browning: The Poems. Ed. John Pettigrew. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.

Clough, Arthur Hugh. Amours de Voyage. 1858. In Clough: Selected Poems. Ed. J. P. Phelan. London: Longman, 1995.

Meredith, George. Modern Love. 1862. In The Poems of George Meredith. Ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett. Vol. 1. New Haven: Yale UP, 1978.

Patmore, Coventry. The Angel in the House. 1862. In The Poems of Coventry Patmore. Ed. Frederick Page. London: Oxford UP, 1949.

Tennyson, Alfred. Idylls of the King. 1886. In The Poems of Tennyson. Ed. Christopher Ricks. 2nd ed. 3 vols. Harlow: Longman, 1987.

Webster, Augusta. Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence. 1895. Introd. William Michael Rossetti. Mother and Daughter (1895): (a machine-readable transcription). Ed. Tara Wright and Perry Willett. Online. Victorian Women Writers Project. 1 June 2000. Available <http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/vwwp-links.html>.

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