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THE MIGHTY VOICE OF THE SILENCED: THE VICTORIAN SAPPHO'S LITERARY PAINTING*

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ABSTRACT

Having no free will and chance to express themselves through writing, women in the nineteenth-century have always been a study of interest in the academic field. Women writers were locked out of mainstream literature, for "*literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be.*" Today's readers find it hard to believe that it was claimed by the Victorian poet laureate Robert Southey in his letter to Charlotte Brontë. The literary field, especially poetry, which has always been a holy occupation, was considered as a serious career for the male only. So how women were expected to bring voice to their literary paintings? Through text analysis, this paper aims to seek the "Judith Shakespeares" in the field of poetry through an analysis of Emily Brontë's poetry skills. It was she, who, despite the long held *Angel in the House* image, had her mighty voice heard regardless all the prejudices against women writers. Likened to the Greek Sappho by Janet Gezari, the image of Emily Brontë is carried out not as a protesting one but as bringing voice to the pleasing silence of the nineteenth-century parsonage where she lived. Modern-day critics are surprised by her "*pure cry of genuine poetry*" and this paper aims to show how unique Brontë's poetry skills in a male-dominated world are, surpassing even those of her male-contemporaries.

Keywords: *Emily Brontë, Poetry, 19th-century women writers.*

SUSTURULMUŞUN GÜÇLÜ SESİ: VİKTORYEN SAPPHO (SAFO)'NUN EDEBİ RESMİ

ÖZET

Kendilerini yazı yoluyla ifade edebilecek kadar hür irade ve şansa sahip olmayan 19. yüzyıl İngiliz kadınları akademik çalışma alanlarında her zaman ilgi odağı olmuşlardır. "*Edebiyat kadını ilgilendiren bir mesele değildir ve olamazda*" mantığından yola çıkılarak bu alanın kapıları kadın yazarlara

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kilitli tutulmuştur. Bugünün okurları, bu düşüncenin Viktoryen saray şairi Robert Southey tarafından Charlotte Brontë'ye yazılmış bir mektupta iddia edildiğine inanmakta zorluk yaşamaktadırlar. Özellikle şiir gibi kutsal bir emel taşıyan edebi alanlar, sadece erkeklere özgü ciddi bir meslek olarak görülmekteydi. Öyleyse kadınlardan "*edebi resim*" olarak ta adlandırılan şiir sanatına ses getirmeleri nasıl beklenebilirdi? Mevcut çalışma, metin analizi kullanarak Emily Brontë'nin şiir alanındaki becerisini inceleyerek bu alandaki "*Judith Shakespeare*"leri ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. O, *Angel in the House* (Evdeki Melek) imajına ve kadınlara karşı tüm önyargılara rağmen güçlü sesini duyurabilmeyi başarmıştır. Janet Gezari tarafından antik Yunan lirik şairi Sappho (Safo)'ya benzetilen Emily Brontë imajı protesto amacı gütmeksizin yaşadığı 19. yüzyıl papaz evindeki hoş sessizliğe ses getirme amacı yürütmektedir. Günümüz eleştirmenleri Brontë'nin "*hakiki şiirdeki saf haykırışı*" karşısında hayrete düşmüşlerdir; bu çalışma ise erkek egemen bir dünyadan gelen Brontë'nin şiir becerisinde ki emsalsiz duruşunu, hatta erkek çağdaşlarından bile üstün oluşunu gösterebilmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Emily Brontë, Şiir, 19. Yüzyıl kadın yazarlar.*

"...life does not mean length of days. Poor old Queen Victoria had length of days. But Emily Brontë had life. She died of it."

D.H. Lawrence

From the Renaissance to the nineteenth-century, verse-writing has always traditionally been a holy occupation of male poets, who had a privileged and '*quasi-priestly*' role within the society.[2] Women were not expected to write real or difficult poetry. Even if women's poetry was welcomed, it was not considered to have any relevance to the world, and consequently was not taken seriously. This could be understood from the comments made on the published poems by women authors during the first half of the nineteenth-century. The works were called, '*a light, readable mixture of poems, stories, letters, and fashionable chit-chat*' which meant that they were categorized as frivolous, trivial and unliterary.[3] Their *literary paintings* were not considered to be of merit for the lack of education, experience and intellectual potential of women.

[2] Sandra M. Gilbert, & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, USA: Yale Nota Bene, 2000, p. 546.
[3] Dorothy Mermin, "Victorian Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900", Review, *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), p. 125.

The nineteenth century, a long literary period marked by outstanding literary achievements of women writers and women poets, refutes this groundless statement. It is a fact that the beginning of the nineteenth-century saw many women writers such as Anne Finch, Anne Elliot, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson rising from "*the glass coffin of the male-authored text, as they exploded out of the Queen's looking glass, the old silent dance of death became a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority*."[4] This silent dance was what they enjoyed, and it was "*Emily Brontë* [who] *chose to* [enjoy the silence] *when she hid her poems in kitchen cabinets (and perhaps destroyed her Gondal stories)*,"[5] for it was she, who was "*alternately the isolated artist striding the Yorkshire moors, the painfully shy girl-woman unable to leave the confines of her home* […] *and the ethereal soul too fragile to confront the temporal world*."[6]

Mary R. Sefkowitz, in her article '*Critical Stereotypes and the Poetry of Sappho*' presents a very striking example of stereotyped judgement as regards male and female poetry. When it comes to critical evaluation of male poets' artistic achievements, there is a consensus among the critics that a male representative of art "*uses the full range of his intellectual powers to come to terms with his problems*." However, when women creators are concerned, the definition changes: "*Any creative woman is a 'deviant,' that is, women who have a satisfactory emotional life (home, family, and husband) do not need additional creative outlets*."[7]

Nevertheless, the Victorian age had left great amount of female-authored texts despite their exclusion "*from the public life and its discourse*, [by attempting] *to strip her power and bereave her of an identity independent from men*, [and by alienating] *women from even their own sense of self*."[8] Women writers were locked out of mainstream literature during the Victorian period and "*the reasons behind this neglect can be traced to various traditionally institutionalized prejudices and ideas concerning literary worth, ranging from assumptions over women's inferior intelligence and a fierce masculine rationality that despised feminine writing*."[9]

When Charlotte Brontë sent some of her poems to the English poet laureate Robert Southey in the hope of getting some advice, his answer was far from encouraging;*"Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life,*

[4] Gilbert - Gubar, ibid., p. 44.
[5] Gilbert - Gubar, ibid., p. 83.
[6] http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/emily-bronte, (15.12.2015).
[7] Mary R. Lefkowitz, "Critical Stereotypes and the Poetry of Sappho", *Greek, Roman and Byzantine* Studies, Duke University Libraries (February, 1973), p.113.
[8] Lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/001/366/145/RUG01-001366145_2010_0001_AC.pdf, (10.12.2015).
[9] Stephanie Jenner, "Identity and the Victorian Woman Poet: Working in and Against the Poetess Tradition", published master's thesis, The University of Birmingham (October 2010), p. 1.

and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation."[10] However, as Charlotte Brontë states in her *Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell* to the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*, "*ill success*," which followed the publication of their poetry book *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846) "*failed to crush* [them]*: the mere effort to succeed had given a wonderful zest to existence; it must be pursued.*"[11] Though Charlotte Brontë failed to give *Wuthering Heights* its due, she was not mistaken about Emily Brontë's poetry;

One day, in the autumn of 1845, I accidentally lighted on a MS. volume of verse in my sister Emily's handwriting. Of course, I was not surprised, knowing that she could and did write verse: I looked it over, and something more than surprise seized me -- a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, nor at all like poetry women generally write. I thought them condensed and terse, vigorous and genuine. To my ear, they had also a peculiar music-- melancholy, and elevating.[12]

Charlotte Brontë was not alone in her positive criticism. When Virginia Woolf in her *Women and Writing* wrote *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* she commented on her poetic skills suggesting that *"her poems will perhaps outlast her novel,"*[13] even though she knew that her only novel was already a *tour de force* classic. The writer of the review in the *Athaneum* (1846) noted that Ellis Bell (Emily Brontë) has a "*fine quaint spirit*" and added that she had "*things to speak that men will be glad to hear,—and an evident power of wind that may reach heights not here attempted*."[14] Matthew Arnold, too, confirms Charlotte Brontë's positive criticism when he compares Emily Brontë to Byron in a poem due to the qualities they shared;

> …and She—
> (How shall I sing her?)—whose soul
> Knew no fellow for might,
> Passion, vehemence, grief,
> Daring, since Byron died,
> That world-fan'd Son of Fire; She, who sank
> Baffled, unknown, self-consum'd;
> Whose too-bold dying son
> Shook, like a clarion-blast, my soul.[15]

[10] Jenner, ibid., p. 12.
[11] Emily, Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994, p. 7.
[12] Brontë, ibid., p. 5,6.
[13] Virginia Woolf, *Women and Writing: Remarkable Pieces on the Writing Life of Women*, London: A Harvest Book, 2003, p. 131.
[14] http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/emily-bronte, (15.12.2015).
[15] Janet Gezari, *Last Things: Emily Brontë's Poems*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 126.

Ill-fed, self-educated and overworked, the Victorian woman did not have '*a room of her own*,' nor the time and energy to pursue what must have seemed the leisurely creative literary expression. As Virginia Woolf draws the imaginary character of William Shakespeare's sister, Judith Shakespeare who wanted to become a poet-playwright, but eventually committed suicide in *A Room of One's Own*, and as Elizabeth Barret Browning seeks "*where are the poetesses,"* we , too, inquire, where are the "*Judith Shakespeares"*?[16] However, despite the long held *Angel in the House* image, and despite all the misfortunes there were courageous women, who gained voice by adopting "*a pseudonym, in particular, a masculine or gender-neutral pseudonym. This had the effect of distancing the text from the author, in the hope that the female poet's body was not confused with her literary corpus.*"[17] This is even more emphasized in *A Room of One's Own* when Virginia Woolf questions the artist being chained in a female body; "w*ho shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?*" [18]

It was Sappho, the Greek lyric poet born in Lesbos (630-570 BC) who became the foremother of all the women poets, though an immense amount of her poetry was lost, her huge reputation has lasted through surviving fragments. She was considered as one of the greatest poets of her time to express herself differently from her contemporaries, drawing an unusual image. In the Victorian period, it is Emily Brontë who "*launches herself as a woman poet in the tradition of Sappho, but not in the tradition of the Victorian Sappho*."[19] During her lifetime, a slim volume by Brontë sisters titled *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846) was published but sold only two copies. They chose to hide their identities, as Charlotte Brontë remarks:

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine'—we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery which is not true praise.[20]

[16] Gilbert & Gubar, ibid., p. 540.
[17] Susan Zlotnick, ""A Thousand Times I'd be a Factory Girl": Dialect' Domesticity, and Working-Class Women's Poetry in Victorian Britain", *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Autumn, 1991), p. 9.
[18] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, New York: Harcourt Inc, 2005, p. 48.
[19] Gezari, ibid., p. 61.
[20] Maureen Peeck-O'Toole, *Aspects of Lyric in the Poetry of Emily Brontë*, Netherlands: Rodopi, 1988, p. 1.

Emily's poetry is a true work of Haworth art; the natural subjects are an important part of her poetry. Her literary aim, unlike many other Victorian poetesses, was not to fight within the male-dominating literary field, but to bring a voice to the pleasing silence of the nineteenth-century parsonage full of powerful imaginary worlds using certain natural elements in her poems. In *High Waving Heather*, for example, Emily Brontë points out the imposed hierarchical order assigned to nature and by doing this she does not simply replace one with the other, but obliterates the boundaries between the two, as the dichotomies are seen "rejoicingly blending;"

> High waving heather 'neath stormy blasts bending
> Midnight and moonlight and bright shining stars
> Darkness and glory rejoicingly blending
> Earth rising to heaven and heaven descending[21]

Emily wrote most of her poetry during what is literally called the Victorian period, "*but her exploration of the self, the imagination is something surpassing the period. She was a woman poet who did not bemoan the lack of "literary grandmothers," as Elizabeth Barret Browning did.*"[22] While the seventeenth century woman writer Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, wrote "*…all I desire is fame*,"[23] Emily Brontë "*longed for one to love* [her] *here.*"[24] However, she persevered writing her immortal novel *Wuthering Heights* in which she transcends all the conventional modes of writing. In 1845 Emily gets angry with a sense of betrayal when Charlotte Brontë accidentally comes across a volume of verse in her handwriting, since it was "*the sine qua non of Emily's survival that shutting the self away in secret artistic expression is a means of establishing and expressing freedom,"*[25] as Irene Tayler puts in her article *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë*. The imaginary lands of Angria and Gondal were where Emily sets her poems' base as a child, inspired by Branwell's toy figures such as soldiers, Turkish musicians, and Indians.

[21] http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc2571/m2/1/high_res_d/Dissertation.pdf, PhD Thesis, University of Noth Texas, August 2000, Questioning Voices: Dissension and Dialogue in the Poetry of Emily and Anne Brontë, Tracy Lin Kalkwarf, pp. 38-39.
[22] http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/emily-bronte#poet, (12.12.2015).
[23] Woolf, ibid., p. 79.
[24] See: "I am the Only Being Whose Doom" in Laura Inman, *The Poetic World of Emily Bronte: Poems from the Author of Wuthering Heights,* Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2014.
[25] George Watt - Irene Tayler, "Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë", Review, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. Pp. x+ 342.

The created characters and surreal setting of Gondal, and the non-Gondal poetry is what differentiated Brontë from the "*simplistic and stereo-typed modes of expression of*"[26] her contemporaries. Her poetry, as Lawrence J. Starzyk puts forth, is

a contrapuntal symphony in which the tranquillity of nature finds its counterpoint in the tempestuousness of the human psyche. Each note or theme is defined by the superimposition of a seemingly dissonant chord: the mystery of love, for example is comprehended only in the moment of discord; the meaning of life discerned only in death.[27]

It is not surprising that Robert K. Wallace found parallels between E. Brontë's Wuthering Heights and Beethoven's sonatas. These parallels include "*emotional storm*," "*calm/storm*," "*response to nature*," and "*intimations*."

As early as 1842 the expiatory mode of her character was evident to Constantin Heger, her gifted professor in Brussels; he made the celebrated as-sertion that she might have been "a great navigator. Her powerful reason would have deduced new spheres of discovery from the knowledge of the old; and her strong, imperious will would never have been daunted by opposition or difficulty.[28]

Emily Brontë, with her poem "Lines", for instance, broke Victorian gender stereotypes choosing to write topics such as death and love in the style of Romanticism;

I die but when the grave shall press
The heart so long endeared to thee
When earthy cares no more distress
And earthy joys are nought to me.
[…]
But long or short though life may be
'Tis nothing to eternity.
We part below to meet on high
Where blissful ages never die.[29]

Emily Brontë defamiliarizes death by emphasizing the solace, peace and freedom in the afterlife. It is obvious that her poems were neither trivial nor sententious as the Victorian male-dominated society wanted to perceive

[26] O'Toole, ibid., p. 8.
[27] Lawrence J. Starzyk, "Emily Brontë: Poetry in a Mingled Tone", *Criticism*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring 1972), Wayne State University Press, p. 119.
[28] qtd. in Robert K. Wallace, *Emily Brontë and Beethoven: Romantic Equilibrum in Fiction and Music*, USA: University of Georgia Press, 2008, p. 148.
[29] http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/74487-lines-i-die-but-when-the-grave-shall-press-the, (17.12.2015).

them. The urge which forced her to write and create was not her own suffering or her own injuries. "*She looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book.*"[30] In her poem '*Remembrance'* (1845) Emily is rejecting the world of her time in which "*a young woman chooses life when she seems already to have chosen death. Another figure chooses life while seeming to continue to prefer death.*"[31]

When Janet Gezari edited Emily Brontë's poems for the Penguin English Poets series, she "w*as surprised to discover so many poems and poetical fragments that had the pure cry of genuine poetry, and then to see how little had been written about them.*"[32] Emily Brontë, in an ill-fated Victorian period for the women poets, suffered neither from the anxiety of influence nor the and anxiety of authorship; "*in her poems, she succeeded in authorizing herself as the subject of her own experience, apparently without wondering whether that experience was eccentric and trivial or, contrarily, profoundly relevant to others.*"[33]

Despite her imaginary characters in her prose and poetry, Emily Brontë, at times, speaks through her characters bringing out a side of her kept in a lonely and silent world of hers, where love and understanding she sought only in her Yorkshire moors. We understand this when, in *Wuthering Heights,* Emily Brontë speaks through the mouth of Catherine Earnshaw: '*I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free.*'[34] Similarly, into her Gondal poems she pours her immense imagination and enormous energy, and it is through her vivid artistic powers that in this mythic world she lives the real life. As she lies in her bare little room, she embraces all creation, all time:

> The world is going—Dark world, adieu!
> Grim world, go hide thee the day;
> The heart thou canst not all subdue
> Must still resist if thou delay…
> And this shall be my dream tonight—
> I'll think the heaven of glorious spheres
> Is rolling on its course of light
> In endless bliss through endless years.[35]

[30] Woolf, ibid,, p. 131.
[31] Matthew Bevis, *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, Oxford: OUP, 2013, p. 382.
[32] Gezari, ibid., p. 1.
[33] Gezari, ibid., pp. 1-2.
[34] Gezari, ibid., p. 23.
[35] Gezari, ibid., p. 29.

The fictional world Emily Brontë creates in *Wuthering Heights,* is to her the real world of passion rather than reason. She is happy in that real world created by her unique imagination:

And the thing that irks me most is this shattered prison after all. I'm tired of being enclosed here. I'm wearying to escape into that glorious world and to be always there, not seeing it dimly through tears and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart, but really with it and in it… I shall be incomparably beyond and above you all.[36]

Emily Brontë's genius as a poet and as a writer did not escape Virginia Woolf's critical eye, in her essay "Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights" she remarks, "*it was not enough for Emily Brontë "to write a few lyric, to utter a cry, to express a creed. In her poems she did this once and for all, and her poems will perhaps outlast her novel.*"[37] She considered her "a greater poet than Charlotte Brontë. She, who presented an idiosyncratic characteristic both in her art and in her own personality, walked along the literary history with an unprotesting yet powerful weapon of "poetry" was indeed unvictorian and was indeed a Sappho of her time, transcending even her male contemporaries, and expressing herself differently from them. Her Gondal poems are not only about bereavement, loneliness and death. In some of them there is a great spirit and hope.

The more unjust seems the present fate,
The more my spirit swells elate,
Strong, in thy strength, to anticipate
Rewarding Destiny![38]

When she wrote her poems and later her unique novel, there was no feminism, no Freud, no Foucault but she had known Shakespeare who held a mirror to all these theories to come. She is the master of defamiliarization: nature, love, death, revenge are presented in an unfamiliar way and, are still open to interpretations. "*Hers, then, is the rarest of all powers. She could free life from its dependence on facts, with a few touches indicate the spirit of a face so that it needs no body; by speaking of the moor make the wind blow and the thunder roar*."[39]

Emily Brontë, who even in her last lines of her poetry before she died, does not fear to enter into her vividly described imaginary world of literary painting. This surely shows that she does not have the characteristic of a stereotype-Victorian woman, highlighting her solitude and independence, which

[36] Brontë, ibid., p. 143.
[37] Woolf, ibid., p. 131.
[38] http://www.online-literature.com/bronte/1335/, (17.12.2015).
[39] Woolf, ibid., p. 132.

affected an Emily of a similar soul, Emily Dickinson, to choose "*No Coward Soul is Mine*" to be read at her funeral.

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:

I see Heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.
[…]

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts: unutterably vain;

Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idle froth amid the boundless main.[40]

Emily Brontë, the poet with "*chainless soul*", who hold riches "*in light esteem*," and whose close friend was "*imagination*," goes on to inspire her readers with her mighty voice.[41]

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