

NAKED NOVELS: VICTORIAN AMATORY SONNET SEQUENCES
AND THE PROBLEM OF MARRIAGE

By

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

English

December, 2010

Nashville, Tennessee

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For SN: without whom this project would never have been finished

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the past three years I have found that a dissertation—even in the humanities—is the work of a community and I am grateful for the generosity of a vast number of people. First and foremost, I was lucky enough to have an outstanding committee who pushed and challenged me at every turn. Many thanks to: Professor Dana D. Nelson—who was with this project at its beginning—for her indefatigable enthusiasm and continual encouragement which helped me make it through; Professor Ellen Levy who tutored me in the fine art of poetics even while in another country; Professor Rachel Teukolsky—who came later to the project—for her thorough readings and patient feedback; and Professor Tricia Lootens—who was there at the germination of this dissertation idea—for showing me a project like this was possible. Lastly, thank you to Professor Carolyn Dever who took a chance on me five and a half years ago. You have shown me such kindness, such strong support, and such willingness to share with me new areas of scholarship. You showed me new cities and new literature, and for that I owe such a debt of gratitude. To my entire committee, past as present, I hope my work will live up to the amazing scholarship you have done and continue to do.

I am grateful to the Department of English at Vanderbilt University, as well as the Jacob K. Javits foundation which funded the first four years of my graduate work. The Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities Fellowship program generously supported my fifth and final year. I am especially grateful to Mona Frederick and the fellows who were brought together through this program and who offered to me their time, their editing eyes, and their interdisciplinary comments and suggestions: Elena Deanda, Gesa Frömming, Patrick Johnson, Gail McConnell, Rachel Nisselson, Matt Witt, and, especially, my fellow Victorianist, Elizabeth Meadows. Also instrumental in getting these thoughts off the ground in their fledgling states

were the three working groups supported by the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. These opportunities to talk across disciplines, theoretical backgrounds, and time periods were invaluable. Thank you to members of the Queer Theory Reading Group, the 18th and 19th Century Working Group, and the Reclaiming Citizenship Working Group.

I am lucky to have been surrounded by a department filled with collegiality and support and I feel very indebted to both Professor Jay Clayton as Chair of the English Department and Professor Kathryn Schwarz as Director of Graduate Studies. The kind of community I enjoyed could not have existed without their institutional direction. Moreover, I am so grateful to have been mentored and taught by the faculty of the department. Professors Vereen Bell, Gordon Bigelow, Lynn Enterline, Teresa Goddu, Andrea Hern, Roger Moore, Mark Schoenfield, and Paul Young guided and trained me to be the teacher and scholar I am today.

Many thanks to the administrative staff of both the RPWC and the English department without whom this document would not exist in any acceptable form or format: Janis May, Sara Corbit, and Polly Case. Thanks also to Donna Caplan, on whom I could count for laughs, for nutrition, and for a listening ear. Thanks as well to Sam at JJ's Market—his kindness and his caffeine helped me through more than one rough writing patch.

To my fellow graduate colleagues, past and present: Beau Baca, Elizabeth Barnett, Diana Bellonby, Rebecca Chapman, Alice Chuang, Matt Duques, Josh Epstein, Heather Freeman, Ben Graydon, Justin Haines, Emily Hines, Lauren Wood Hoffer, Donald Jellerson, Megan Minarich, John Morrell, Brian Rejack, Donika Ross, Freya Sachs, Nafissa Thompson-Spires, Derrick Spires, Nicole Seymour, and Jane Wanninger. Thank you for being both colleagues and friends.

As I discovered, writing is a long process and the road to coherency and clarity is littered with grammatical and theoretical debris of a seemingly insurmountable scale. I am so thankful

for my writing group members Rachel Nisselson and Bethany Packard who encouraged me, prodded me, and cheered me along the way. Elizabeth Covington, Charlotte Amanda Hagood, and Sarah McCauley Passino offered sustenance for my soul, body, and mind. Virginia Woolf said: “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not *dined well*.” We dined very well indeed, ladies.

I would be remiss not to thank my professors and mentors at Muhlenberg College. They taught me about poetry and, more importantly, gave me permission to love it. Gratitude also to those who were, above all, my dearest friends and confidants, who loved me even when the writing went poorly: Yeo Ju Choi, Lindsay and Robin Marjoram, and Jennifer Epting. And finally, thanks and love to Sarah Niebler. With you, everything (even a dissertation!) is possible.

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INTRODUCTION

Victorian Marriage: An Institution under Construction

“And then, there it was, suddenly entire shaped in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clean and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here—the sonnet.”

— Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

“Compact, conventional, rigid in appearance, the sonnet has been, for six centuries, a miraculous wine-press through which the richest, the quintessential elements of the human spirit have been strained...

There has been little effort to define the sonnet sequence...Such a narration, with all superfluous matter cut away, might be called a naked novel.”

— Houston Peterson, *The Book of Sonnet Sequences*

At the end of the nineteenth-century, poet Amy Levy (1861-1889) called into question the efficacy of the institution of marriage in her satirical poem entitled “The Ballad of Religion and Marriage.”¹ Levy suggests that marriage has gone the way of the Judeo/Christian God, both of which the speaker of the poem disavows.²

Swept into limbo is the host

Of heavenly angels, row on row;

The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,

¹ Not circulated during her lifetime, the poem was printed in a limited edition pamphlet in 1915.

² Other poets like Edith Nesbit and Edward Carpenter also wrote poems calling into question the role of marriage as an outdated institution. Nesbit composed the companion poems “The Husband of To-Day” and the “Wife of All Ages” (*Lays and Legends* 1886) and Carpenter composed his famous “Towards Democracy” (1883).

Pale and defeated, rise and go.
The great Jehovah is laid low,
Vanished his burning bush and rod—
Say, are we doomed to deeper woe?
Shall marriage go the way of God? (l.1-8)

While tongue-in-cheek, the poem's underlying message is that marriage, like religion, has no place in the modernity of the nineteenth century. Marriage and religion are in "limbo," lost souls not yet destined for heaven or hell, but most definitely dead and gone. As Levy's poem continues, she pokes fun at a domesticity that is as bland as boiled roast and hoping for a future—in a "million years at most"—where the emphasis is no longer on married "pairs."

Monogamous, still at our post,
Reluctantly we undergo
Domestic round of boiled and roast,
Yet deem the whole proceeding slow.
Daily the secret murmurs grow;
We are no more content to plod
Along the beaten paths—and so
Marriage must go the way of God.

Soon, before all men, each shall toast
The seven strings unto his bow,
Like beacon fires along the coast,
The flame of love shall glance and glow.

Nor let nor hindrance man shall know,
From natal bath to funeral sod;
Perennial shall his pleasures flow
When marriage goes the way of God.

Grant, in a million years at most,
Folk shall be neither pairs nor odd—
Alas! we sha'n't be there to boast

”Marriage has gone the way of God!” (l.9-28)

Punning on “odd” at the end of the poem, Levy pointedly critiques social norms which see marriage as an ideal state and imagines anything else as “odd” or strange. Levy’s language reminds the reader that sexuality and marriage are linked, ranting that “we” are “Monogamous, still at our post” (l.9). If marriage were gone, “pleasures” could “flow.”

Though the project which follows looks specifically at the form of the sonnet as in conversation with Victorian ideas about marriage, Levy’s poem, nevertheless, helps to frame my argument about the problems marriage posed for nineteenth-century women and men. Levy, while somewhat tongue-in-cheek, lambastes marriage as an institution. Her poem overstates what the sonnets in this dissertation attempt to more subtly work through. Considering marriage as a norm for social interactions, Levy suggests we reevaluate what makes our interactions with the world “odd,” suggesting that only a “pair” is considered the norm. She also laments that there will be no change in the conception of marriage that she might live to see.

Following a trajectory from mid-century through the *fin de siècle*, my dissertation looks at amatory sonnet sequences composed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Meredith,

Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, George Eliot, Augusta Webster and Michael Field. Through readings of these authors' works, this dissertation grapples with the institution of marriage in the nineteenth century and the constraints marriage laws placed on individuals. Focusing specifically on sonnet sequences, I argue that the poetic form intervenes in discussions of intimacy as sanctioned by marriage. Isobel Armstrong, in her germinal book *Victorian Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, calls Victorian poetry "double," suggesting that its multivalent quality provides "a way of exploring and interrogating the grounds of its representation" (12). Moreover, Armstrong argues, Victorian poetry at its core is concerned with a drive to understand and know relationships:

Victorian poetry is obsessed with a series of displacements effected by these redefined relations, and helps to bring these redefinitions about. The problems of agency and consciousness, labour, language and representation become central. Teleology is displaced by epistemology and politics because *relationships* and their representation become the contested area...above all between self and the lover. (6-7)

My project takes up Armstrong's suggestion that, "above all" Victorian poetry is obsessed with the relationship between the "self and the lover." Focusing on the form of the nineteenth-century sonnet sequence, I attempt to expose the ways this poetry reshapes expectations of Victorian desire, love and marriage

Marriage, for Victorians, became the hotly contested space where gender, economics and the law collided. Legally classified as a person only through her spouse, an early nineteenth-century wife was considered a political and economic extension of her husband. Under what were generally referred to as the laws of *coverture*, a 19th century wife effectively had no rights. As Mary Shanley argues in *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England*, a woman's

rights and her economic power were no longer her own but under the guardianship of her husband (22). Marriage, therefore, amounted to a legal death of the wife; she became “nonexistent” (Poovey 52). The married couple became bound together as one, an inextricable two-in-one of legal and social framing. Unfortunately, few alternatives existed if a married couple desired to dissolve their marriage.³ The institution of marriage, especially as it related to the position of women, became a subject of public and political debate in 1856 when a divorce bill was under deliberation in the House of Lords. Unable to move the bill to the House of Commons before the term ended, the bill was dropped. Reintroduced in the session of 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act became the first official Parliamentary resolution to the “marriage problem.” Granting women rights to their own inheritance and property, the bill sparked heated Parliamentary debates. Critics saw the reformation of *coverture* laws as the downfall of domestic and economic life as they knew it.

The Matrimonial Causes Act, as Mary Poovey argues, was “the 1st major piece of British legislation to focus attention on the anomalous position of married women under the law” (51). Moreover, the new laws rewrote the existing divorce laws making it easier (though not by any means easy) for women to initiate divorce, as well as opening up the possibility of divorce to the growing middle class. Poovey argues that “in acknowledging the fact of marital unhappiness, [the laws] inevitably exposed the limitations of the domestic ideal” (52).

Throughout the nineteenth century, however, the Victorians remained hotly divided about how marriage should be defined and what the impact of the Matrimonial Causes Act would be. Some fought for a definition of marriage as a legal and sacred institution whereas others called

³ A. James Hammerton writes, “Under ecclesiastical jurisdiction before 1857, [19th-century divorce law in England] provided no more than separation from bed and board (divorce *a mensa et thoro*), and prohibited remarriage of either party—absolute divorce (*a vinculo matrimonii*) being restricted to the minority wealthy enough to finance a private act of Parliament” (271).

for a conception of the institution as simply a social contract. Others, like Levy, suggested marriage law be radically changed and reformed. Though marriage held strong as an anchor for Victorian notions of property and economics, the understanding of the intimate bond of marriage was, of course, not limited to the economic. In *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus suggests:

For Victorians, marriage meant the union of sexual and spiritual impulses, the reconciliation of sexuality with propriety. Marriage was a socially acceptable exhibition of sexual intimacy because it was predicated on fidelity and this advertised not only the sexuality of spouses but also their acceptance of restraints and limits.

(203)

Marriage, as Marcus points out, “reconciled” sexuality with propriety—it allowed for the existence of sexuality in a legally sanctioned space.⁴ Because of the connotations of sexual fidelity and limitations within the marriage, the marriage contract effectively erases sexuality from sight; marriage normalizes and institutionalizes the act of sex. Camouflaged by social respectability, marriage is the only place where sex and sexual desires are considered healthy, normal and socially useful (i.e. for reproduction). Marriage comes with the twin imperative of monogamy and reproduction which are thought to make it decorous and alleviate any sexual threat. Any sex outside of marriage is, therefore, deviant, threatening and always unpropitious—a notion to which I will return in my conclusion.

The amatory sonnet sequence, before the nineteenth century, traditionally chronicled courtly love and unrequited desire. My work, however, examines how the form of the Victorian sonnet sequence shifts its focus from courtly desire to take as its subject the center of the domestic sphere—marriage. I draw a connection between the strict formula of the “sonnet” and

⁴ While Marcus makes this claim to support her argument that female-marriages could be integrated into the social order, her suggestion marriage made sexuality decent or decorous expose the link between marriage and sexuality.

the strict norms of sanctioned intimacies recognized in Victorian “marriage” in order to problematize both the poetic form and the legal institution. Victorian poets who shifted the subject of the amatory sonnet sequence were thus allowed to work through issues of sexuality without having the authors themselves flagged as deviant.⁵ The shift from courtly love to marriage and the domestic sphere helped to elide sexuality from the poetry by playing into Victorian notions of “propriety.” The form, traditionally about desire, allowed for the exploration of that desire while safely distancing itself from deviance or vulgarity.

Amatory Sonnet Traditions: The Domestication of a Form

In his famous meditation on the sonnet form, Wordsworth suggested that in the form lay both unalienable freedom and structured containment:

Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room
And hermits are contented with their cells;
And students with their pensive citadels;
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
In truth the prison, into which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, ‘twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground;

⁵ This did not always work. Specifically, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sonnets became the center of debate in 1871 when they came under attack as too “fleshly.” (I return to this in more detail in my chapter on the Rossettis.)

Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found. (1807) (l.1-14)⁶

Defending the form of the sonnet, Wordsworth uses the form to comment on the possibilities of what Joseph Phalen calls, “an iconic representation of freely chosen imprisonment... The sonnet is seen as illustrating the paradoxical relationship between liberty and restriction” (4). Through the sonnet sequences in this dissertation, I consciously examine the paradox of chosen “liberty and restriction” as it pertains to the institution of marriage.

What links all the poems in this study together is the revision of and interest in the amatory sonnet sequence. The amatory tradition of sonnet sequences developed between 1225 and 1230 as an extension of the courtly love tradition. Drawn to the sonnet form for its ability to work through a problem of desire, Italian poets like Dante, Petrarch and Michelangelo embraced its form for its ability to present a thought, counter-thought and resolution in its octave and sestet. “Predicated on the absence or unattainability of a beloved addressee” (Billone 3), the form not only chronicled desire and courtly love, but also developed as a poem of reflection and religious devotion. In *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, Paul Fussell writes that forms like the

⁶ Wordsworth’s other famous sonnet on the sonnet calls particular attention to amatory traditions suggesting they had been recently too-overlooked:

Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,
Mindless of its just honours; with this key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;
With it Camöens soothed an exile's grief;
The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,
It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land
To struggle through dark ways; and, when a damp
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew
Soul-animating strains—alas, too few! (1827) (l.1-14)

sonnet, “tend to say things even if the words are not at the moment fitted to their patterns” (126). Like Fussell, I argue that the sonnet form and the sonnet sequence work paradigmatically, exposing Victorian ideologies of desire and love.

Widely popular in English in the late 1500s and into the 1600s (beginning with Wyatt and Surrey, and continuing through Sidney, Shakespeare, Milton and Donne) the amatory sonnet became linked to sequence. The object of desire in the poems was usually female, and the sequences were extended meditations on desire for the unobtainable love object—such as the “dark lady,” Laura, Stella, and Shakespeare’s “young man.” The sonnet and the sonnet sequence lost popularity, however, soon after the Renaissance, and between 1700 and 1800 none of the leading poets wrote them. Although it had a resurgence in the hands of the Romantics, the form lacked the same cultural esteem given it by its Early Modern predecessors. Shelley, Coleridge, Keats, Byron and Wordsworth all wrote sonnets but, generally, these were individual sonnets (not sequential) and few were amatory.

Though the more famous Romantic poets such as Shelley, Keats, Bowles, Southey and Coleridge all published sonnets, their sonnets were for the most part freestanding, individual poems. Partly, this can be explained by the means of publication—these sonnets appeared individually, usually embedded in prose periodicals. Their compactness made them ideal space holders for editors and the poems’ self-contained subject matter required little-to-no context. William Michael Rossetti confirms this use for sonnets writing about one of his own sonnets that was printed in *The Germ*: “I ought to have been more chary than I was of introducing into our seriously-intended magazine such hap-hazard things as *bouts-rimés* poems: one reason for doing so was that we were often at a loss for something to fill a spare page” (as cited in Phalen 1).⁷

⁷ Footnote reads: “Introduction to the facsimile reprint of *The Germ* (1901; rpt Oxford Ashmolean Museum, 1992), p. 20” (n155).

M.H. Abrams defined the form as being “Just long enough to permit a fairly complex lyric development, yet so short and so exigent in its rhymes as to pose a standing challenge to the artistry of the poet” (290). Even Miscellanies, also popular in the nineteenth century and in the late eighteenth, collected sonnets but still allowed the poems to stand alone. Each sonnet in a miscellany had the potential to undertake an unrelated and limited subject instead of creating a longer meditative argument on a single subject.⁸

Historically, the sonnet sequence signifies differently from the unrelated sonnets, whether gathered or individually published. While Wordsworth’s sonnets were widely read, it was Romantic women poets who revived the amatory sonnet and, in particular, the amatory sonnet sequence. Mary Robinson’s sequence “Sappho and Phaon” (1796) and Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* (1786) were both popular. Robinson’s semi-autobiographical collection relied on the ancient story of the scorned Sappho as an allegorical guise. An actress and a celebrity, Robinson had a notorious affair with the Prince of Wales (later George IV), which eventually left her heartbroken and made her the subject of scandal (Going 15). Robinson relied heavily upon the amatory tradition and mythologizes her personal experience. Charlotte Smith’s sonnets were also semi-autobiographical, and chronicled the downward spiral of a marriage very similar to her own. For Smith, it was the sonnet form that best suited as a “vehicle for the articulation of a certain type of intense *personal* experience” (9; emphasis added). What is exceptional about the Victorian amatory sequence is its emphasis on the personal experience and domestication. These sonnets move the relationship of the lover and the beloved into the sphere of marital life. Like Robinson and Smith before them, Meredith and Barrett Browning’s poems were deeply read by audiences as autobiographical. Though guised as fictional, contemporary readers likely knew the

⁸ Wordsworth himself published many sonnets in his *Poems in Two Volumes*; however, his sonnets lacked an overarching connection or overt narrative arc, though he did give careful attention to how the ordering affected the overall ethos of the volume.

biographical back-stories to the poetic sequences and then read that biography back onto the poems.

After Smith and Robinson, the amatory sequence lay dormant again until Barrett Browning's 1850 publication of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and the 1862 edition of *Modern Love*. After Dante Gabriel Rossetti's publication of *The House of Life* (1870, 1881), the amatory sonnet sequence proliferated. Though the amatory tradition had fallen out of fashion for so many years prior to Smith and Robinson, the sonnet itself had deep historical roots in England. In her essay on *fin de siècle* women poets and the sonnet, Natalie Houston gives a kind of history of the Victorian obsession with the sonnet, going so far as to suggest that the form is tied to national literary traditions:

In addition to the critical introductions included in many of the sonnet anthologies, a large number of reviews and critical essays in general periodicals like the *Athenaeum*, *Contemporary Review*, *Eclectic Review* and *Quarterly Review* debated rules for the sonnet's form and promulgated basic facts of its long history. Critics and defenders of the sonnet argued about its fitness for the English language, its place in a national literary tradition, and the challenges its restricted form posed for poets and readers alike. For many Victorian poets and critics, the sonnet was an historically self-conscious form of poetry, because the sonnet form itself explicitly registers its long history, creating opportunities for poetic revision and critical debate. (148-9)

As Houston suggests, poets writing sonnets in the nineteenth-century were aware of the form's history, its revisions, and their own place in that poetic lineage. For this reason, I argue, the authors knowingly selected this poetic form in order to question the institution of marriage and illustrate the many constraints it placed upon them in nineteenth-century Victorian England.

Queer Formalism: A Methodological Approach

Within this dissertation, I locate these nineteenth-century sonnet sequences in a tradition of amatory poetics, and consider, as well, how the formal revisions of the sonnet enact a critique of the subject matter they address. I use a formalist approach in order to draw a parallel between poetic form and political or social form. This approach is derived from the kind of work Caroline Levine calls for in her article “Strategic Formalism.” Levine argues for a return to the formalist readings of poetic in order to see within them the competing and intersecting forms of poetic and social engagement. She writes:

...literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them. Literary forms, that is, trouble and remake political relationships in surprising, aleatory, and often confusingly disorderly ways.” (626)

Levine argues for a new kind of formalism which returns to the strongholds of formalist practices (the interrogation of meter, line, rhyme, etc) but with an eye to placing these forms in conversation with political forms.⁹ She continues:

a strategic formalist would ask, instead, whether the specific formal tactics [the poet] uses might be particularly effective in political situations where powerful figures are failing to live up to professed principles of justice, fairness, equality, and freedom... The point would be not to isolate forms, to bind them to intentions, or to choose between them, but to recognize their challenges to each other. (647)

⁹ Levine writes about her method that it is “‘strategic,’...because it exposes the inadvertent consequences of calculated subjective action, revealing how often the most clear-cut political projects are rerouted and destabilized in the face of contending forms...And if the jostling of incommensurable forms of order is an inevitable fact of social life, then any meaningful political strategy must involve first and foremost, an intricate practice of formalist reading” (639).

The poetic revisions of the amatory tradition and the formal constructions of the poems I offer in this work are in conversation with institutions of social and political importance, namely the institution of marriage. In particular, I draw out the connection between the strict and constraining form of the sonnet and the strict and constraining form of legal marriage. In this way I put the two forms in conversation with one another to explore the “challenges” posed by their juxtaposition.

Joseph Phalen’s *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* chronicles the history of the individual sonnet throughout the century, and both John Holmes and Amy Christine Billone’s work devote time to the sonnet in service of either the late-Victorian understanding of the self (Holmes), or a female understanding of the self (Billone). In her conclusion to *Little Songs* Billone argues for the usefulness of the sonnet form for women:

Women poets gravitate toward the sonnet form because, with its exigent rules of meter, syllable count, rhyme scheme, and structural shifts, it offered them a ready-made metaphor for the difficulties of articulation. Highly compressed and restrained, the sonnet helped to make inexpressibility visible. (156)

Billone’s emphasis on gender and the sonnet form is persuasive, but in some respects, I think, too narrow. I want to consider the larger expanse of the argument’s implications and I argue that the “highly compressed and restrained” formula allows for multivalency and conflict that lends itself to queer readings, as well as gendered. The Victorian sonnet explores the tension between individual identity and a bonded or married identity, and it examines the relationship between poetic collaboration and the single poetic voice. Formally, sonnets are constructed under the pressure of restraint, making them useful for considering the pressures of representing tension and multivalency. While there exists quite a bit of scholarship regarding the formal aspects of

long Victorian poems (such as *In Memoriam*) and the Victorian sonnet, there is surprisingly little reference to sonnet sequences in Victorian poetry, and even less regarding the queerness of these sequences.

Indeed, I suggest a specific kind of intervention, a particular approach to this formalist reading. My intervention comes out of concepts of queer theory that read against the heteronormative impulse in Victorian amatory sonnet sequences. Virginia Blain, in her article “Queer Empathy,” states that within Victorian poetry she works “with the aim of disrupting certain habituated reading practices that incline us to read ‘straight’ when it might be more appropriate to read ‘bent.’ ... ‘Queer’, unlike ‘homosexual’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’, does not designate an ontological category or substantive entity” (1). The amatory tradition, as it is deployed in nineteenth-century Britain, is read most widely as “straight” and instead, I want to trouble the strict heterosexuality expected in the poems.

Like Blain, Marcus and Julia F. Saville, I use queer theory as a lens through which we can see around the particular assumptions we make when reading these Victorian sonnet sequences. Already surprising is the way that these sonnet sequences negotiate a space between the amatory poetics of the Renaissance and the marriage plot of Victorian novels. Locating in the texts a nexus of sexuality and desire, these articulations of intimacy—sanctioned or non-sanctioned—are in conversation with both social norms of the mid to late nineteenth century and also legal debates raging over divorce and marriage law (such as mid-century marital debates) and unauthorized homosexual sex (for example, Oscar Wilde’s trial or Freud’s publication of *Three Essays on Sexuality*). I look to place the historical artifact of the poem as central in the debate about cultural and legal sanctions.

In short, I propose a kind of queer formalism. I aim to analyze the way particular literary forms, in this case the amatory sonnet sequence, “trouble and remake” political and social debates (Levine 626). Motivated by Lee Edelman’s notion of the “queer” as that which “exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality,” I argue that exposing sites of queerness in nineteenth-century poetry also exposes the text’s resistance to and critique of social and political structures such as marriage (6-7). Saville writes in her book on Gerard Manley Hopkins:

theorists currently use the term *queer* to signify an energetic resistance to the inertia of sexual conformity coupled with a commitment to articulating and negotiating innumerable differences—ethnic, religious, political and so on—constellated around sexuality. The flexibility required of queer theory makes it an intellectual field fraught with anxieties about lack of focus, discipline and unity. Yet, as Lee Edelman has explained, because queer theory must operate as a ‘vector of desire’ rather than as an (impossible) attempt to define or delimit sexual and other nuances of desire, it must continue to exist without predetermined imperatives. (6)

Queer theory, and queerness, becomes a way for thinking through issues of non-sanctioned intimacy as they are presented and described through the tradition of amatory poetics. In this way, *queer* articulates a kind of formalist practice. These sonnet sequences explore the tenuous topic of desire and intimacy through the form of the amatory poem. By using this form the poets are already calling on a history of poetic tradition. Their manipulation and transformation of the trope indicate how the poets revise available taxonomies of desire, love and intimacy.

Moreover, I argue for a particularly queer intervention in order to dissuade the long-standing heteronormative readings of the poems. While not all of the poems in this project

explicitly call for a new understanding of sexuality or critique Victorian norms of sexuality, many do. For some of the poets, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Michael Field, the poems attempt to normalize otherwise “deviant” interactions. In other sequences, like EBB’s or Meredith’s, the act of getting married, or the institution of marriage itself, actually opens a space for the queering of marriage. In other words, marriage pushes each of the poets to interrogate possibilities other than marriage. The queer becomes evident at the moment the hegemonic closes in and binds the two lovers in a heteronormative contract. For EBB’s and Meredith’s poems, it is the confrontation with the heteronormative contract that fuels a need to explore alternatives.

Sonnet Sequences and Narrative Implications

In the introduction to a 1929 collection entitled *The Book of Sonnet Sequences*, Houston Peterson wrote of the sonnet form:

Compact, conventional, rigid in appearance, the sonnet has been, for six centuries, a miraculous wine-press through which the richest, the quintessential elements of the human spirit have been strained [...] There has been little effort to define the sonnet sequence [...] Such a narration, with all superfluous matter cut away, might be called a naked novel (vii, viii-ix)

Peterson’s quotation serves as part of my epigraph because it raises key issues about sonnets and sonnet sequences. First, the form of the sonnet, as rigid and constrained as it seems, has been flexible enough to allow for the complexity of human emotion for over 600 years. Next, sonnet sequences—especially in the nineteenth century—engage novels, creating a kind of interplay between novelistic form and poetic form. Beginning with *Sonnets from the Portuguese*,

composed in 1846, the sequences I examine were widely popular during the novelistic heyday of mid to late-century Victorian culture and the sonnet sequence, with its broken and sectioned parts, bears a resemblance to the serial novels of the day.

Indeed, most critics read sonnet sequences such as EBB's, the Rossettis', and Eliot's as "naked novels."¹⁰ Possibly, the desire to read the verses as a progression towards eventual marriage is born out of what Peter Brooks calls the "narrative impulse" (6). As Brooks argues, narrative impulse comes from the nineteenth-century obsession with "questions of origin, evolution, progress, [and] genealogy" (6). I return to Brooks' ideas about narrative impulse in my first chapter, but the overarching question is: If readers demand that sonnet sequences present something narrative, or novelistic, then what do readers force onto the poems?¹¹ In other words, do readers add narrative to sonnet sequences that is not upheld by the poems themselves? The sonnet sequences I examine in the following chapters were written during the heyday of the Victorian novel and are in conversation with the (most often) novelistic theme of marriage. While not all Victorian novels are about marriage, I suggest, that we read these sequences as negotiating a liminal space of discourse between poetry and novels—engaging with novels while also refusing and revising novelistic narrative with regards to the marriage plot.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was actually the first to call the collections of sonnets "sonnet sequences" and before him they had been known mostly as "sonnet series" or "sonnet cycles." William T. Going attempted to delineate the differences between the terms "series" or "cycle"

¹⁰William Going writes that:

The outline of the underlying narrative is clear and simple:[...] The series is not discursive and inclusive like those of Petrarch and Drayton. It has a unity of theme; it has a beginning, climax (Sonnet XVI "Here ends my strife"), denouement, and conclusion (Sonnet XLIII "I shall but love thee better after death"). (19)

¹¹ This is not new; critics have long attempted to create some kind of narrative out of sonnet sequences. Eve Sedgwick writes of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in *Between Men*, that "Shakespeare's Sonnets seem to offer a single, discursive, deeply felt narrative,"(49) and that "one most wishes the Sonnets were a novel" (46).

and “sequence,” ultimately deciding that there was little difference.¹² What seems particularly useful, however, is the recognition that “sonnet sequence” as a concept is a Victorian invention.

While the lyric or the epic poem is able to tell a similar kind of story as to the sequence, sequences are by definition broken into smaller pieces. *Modern Love* and *Sonnets from the Portuguese* tell a distinct story of interrelation and evolution of intimacies, and the sequential form allows for each poem to confront the subject of marriage from a different perspective. The poems may change voice, point of view, or tense, but the sequential model necessitates their interrelatedness. Meredith moves his poetic voice from first person to third person and EBB interrogates her own desire repeatedly in poem after poem. While EBB’s sequence may have no definite progression of plot in the way that Meredith’s does, the poems still tell a kind of overarching story of desire, crisis and resolution that cannot exist in a miscellany or collection of poems. Because the sonnets in a sonnet sequence are linked by association and title, I suggest that sonnet sequences present interrelation without necessarily requiring narrative progression.

In her article, “Poetry as Fiction,” Dorothy Mermin asserts that *Modern Love* occupies a liminal space of overlap between Victorian novels and poetry (100). Building from her suggestion, Alan Barr argues that the poems contrast narrative with lyric for effect:

Modern Love juxtaposes, largely to subvert and expose it, the courtly, sentimental, relatively static (lyric) mode of the sonnet tradition with the narrative, often satiric or ironic, middle class, realistic characteristics of the novel. (289)

For Barr, Meredith’s choice of the sonnet only stands to serve his larger narrative impetus. In fact, Barr suggests that Meredith’s achievement is in ‘bending’ poetic form to make it more novelistic: “he achieves this sense of the novel and the modern within the sonnet tradition that he

¹² See Going’s 1947 essay “The Term Sonnet Sequence” (400-402).

borrowed and bends” (289). But what if we read Meredith’s choice of the sequence as an *alternative* to the novelistic narrative? The sonnets interrogate the “ironic, middle class, realistic characteristics” of the novel but in a fixed and relatively minute space (Barr 284). The form of the sonnet, which should not be large enough to encompass a novelistic narrative, does. Moreover, according to Barr, the sonnet sequence challenges an ideology of realism by suggesting that realistic narratives have gaps and fractures and sonnet sequences are require gaps and fracturing by their very definition. Although I am not arguing that novels present desire, anxiety and intimacy as whole and seamless, what the sonnet sequence carries out that is different from the novel, is a self-conscious presentation of formal constructs. The sonnet sequence is conscious of its formal structuring, unlike most Victorian novels which attempted some form of verisimilitude. The sonnet sequence is self-consciously formal; it could even be called performative.

Narratives of love, desire and marriage figured in Victorian sonnet sequences are skeletal in comparison to novels; they are filled with gaps, fissures and breaks.¹³ The sequences I have selected present a portrait of Victorian desire and marriage that engage a different mode of realism than their novelistic counterparts, specifically because of the sonnet form’s ability to represent the conflict between structuring and fracturing. The poetic form necessitates these gaps and breaks in the form of stanza ends. In this way, I argue that sonnet sequences emphasize the experiences of desire, anxiety and intimacy as multifaceted.

More than just their temporal relationship to novels and the novelistic form, marriage, and specifically the ‘marriage plot’ of novels, influences the way Victorian sonnet sequences are

¹³ For more, see discussion in *Little Songs*, p 6.

read. In EBB's sonnets, marriage becomes the conventional telos of the sonnets.¹⁴ Similarly, in Christina Rossetti's poems, her own biographical spinsterhood is overlaid onto the poems. One way of thinking about marriage is as part of a normative temporality. Queer theorist Judith Halberstam places courtship and marriage narratives at the center of normative temporality and a normative telos is charted by marriage and reproduction while nonnormative temporality— what she calls “queer time”—disrupts this progression:

... “queer” refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time. “Queer time” is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. (6)

Queerness disrupts a normative notion of time which is constructed or marked out by a series of heteronormative events, specifically marriage. Halberstam's assertion is not wholly unique— other queer theorists, including Lee Edelman and Madhavi Menon, highlight marriage and reproduction as central markers for the narrative of heteronormativity.¹⁵ Conversely then, queer time has the potential to “produce alternative temporalities” which imagines life “according to logics that lie outside of these paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction and death” (2). While Halberstam follows contemporary subcultures, her analysis of the “imagination” of other types of futures gets at a central crux of these poems. The imaginary is a possible site of intervention through aesthetic means, and those imaginations are

¹⁴ In my chapter on *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, even as I attempted to leave her biographical reading behind, the specter of marriage and heteronormativity was hard to shake. Biographical connections exist for all of the sonnet sequences I read and part of my project has been to negotiate a reading where the biography can provide context for the poems without dictating a “true” or “actual” reading of them. In other words, I have done my best to allow the poems to speak for themselves, while also recognizing their biographical situation.

¹⁵ In the book *No Future* and the article “Queering History,” with Jonathan Goldberg, respectively.

by their own terms political—they resist and reframe normative social standards and understandings of kinship/family, community and legacy.¹⁶ The sonnet sequence reconsiders the marriage plot by emphasizing marriage as performance and not as the *telos* of narrative. Natalie Houston suggests that “these sequences self-consciously anticipate and negotiate such an assumption of truthful reality by repeatedly demonstrating that authenticity in a sonnet sequence is always constructed” (“Affecting Authenticity” 100). As Houston suggests, the sonnet has a manifest artificiality, a constructedness, which parallels and exposes the manifest artifice and construct of marriage itself.

Naked Novels: A Chapter Outline

In this dissertation, I begin with perhaps the most famous Victorian sonnet sequence. In chapter one, “Queering Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*,” I depart from traditional critiques of EBB’s poem to offer a queer reading of the well-known love poem. While traditionally scholars read *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) as a “celebration of married love” or as portraying a “reciprocal love and marriage” between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, I detach the sonnets from any biographical link in order to interrogate their relationship to the amatory tradition.¹⁷ The poems are filled with return and repetition, suggesting that they do not narrate an easy linear progression from single woman to married wife, but a more fraught and meditative debate over love and desire. Formally, EBB modifies the rhyme scheme of her sestet which places her sonnets in conversation with Miltonic and Wordsworthian sonnets, and therefore draws a connection between their overtly political projects of revolution and her own. By linking her own meditations on intimacy and marriage to their

¹⁶ Halberstam, while she does not analyze poetry *per se*, uses contemporary visual art as examples of interventions of queer time.

¹⁷ See Phelan, p 109, and Billone, p 73.

revolutionary projects through the choice of form, EBB places her sequence in conversation with both the Petrarchan tradition of amatory poems and the more revolutionary tradition of political sonnets in order to question the institution of marriage.

Chapter two, “Modernizing Love in George Meredith,” tracks the interrelation of Meredith’s revised sonnet form and his critique of the marital institution in his 1862 sequence *Modern Love*. Primarily a novelist, Meredith chooses poetry as the vehicle for this particular narrative. Continuing on in formalist close reading, I argue that each sonnet recapitulates the claustrophobia set out in the first sonnet through its endlessly repeating quatrains and enveloped rhymes. Meredith’s political project seems overt—he calls the sequence “modern” and uses formal poetics to explore the institutionalization of marriage which inhibits and binds together two lives (the husband and wife in the poem). However, what is most interesting is the way Meredith’s project loops back onto itself. Consequently, we can read Meredith’s political project as its inverse: Meredith uses the institution of marriage as a way to explore a Victorian formal poetics which reiterates, inhibits and binds together its own two-ness (two rhymes in each of the four quatrains). *Modern Love* attempts to revise understandings of art and artistic relation not only to the aesthetic of “love,” but also its institutionalization. The new sonnet form recapitulates Meredith’s entrapment within the poem.

If *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Modern Love* revise the amatory tradition in order to critique and explore the institution of marriage, then Christina Rossetti’s and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sonnet sequences use the amatory tradition to explore subjectivity and intimacy. Chapter three, “A Spectrum of Victorian Sexuality” pairs Christina Rossetti’s sequence *Monna Innominata* (1881) with her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The House of Life* (1870, 1881). Because of the radically different articulations of erotic encounter within the poems, their

comparison offers an interesting dialectic on the possibilities of intimate bonds. The silenced beloved of *Monna Innominata* ends the sequence with a vow of celibacy, directing the erotic language of the poem not at the lover who abandoned her, but to God, religious ecstasy, and poetic production. Dante Gabriel's speaker repeatedly imagines martial bliss with his love object, as in the sonnet "Nuptial Sleep," but the beloved becomes a conduit through which the speaker experiences a myriad of erotic and sexual encounters. Finally, I read the two poems through CR's poem "In an Artist's Studio" in order to place the sonnet sequences in direct conversation with one another and explore the range of sexualities presented.

In the fourth chapter, "Intimacy and Familial Ties," I shift my focus slightly to interrogate explorations of Victorian desire through familial relationships. Taking George Eliot's "Brother and Sister" (1874) and Augusta Webster's *fin de siècle* sequence "Mother and Daughter" (1895) as my subject, I look closely at the authors' revisions of amatory poetics. Using the tradition of love poetry, and even metaphors of marriage, these two sequences articulate desire and intimacy as figured in two familial bonds.

Finally, chapter five focuses on a more radical departure from the amatory sonnet sequence. Michael Field, the pseudonym of women writers and lesbian lovers Edith Cooper and Katharine Bradley, creates a sequence of poems which press against the boundaries of what counts as intimacy and marriage, but also explodes the very form of the sonnet itself. In the limited printing of *Whym Chow* (1914), the women praise their dramatic and spiritual connection with their dog, Whym Chow. Chow becomes a fulcrum for the women's connection with each other, and creates a triangulated understanding of love and poetic production. *Whym Chow* abandons an understanding of intimacy as dyadic in favor of a different kind of connection which spans the human/animal divide. Breaking from the strict sonnet form which first inspired

the project, the poems transform it through manipulations of rhyme, line length, and poem length. These formal manipulations again underscore the poems' subject—which is a reexamination of the construct of individuality and intimacy.

Returning, in my conclusion, to the legality of marriage, I attempt to reposition sexuality and marriage. In my conclusion, “Re-contextualizing Tennyson’s Metaphors of Marriage” I examine perhaps the most famous of all Victorian poems, Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. An elegy for the poet’s boyhood friend and classmate Arthur Henry Hallam, the poem begins to look different in light of my arguments about queerness, marriage and sequencing. Tennyson repeatedly turns to the metaphor of marriage or courtship in an attempt to analogize his relationship with Hallam. The need to describe the relationship in a multitude of ways conveys Tennyson’s inability to articulate his relationship with Hallam in socially legible and emotionally accurate terms. Conversely, his obsessive refiguring is not a way to grapple with unavailable language, but instead a way to see every relationship as inflected by the friendship. I argue that intimacy is therefore channeled and diverted through a variety of other, more culturally sanctioned relationships and longings. Even in the most famous of all Victorian poems, and arguably the most famous of all elegies, it is *marriage* that becomes the institution through which and by which Victorians grapple with understandings of subjectivity and individuality.

CHAPTER I

Queering Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

Hailed as “the finest love poems in our language” by one 1862 reviewer, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was and still is at the center of the myth surrounding both the courtship of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, as well as ideas about Victorian love and marriage (Conant 353). Most know at least some of the biographical story of the romance behind Elizabeth Barrett Browning's amatory sonnet sequence; the handsome and younger poet, Robert Browning, wooed the 38-year old Elizabeth Barrett. She was an “invalid,” confined to her room by physical ailments, and forbidden by her father to ever marry (Breen ix).¹ She was already a well-respected poet, but, as the mythology goes, she was a captive of number 50 Wimpole St, London. EBB wrote the poems during their courtship.² As *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are usually read, they chronicle the passionate love between EBB and Robert Browning, which culminated in her physical recovery, their secret marriage and their elopement to Italy.

¹ While it is not wholly clear why EBB's father forbid marriage, many speculate that Barrett desired to end the family line because of its mixed racial heritage (Markus xviii). In fact, EBB was the first child in the extended family to be born in England; the family had a long history in the Caribbean and the family fortune was built upon the slave trade.

² I refer to Elizabeth Barrett Browning as EBB throughout the rest of this paper in order to acknowledge that she wrote the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* before her marriage to Browning and, therefore, before her name became “Barrett Browning.” EBB easily stands in place of Elizabeth Barrett Browning as well as her proper maiden name, which was Elizabeth Barrett Barrett. Even Robert Browning commented in one of his letters that he was glad their marriage would not change her initials (which was how she signed her letters to him). He wrote, “you cannot tell how I feel glad that you will not part with the name—Barrett—seeing you have two of the same—and must always, moreover, remain my EBB!” (December 19, 1845) (vol 1; 366).

Since their publication in 1850, the *Sonnets* have become increasingly sold as artifacts of “true love.”³ Contemporary reviews of EBB’s volume praised the poetry as “glowing with passion, melting with tenderness. True love was never more fitly sung” (Mitford 179). Even into the 21st century, the poems have maintained a kind of cultural cachet, persisting in popular consciousness. They have become culturally sacred as a celebration of marital love, often read at marriage ceremonies or printed on Valentines. Indeed the famous line from sonnet 43, “How do I love thee, let me count the ways” is frequently recited, revised and even parodied, but it is always used to express firm and unquestionable passion. Despite their historical significance as well as their prevalence in today’s popular culture, the *Sonnets* are invoked or cited much more often than they are actually read.⁴

Indeed, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is remarkable because it revises a tradition of courtly love poetry. EBB creates a sequence of sonnets voiced by a woman poet and lover, to her male beloved.⁵ The *Sonnets* interest me precisely because they are consistently marginalized as EBB’s least interesting poetry even though they continue to persist as cultural object. We might ask, like Tricia Lootens in her book *Lost Saints*, “Are the *Sonnets* sacred as literature [...] or as something else? [...] Most of us think we know the *Sonnets*, but how many of us, even students and teachers of English literature, have actually studied them?” (116). In this chapter, I

³ Tricia Lootens describes a number of the kinds of commodities which were inspired by the “true love” tale of the Brownings’ courtship. There were gilded books and fancy editions of the sonnets and the letters between EBB and RB. More astounding is what Lootens describes as a “morocco box” which, now housed in the British Library, holds a copy of the sonnets as well as two locks of hair—one supposedly RB’s and the other a lock of EBB’s that he carried with him until his death. The whole box was proved to be a fraud, but the story suggests how deeply the *Sonnets* had been transformed into relics of heterosexuality (144-5).

⁴ Angela Leighton argues that the mass popularity of the 1931 play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, by Rudolph Besier, only furthered the myth of the couple’s fairy-tale love (2). (Besier’s play was produced by MGM as a motion picture in 1934 and then remade in 1957.)

⁵ Traditional amatory sonnets, like Petrarch’s and Shakespeare’s, were written from a male lover to a female beloved. An exception would be Lady Mary Wroth. The niece of Sir Philip Sidney, Wroth wrote *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* which was published in 1621. She is heralded as the first woman poet to publish a sequence of sonnets.

take up Lootens' questions to form a reading which challenges *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as celebrating the heterosexual ritual of marriage.

To begin, I locate the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in conversation with Victorian novels in order to question presumptions of Victorian love and desire. Then, as my title suggests, I offer a queer reading of what are arguably the most famous heterosexual love poems, using Sonnet 21 as exemplary of the kind of queerness for which I argue. While there are a number of queer readings of Early Modern sonnet sequences, including Shakespeare's, few critics have examined Victorian poetry in this way (presumably because the poems are ostensibly heterosexual). I suggest that the poems do *not* offer a story of progress or a teleological narrative that ends in marriage, but instead that they present a picture of desire based on repetition and recursive movement. In doing so, I argue the *form* of the sonnet performs the repetition it suggests. In each of these sections, I explore perpetuating overgeneralizations—between sonnet sequences and narrative, heterosexuality and queerness, and expectations of Victorian desire and love—in order to restore some of the complexity the *Sonnets* have lost.

***Sonnets* and Novelistic Narrative**

Virginia Woolf attempted to revive interest in the poetry of EBB; even as the modernists ridiculed her work as too "Victorian." Woolf included an essay on EBB's *Aurora Leigh* in her *Common Reader: Second Series* (1932) and composed *Flush* (1933)—a novel inspired by Elizabeth Barrett's cocker spaniel. Still, Woolf admitted, "fate has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place" (*Common Reader* 202). It would not be until feminist criticism and recuperation projects in the 1980's and 90's that EBB's poetry would be reinstated into the critical canon of Victorian

literature. Those scholars lauded her as a great female poet and the *Sonnets* were praised for their revision of the male tradition of amatory poetics.⁶ Linda Shires notes, however, that “critics have often seemed to find it necessary to read Barrett Browning through one tradition (male canon) or the other (female poets of sensibility), against one tradition or the other” (332). Shires explains that relying on a gendered approach to the *Sonnets*

construct[s] a narrative of development out of one kind of gendered tradition and voice to another. This type of critical reading appears too limited in its usefulness, because it is itself an inheritance from the more rigid paradigms propagated in the nineteenth century. By this I mean that it adheres to a notion of separate spheres in separate traditions; it relies on models of psychological growth via anxiety or trauma and self-affirmation; it reads careers in terms of sex more than gender. (332)

Reading the poems through gender (or sex, as Shires suggests) only reifies the “narrative development” of the speaker.

As I suggested in my Introduction, 19th-century sonnet sequences borrow from novels, creating a kind of interplay between novelistic form and poetic form, or what Peterson called the “naked novel.” *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, composed in 1846, were widely popular during the novelistic heyday of mid-century Victorian culture. The sonnet sequence, with its broken and sectioned parts, bears a resemblance to the serial novels of the day. Indeed, most critics read the 44 sonnets as a narrative of triumph which ends in marriage; it is read as a progression from

⁶ Lootens argues, in her chapter on EBB “Canonization through Dispossession,” that the canonization of EBB was conjoined with her canonization as a pure woman, and that the debates over her poetry were inextricably bound up with debates over gender and gender roles.

single woman to wife, from timid recluse to engaged lover, and from physical invalid to reproductive mother.⁷

The impetus to read the sonnets in terms of novelistic layout makes them into a *bildungsroman* which culminates in the marriage of EBB to Robert Browning. While critics generally agree on this kind of teleological progression, the sonnets themselves do not bear it out.⁸ I argue, instead, that the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are concerned with recursive movement and that they resist the narrative of the *bildung*. Perhaps the desire to read the verses as a progression towards eventual marriage is born out of what Peter Brooks calls the “narrative impulse” which stems from the nineteenth-century obsession with “questions of origin, evolution, progress, [and] genealogy” (6). According to Brooks, readers need an “explanatory narrative” that “[traces] a coherent story forward from origin to present” (6). Instead of reading the poems on their own terms, critics have overlaid EBB’s biography with the *Sonnets* in order to make a more readable narrative. But what if we read the poems without the knowledge that EBB’s own courtship culminated in marriage? To put it another way, what if we reread the sonnets as EBB wrote them—without the privilege of a temporal position that guarantees marriage?

⁷William Going, as mentioned in the previous chapter, argues that *Sonnets* have a “beginning, climax . . . denouement, and conclusion” (19). Moreover, Amy Christine Billone argues that the “poems move in progression from “silence, sadness, death and weakness to speech, joy, life and strength” (63). Finally, Helen Cooper suggests:

The *Sonnets* fall into three groups: in 1 and 2 the speaker portrays woman as the project of man’s love, 3-40 record the speaker’s wavering between objectifying herself and claiming her own creative and sexual subjectivity, and 41-44 demonstrate the poet’s arrival at her own subjectivity, which displaces her allegiance to the conventions of the male tradition and reveals her confidence in the voice when that subjectivity elicits. (108)

⁸ A strong exception to this general reading of the sonnets simply a novel in verse is Natalie M. Houston’s article “Affecting Authenticity.” She carefully situates the poems within their amatory tradition as well as in conversation with Victorian novels. She writes, “The ‘marriage plot’ of the Victorian novel responded to and helped create a cultural ideal of domestic romance radically different from the cultural context of the Renaissance sonneteers; closer examination of the *Sonnets* reveals how Barrett Browning used the sonnet sequence to negotiate between two ideas of love” (106).

If readers take the poems as uncertain of love, and instead as deeply meditative verses on what love and desire might mean, the poems begin to look very different. The amatory sonnet sequence, which abounded in the 16th century, had fallen mostly out of favor, but this was the form to which EBB turned. If we read the sonnets as revisions of amatory poetics and as in conversation with ideas about desire and love such as those found in Early Modern sequences, then the poems look quite different.

Read only as biographical, the *Sonnets* lose their intense negotiation of time and life. To read the *Sonnets* without the happy marriage at the end, the poems reveal themselves as anti-teleological and instead intent on a repetitive, recursive meditation about desire. Pausing for a moment, I want to make clear I am not claiming that critics of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* have been historically bad readers; instead, it seems that those reading the sequence are particularly *adept* readers of the masterplots of the nineteenth century. Those who know the courtship ended in marriage read that marriage back into the poems.⁹ This explains in part why the poems are so easily dismissed as embarrassing or bad. There is a gap between what the poems should do and what they actually perform which results in an uncomfortable mismatch. Readers expect a marriage plot and when the poems deny that narrative arc the poems are rejected. Tricia Lootens sums this up saying, “If the *Sonnets* are embarrassing, it may be because the experience of reading them reveals the extent to which *we*, and not they, rely upon dreams of simple, innocently sentimental Victorian love” (120) (emphasis mine).

The speaker of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* does not recognize love and enter into a new life. The individual poems themselves, some of which do suggest awakening, do not form a

⁹ The clear narrative of *telos* appears only when the poems are read backwards, inserting the marriage at the origin of the text in order to make it readable. This is maybe an interesting intervention in the formal understandings of *bildungsroman*. Is it always true that we read backwards, understanding origins of narratives only after the endings are disclosed? Is a *bildungsroman* only a *bildungsroman* once we know that the protagonist “comes of age”?

progression in their sequencing. In its very basic form the sonnet is a kind of “plot,” in Brooks’ language. It has a demarcated and organized space which marks off and creates a “goal-oriented” and “forward-moving” structure (Brooks 12). However, the plot is particularly cordoned off at the fourteenth line. While the highly-ordered and sequenced poems evoke a heteronormative progression from budding love to marriage, I suggest that EBB turned to the sonnet in order to explore containment and resistance to narrative progression. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are concerned with a fraught and fretted notion of love which is amplified by the poetic form. The sonnet sequence is formulated on fractured and moveable parts which nevertheless suggest a relational *process* without a particular form of progress. Sonnet sequences particularly lend themselves to this kind of interplay of individual poems with the sequence as a whole; the sonnets are not stand-alone verses, yet the sequence is also not a progressive narrative. The sonnet as a form exemplifies complexity, but its brevity suggests a resistance to narrative progression. Sonnet sequences, while they suggest relation, require breaks and gaps at the end of each verse, halting our ability to read the poem as unquestionably progressive.¹⁰ It is the sonnet sequence’s self-conscious construction, however, that makes the poems most complex.

Queer Temporality

If *Sonnets from the Portuguese* do not present an easy progression or narrative of awakening for the female lover of the poems, then what kind of commentary on desire and intimacy do the poems offer? I argue that a queer reading of the sonnets offers insight into the

¹⁰Other longer poems do not necessarily do this. For instance EBB’s own *Aurora Leigh* (1856) presents itself as a kind of novel in verse, an epic poem. This is true also of Tennyson’s *Maude* (1855) and Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), which was even published like a serial novel (in installments) over two years.

poems' understanding of desire and intimacy. For my purposes, queer theory helps to destabilize the heteronormative structure that is so cemented in the *Sonnets*. In the words of Virginia Blain, I want to reject "the normality of heterosexuality" (2) as well as "certain habituated reading practices that incline us to read 'straight'" (1). In other words, queer theory helps to denaturalize or defamiliarize *Sonnets from the Portuguese*; it helps us to see beyond their mythic heterosexuality.

Perhaps the best way to defamiliarize the poems is to kick free of biography altogether.¹¹ Instead of reading the poems as about the courtship and eventual marriage of RB and EBB, I interrogate them as a poetic structure and as revisions of the amatory tradition of poetics. If we stop reading them as a sprint towards the heteronormativity of the author, then the poems no longer seem like embarrassing artifacts of Victorian sentimentality. Instead the poems are full of negotiations of the amatory tradition and poetic form. What better place to think about the complexity of desire than in the form used by Shakespeare, Petrarch and Sidney? By removing

¹¹ I do think there could be a queer reading of EBB herself, but for the sake of this argument I will only gesture towards this. EBB, as portrayed in most biographies is imagined lying on her sick-bed, the invalid but genius daughter of an over-protective father. Christine Battersby goes so far as to claim EBB as described in her biographies has, "internalised the models of her age 'condemning' her to freakishness, to (fatal) sickness, and to maleness for her pretensions of genius" (88-90). Battersby suggests that EBB's combination of genius, gender and illness assured her rejection from domestic norms. Moreover, since marriage was forbidden by EBB's father, her marriage to Robert Browning was an act of defiance to the norms levied by him and therefore could be read queerly. In her letters EBB writes about her struggle with the impossible task of being a good daughter, a good wife and a good poet. Already estranged from the daily household life, she explains to RB how her estrangement from the domestic sphere influenced her and her art:

It was a lonely life—growing green like the grass around it. Books and dreams were what I lived in—and domestic life only seemed to buzz gently around, like the bees around the grass. And so time passed, and passed—and afterwards, when my illness came and I seemed to stand at the edge of the world with all done, and no prospect (as appeared at one time) of ever passing the threshold of one room again, —why then, I turned to thinking with some bitterness [...] that I had stood blind in this temple I was about to leave. . that I had seen no Human nature, that my brothers and sisters of the earth were *names* to me [...] – do you understand? And do you also know what a disadvantage this ignorance is to my art—Why, if I live on and yet do not escape from this seclusion, do you not perceive that I labour under signal disadvantages. . that I am, in a manner, as a *blind poet*? (20 March 1845) (vol 1; 43) (*sic*)

the biographical elements of the poems, we are able to divorce them from their focus on heterosexual marriage. This in turn frees us to undertake a “queer” reading, in which we can focus on form and repetition in the poems. Stripping away the biographical narrative, what remains are not disparate verses. Instead, they are poems threaded together through their interior links: repeating strains and metaphors, and even rhyme.¹²

Built entirely on repetitive speech utterance, Sonnet 21 is significant to *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Almost exactly halfway through the sequence, this poem links the opening poems with the rest of the sequence—most especially the ever-famous Sonnet 43. In 21, the speaker asks the beloved to “love me,” repeating the phrase five times during the short fourteen-line verse. The poem calls attention to repetition through words like “again” and also through repeated word clusters and images:

Say over again, and yet once over again,
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
Should seem a “cuckoo-song,” as thou dost treat it.
Remember, never to the hill or plain,
Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.
Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted
By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt’s pain
Cry, “Speak once more—thou lovest!” Who can fear
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,

¹² It is interesting to note that there is a historical precedent for this kind of reading that refuses to acknowledge the poetry’s biographical link. The title *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was suggested by RB as a way to *hide* the poem’s biographical nature at the time of their original publication. The title was meant to disguise EBB’s own sonnets as translations of some long lost amatory sequence. However, Victorians quickly figured out that the sonnets were EBB’s own writing.

Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?

Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—toll

The silver iterance!—only minding, Dear,

To love me also in silence with thy soul. (XXI; l.1-14)

The poem's language suggests the need for returning to and reiterating a declaration of love. It uses words like "over again," "repeat," "remember," "too many." More than just the language of the verse, the poem is also formally built on repetition. For instance, the first line opens the poem with a kind of chiasmus: "Say over again, and yet once over again." This parallel structuring, which begins and ends the line with "over again," calls attention to the poem as a poem and reminds the reader of its crafted artifice. Emphasizing its own poetic nature, the first line calls attention to the performance within the poem. The verse is constructed to do just what this first line calls for: it says over again and once over again, enacting the very speech for which it calls.

This kind of parallelism of structure continues in the tenth and eleventh lines where each line begins with "too many" followed by a pause and the repeated phrase "though each." These lines, "Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,/ Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?", are a commentary on the project of the amatory sonnet sequence itself. The sonnets that make up this sequence are like the many stars or many flowers—all almost too similar and too abundant. Indeed, how does the poet know if the love at stake is not too common? The line answers the anxiety by insisting on the need for *each* star, *each* flower and *each* verse as she poses the question about their superfluosity. What is implied in "who can fear" too many flowers or stars, are the questions: 'Who can fear too many declarations of love? Who can fear too many sonnets on love?' In answer to these questions, the poem offers a

solution in the final pair of rhymed words, which appear internally in the line—"iterance" and "silence." The verse suggests only with both silent love and verbalized love can the speaker be assured of love.

If chiasmus and parallel structure are two formal structures which emphasize repetition and reiteration, then the poem enacts the re-saying that it calls for through its very syntax. Moreover, the aural and visual experience of the words of the poem also performs a kind of repetition and reiteration. The sonnet is crafted with a series of internal repetitions in the form of half-rhymes and sight rhymes like "green" and "greeted", "spring" and "spirit" and then "iterance" and "silence" in the final two lines. The sonnet form already constrains the poem, through its end-rhymes, but this poem connects internally as well, amplifying the sounds of repetition and reiteration.

Even the bird of the poem, the cuckoo of lines 3 and 5, sings a song of repeated sounds: *cuckoo, cuckoo*. The cuckoo sound of the bird is also syllabically and phonetically similar to what the lover hopes the beloved will respond: "love you." "Cuckoo" and "love you" are remarkably similar, both stressing the first of the two syllables and then, obviously, relying on the long and drawn-out vowel sound. The poem encodes this response of "love you" in its invocation of the bird. However, while the speaker calls out for the lover to respond "I love you," the poet/speaker also fears that the response will be nothing more than the song of a bird who cannot sing but one refrain. The cuckoo is not moved by emotion, as the speaker hopes the beloved will be, but is instead fated to echo its one song again and again. This kind of repetition is what the poet both longs for and fears and is exemplary of the deep ambivalence present in these verses. The speaker knows the bird's call heralds a changing of seasons— "Remember, never to the hill or plain,/ Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain/ Comes the fresh Spring in

all her green completed” (l.4-6); however, she fears that the song is only a kind of repetition without feelings. At the turn of the poem, the lover confesses doubt and calls out for the beloved to reaffirm love: “Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted/ By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt’s pain/ Cry, “Speak once more—thou lovest!”(l.7-9). Doubt, not easy love, stands at the middle of the sonnet which is already built on reiteration. Finally, not only does the speaker ask the beloved to declare love again and again in language, but in the closing line, asks for love in silence as well.

Sonnet 21 does not present an easy progression toward happiness or marriage, but a recursive and hesitant notion of repetition. This is what I want to call a queer movement— non-teleological and nonlinear—instead insistent upon a recursive motion, a motion which doubles back. In her book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam argues for what she calls a “queer time.” Halberstam states: “If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedule, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity” (1). In other words, queer time is that time which differs from normative narratives of progression; it is a life schedule that is *not* marked out by marriage and reproduction, but by other mile markers.¹³ In this case it is heteronormative time, or the consistent reading of the sonnets as necessarily leading up to a *telos* of marriage, that clouds our reading of them. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* troubles and meditates on the problems of marriage, intimacy, and domestic life, rather than unquestioningly upholding; the *Sonnets* enact a queer time.

¹³ Or, possibly, none at all.

Sonnets and Nineteenth-Century Wives

Sonnet 21, like all the *Sonnets*, is composed in the Petrarchan tradition of a lover to the beloved. Each of the 44 poems is itself traditional—fourteen lines of (loosely) iambic pentameter, divided into octave and sestet. EBB chose to repeat the same rhyme scheme in the octave of the entire sequence, rhyming *abbaabba*. This decision constrains the poems, demanding even stricter rhymes than usually expected in a sonnet. While the octave and sestet suggest Petrarchan love poems, EBB deviates from this tradition in her sestet. In doing so she also deviates from the tradition of amatory poetry as a whole. Instead of following the traditional rhyme scheme of *cdcefe* (or *cdccdc*), she borrows the form of a Miltonic or Wordsworthian sonnet, rhyming her last six lines *cdcdcd*. While this is only a slight shift in the form, it has larger implications for the poems. EBB's adjustment aligns her sequence with the more political and revolutionary projects by Wordsworth and Milton. As Margaret Morleir notes, this modification places the sonnets in conversation with issues raised in other sonnet forms, that of "the heroic/political sonnet" (326). Through her revision of poetic form, EBB underscores that the *Sonnets* are a commentary on the political climate of the day.

Thinking about the *Sonnets* in conversation with the rest of EBB's poetic corpus, this conclusion does not seem all that radical. Much of her work after the *Sonnets* is engaged with social and political problems. For instance, "A Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1847), "A Plea for the Ragged Schools of London" (1854), and the volume *Poems Before Congress* (1860) all overtly comment on political and social injustices. We can read EBB's poems as already "political" for giving voice to a female lover and making the beloved/love object a man but also at stake for thinking about love and desire are the legal implications of marriage, the stakes of making one body under the law. For a Victorian woman, marriage fully erased her as an

autonomous person. Legally and socially, her identity was overwritten by her husband's. This is the law of *coverture*.¹⁴ While highly debated in Parliament, the position of married women under the law would not even begin to change until 1857—a full 10 years after EBB composed her sonnet sequence.

The sixth poem in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is perhaps the most evocative of the crisis of individuality vs. marital union. In this poem the speaker contemplates a subject position as “individual” (the “I”) and as coupled (the “us”):

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before,
Without the sense of that which I forebore—
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
And sees within my eyes the tears of two. (VI; 1.1-14)

¹⁴ A. James Hammerton's article, "Victorian Marriage," as well as the section of *Between Women* entitled "Female Marriage and Victorian Marriage Reform" give quick overviews of Victorian Marriage law. In *Between Women*, Marcus states the legal discrimination simply and directly: "The law of marriage also mandated the formal inequality of husbands and wives, since coverture dictated that they were legally one person, the husband" (204).

For a Victorian woman, the crisis of “individual life” was a legal and domestic one. “I shall stand/ Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore/ Alone” (l.1-3), suggests that a beloved’s profession of love and ultimate proposal of marriage would require the speaker to drastically alter her current position. She would cease to exist as an autonomous being under the law; she would be completely overwritten by the beloved. The loss of individual life is central to the concerns in the *Sonnets* and it is at the center of the octave in sonnet 6. The line pairs “individual life” with “command” highlighting the sacrifice of both individuality and legal power in the union with the lover. With individuality comes command, but to lose an individual life means to fully give up one’s own command.

The poet knows that the meter of life is indelibly altered by the union with the beloved and her heart will no longer beat alone; it will “beat double.” In the sestet, the speaker conveys a fear of the replacement of one heart with two hearts and individual emotions with the combination of two emotions. Enjambling the octave and sestet, line eight spills over into nine: “The widest land/Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine...” (l.8-9). The enjambment of the line enacts the union of “thy heart” and “mine” by joining the two sections of the poem and effectively delaying the sonnet’s turn. The consonance of the ‘d’ sound from “doom” and “double” is repeated in “What I do/ And what I dream,” carrying the force of sound through the next lines. The consonance also creates a lingering sense of “doom,” echoing the word in the ‘d’ sounds and in the half-rhyme “do” and sustaining the sound of the “doom” for three lines: “Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine/ With pulses that beat *double*. What I *do*/ And what I *dream* include thee...” (l. 9-11).

In the final three lines of the sestet, the speaker imagines herself before God: “...And when I sue/ God for myself, He hears that name of thine,/ And sees within my eyes the tears of

two” (l. 12-14). Interestingly when “suing” God, the poet speaks on behalf of her beloved suggesting that *she* stands as representative for both herself and her beloved. This is exactly the opposite of how England’s legal records would read. In legal ledgers, the woman/poet would be represented only by her husband’s name. In the poem she represents the couple and even though God hears her beloved’s name (“that name of thine”), it is her body which represents them rather than her husband’s. She presents *herself* to God, and God reads in her eyes the “tears of two.”

Sonnet 6 locates the poet in a liminal space, standing at the “threshold” of a life alone versus a life doubled by the union with the lover. For this argument, I want to specifically put emphasis on the word “beat” from the line “with pulses that beat double.” “Beat” is particularly emblematic in that it conflates the rhythm of the speaker’s own blood and heart and the rhythm of the poetry (heartbeats and beats of a line of verse). The beat of the lover’s heart speeds up with the entrance of her beloved, but it also is now charged with the care and union of two bodies. There is no longer one heart, but two; the beat doubles. In addition the word “beat” suggests the violence that underlies a number of the sonnets. Like the shadow which looms forebodingly across this poem, we are reminded of institutional violence looming for a 19th-century wife under marriage law.¹⁵

Indeed, violence is present throughout the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and further complicates our reading of the poems as easy love poems, happily ending in marriage. Violence is present even in the first sonnet of the sequence.¹⁶ In Sonnet 1, the poetic voice is drawn “backward by the hair” (l.11) by the shadowy figure of Love. In this moment, the speaker is attacked from behind, wrenched backwards by the hair. The image is disturbing but it is also regressive; the poet is surprised, caught unaware, and drawn backward instead of pulled forward.

¹⁵ “Beat” also appears in Sonnets 6, 25, 28 and 39; also I return to “beat” in my discussion of EBB’s “Sonnets to George Sand.”

¹⁶ Erik Gray also reads this moment as violent in his essay “Sonnet Kisses” (136).

The poem, however, opens with the poet musing on poetry, alone and solitary:

I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,
Who each one in a gracious hand appears
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove, —
“Guess now who holds thee?” — “Death,” I said. But, there,
The silver answer rang, — “Not Death, but Love.” (I; l. 1-14)

While the poet reflects on life's “sweet, sad years” the future eclipses those memories—a “mystic shape” moves into the poem and behind the poet. This is the moment of collapse of temporal space and time. The *Sonnets* open with the subversion of easy progress. What looks like an end to those “melancholy years” is not death which was the previously imagined final stage. Instead it is “Love” which takes her “backward” instead of in a continual forward progression. This opening poem anticipates the metaphors of Sonnet 21, connecting the two through the word “silver.” In 21, the speaker asks, “Say thou dost love me, love me, love me, —

toll/ The silver iterance!” (l.12-3). Both Sonnet 1 and 21 are concerned with speech acts which affirm love even while the poem itself displays an ambivalence about love’s redemptive power.

Speech acts and motion in Sonnet 1 are not simple or clear. Sonnet 15 picks up the trope of troubled movement and imagining the flight of a bird “in the outer air.” The bird does not move forward (or fly forward), but again performs a kind of recursive and repetitive movement:

Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear
Too calm and sad a face in front of thine;
For we two look two ways, and cannot shine
With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.
On me thou lookest with no doubting care,
As on a bee shut in a crystalline;
Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love’s divine,
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air
Were most impossible failure, if I strove
To fail so. But I look on thee. . on thee. .
Beholding, besides love, the end of love,
Hearing oblivion beyond memory;
As one who sits and gazes from above,
Over the rivers to the bitter sea.(XV; l.1-14)

In this poem, the poet fails at failing. And, as in poem 21, the form of the verse enacts the sonnet’s subject; it plots out this failure in its construction. The octave here spills over into the sestet, as it does in many of the poems, but it is the repetition of “on thee.. on thee..” that slows the poem and marks its turn. By the end of the poem, not only are her words repeating—”on

thee” and “love”—but all motion is becoming a kind of “oblivion beyond memory” and the poet is surrounded with water “over the rivers and to the bitter sea,” indistinguishable from anything else.

Imagery of regressive, recursive and reiterative movement exists throughout the sonnets and not just in those presented thus far. In Sonnet 9 the poet asks the beloved to “sit beneath the fall of tears” in order to hear the “sighing years/ Re-sighing on my lips renunciative” (l.2-4). In Sonnet 7 the poet is re-taught the “whole/ Of life in a new rhythm” (l.6-7). The poems as a whole sequence are, moreover, an iteration of the amatory tradition they engage. They call for repetition in their subject, but their overall form is also a revision, a reiteration of the long-standing poetic tradition. In her discussion of performance and performativity in *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler argues that repetition is a way of unsettling norms. She writes, “Performativity is [...] not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, [...] it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (12). By taking as their subject an exploration of desire through repetition and then performing that repetitiveness in their form, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* enact a challenge to the norm. While EBB chose a sonnet sequence in order to “perform” or enact a meditation on desire and love, these poems “dissimulate” the amatory tradition even as they mimic it. Desire moves from the court to marriage, the speaker is female rather than male, and the love object is a man, rather than a woman.

In sonnet 42 EBB rewrites one of her own poems, further emphasizing the sonnet sequence’s emphasis on reiteration and revision. Sonnet 42’s first line, “My future will not copy fair my past,” was taken from a previous sonnet written and published in *Poems* (1844) and entitled “Past and Present.” This earlier sonnet suggests a kind of barrenness; the speaker has

lost all and yet is contented with that which is “scattered and trampled” because of the future promise of heavenly gifts.¹⁷ As in the opening sonnet of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the poet imagines death is the logical next step of her life:

My future will not copy fair my past
On any leaf but Heaven’s. Be fully done
Supernal Will! I would not fain be one
Who, satisfying thirst and breaking fast,
Upon the fulness of the heart at last
Says no grace after meat. My wine has run
Indeed out of my cup, and there is none
To gather up the bread of my repast
Scattered and trampled; yet I find some good
In earth’s green herbs, and streams that bubble up
Clear from the darkling ground, — content until
I sit with angels before better food: —
Dear Christ! when thy new vintage fills my cup,
This hand shall shake no more, nor that wine spill. (“Past and Present” 1.1-14)

The speaker here can imagine no future. While she is grateful for her life (“I would not fain be one/ Who... Says no grace after meat...” (1.3-6)), that life seems little worth living when there is none to share it. Instead, she imagines the time when she will “sit with angels before better food.” The sonnet follows the more traditional devotional rhyme scheme of octave *abbaabba*

¹⁷ EBB’s volume *Poems* contained 28 sonnets in total and critics suggest that she had turned to sonnet writing upon the death of her beloved brother Sam in 1840. Critics have suggested that, read as biographical, “Past and Present” reflects the kind of grief the poet felt in those years after these losses and before Robert Browning’s first letter. (See Markus and Leighton for this reading.)

and sestet *cdecde* and the poem is a fairly straightforward repetition of saintly grace and melancholy thankfulness.

In the revision of the poem in *Sonnets*, however, the poet/speaker is more concerned with an articulation of past and future than with an immortal soul.¹⁸ This later poem is much more intricate in its formulation as it progresses. The turn of the poem happens between lines ten and eleven and the poem's metaphor becomes increasingly complex. The speaker suggests that at the time she first wrote the line "My future will not copy fair my past," she had only a limited understanding of what "future" could hold, which was only a final happy communion in heaven with Christ. Here, however, the future does not unfold in a prophetic and happy *telos*. Instead, the metaphors of vines, leaves, writing and pages intertwine:

'My future will not copy fair my past'—
I wrote that once; and thinking at my side
My ministering life-angel justified
The word by his appealing look upcast
To the white throne of God, I turned at last,
And there, instead, saw thee, not unallied
To angels in thy soul! Then I, long tried
By natural ills, received the comfort fast,
While budding, at thy sight, my pilgrim's staff
Gave out green leaves with morning dews impearled.

¹⁸ This is the only original sonnet that RB and EBB left out of the first publication of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Sonnet 42 proved that the *SFTP* were not translations of another poet, but EBB's work herself. In his letter to friend Julia Wedgeood, RB discusses the decision:

Afterward the publishing them was through me – in the interest of the poet, I chose that they should be added to other works, not minding the undue glory to me, in fact should become transparent: there was a trail at covering it a little by leaving out one sonnet [sonnet 42] which had plainly a connexion with her former works: but it was put in afterwards... (November 1864)(as quoted in Markus 91) (*sic*)

I seek no copy now of life's first half:
Leave here the pages with long musing curled,
And write me new my future's epigraph,
New angel mine, unhopd for in the world! (XLII; 1.1-14)

The poem's metaphor turns at line nine while syntactically it is not until line 11 that the poem actually breaks. In line nine, the poetic voice has received the "comfort fast" and "While budding, at thy sight, my pilgrim's staff/ Gave out green leaves with morning dew's impearled" (l. 10-11). The poem reverts to iambic pentameter and the sudden shift in imagery is startling. The poetess' staff begins to blossom with dewy vines. This strange phallic metaphor seems to be about the proliferation of poetry under the sudden entrance of the "thee" in the poem.¹⁹ The "green leaves with morning dew's impearled" are the pages of paper inscribed with the new poems written in the beloved's honor but they are also full of burgeoning sexual arousal.

In line 11, however, the poem takes a syntactical and intellectual turn. The poetic voice returns to the opening line in order to revise it. "I seek no copy of life's first half" refuses the kind of imagined future of the quiet, lonely pious life from before. Instead the poet presents a manuscript: "Leave here the pages with long musing curled/ And write me new my future's epigraph" (l. 12-13). The syntax implies "leave" as the past tense of "to go," but *leave* also recalls the intertwining vine with its leaves, and also the manuscript pages. The next line does not clarify the metonymies. The speaker asks for her "new angel" to "write me new my future's epigraph." The poem does not ask for a new *future* but a new *epigraph*. The choice of noun is in part due to the rhyme scheme set out by the sestet, but it also changes the expected reading of

¹⁹ This is, as suggested to me by Gesa Frömmling, a trope associated with St. Joseph that comes from apocryphal versions of the birth of Christ. In those versions, Joseph is chosen to be Mary's husband because his walking stick flowered. Joseph appears with this symbol in paintings such as "St. Joseph with the Child" by Tiepolo (Church of St Sylvester, Bergamo).

the sonnet. What is expected is that the Beloved is asked by the poetic voice, as a writer and lover, to rewrite the future through the offer of a new life in love. However, the poem does not ask for that, but imagines only that the beloved composes the few short lines which introduce *her* work.

As the title of EBB's 1844 sonnet "Past and Present" suggests, the *Sonnets* do not imagine a future. Instead futurity is deferred and the poems revolve around obsessive and continual return and meditation. Throughout the sonnets, the poet imagines that love collapses opposing motions, like speaking and keeping silent, loving and renouncing, blessing and cursing. The sheer excess of motion and emotion makes it impossible to read a linear progression in the sequence. What the *Sonnets* perform most reliably is repetition and recursion. The poems revisit and reiterate desire and love as Sonnet 21 says, "over again and once over again" (l.1). Through subject and form, the *Sonnets* resist teleological narrative of a desire and love that would end in marriage.

Intertextual Connections

While heretofore I have resisted and discouraged a reading of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* that focuses on the biography of EBB, I do want to situate the poems within the context of EBB's work. Although I foreclose a reading of her poems as confessional or autobiographical, it is useful to position *Sonnets from the Portuguese* intertextually. Specifically, I turn to EBB's two sonnets to author George Sand in order to locate within those poems language of violence, sex and gender similar to that in the *Sonnets*. Next, I look at EBB's verse novel *Aurora Leigh* to show that this long poem also exhibits ambivalence about marriage and its relationship to individuality. By situating *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in this way, I

hope to reinvigorate their reputation within the body of EBB's work. Moreover, these sonnets to George Sand and *Aurora Leigh* are often read in terms of their political intervention. Situating *Sonnets* within this body of work only makes the sequence more legible, more consistent with EBB's poetic works.

Sonnets To George Sand: "A Desire" and "A Recognition"

In the same volume in which "Past and Present" appeared (*Poems* 1844), EBB included a sonnet pair dedicated to the French author George Sand.²⁰ Written before the *Sonnets*, this short, two-poem set explores ideas of identity and poetic work through metaphors similar to those deployed in the longer sonnet sequence. The poems to George Sand can be read as a kind of prequel to the story of frustration and desire told in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*; however, the poems dedicated to George Sand more overtly question gender and sex as it relates to the position of women writers in the nineteenth century. Evocatively entitled, "A Desire" and "A Recognition," this very short sequence praises Sand for her androgyny.

Famed for dressing in men's clothing and smoking cigars, Sand's persona was alternately praised and criticized. Moreover, her novels suffered the same fate. Praised as brilliant by some, others found Sand vulgar and grotesque.²¹ EBB's decision to compose and publish two poems dedicated to Sand suggests an interest and investment in exploring the kind of androgyny that the poems praise Sand for exuding. Most famously, "A Desire's" opening heralds: "Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man, / Self-called George Sand!" (l.1-2). Echoing contemporary critiques of Sand, the speaker of the poem not only draws attention to her androgyny, but also inverts gendered norms which pair male/mind and female/heart; instead,

²⁰ George Sand is the pseudonym of the French, woman author Amadine Dupin (1804-76).

²¹ Belinda Jack covers these controversies in vivid detail in her biography of Sand, *George Sand: A Woman's Life Writ Large* (2001).

Sand is a woman of great mind and man of immense heart. In addition, the phrase “Self-called” emphasizes Sand’s agency in the choice of a male pseudonym and creation of her own writerly-persona. Then again, if read in terms of debates over marriage law, this phrasing suggests that Sand’s self-designated pseudonym is a guarantee; Sand attains a male name without having to marry.²² Sand herself is a more obviously queer figure than EB, by today’s standards of gender-bending and sexual identity, but EBB’s emphasis in the sonnets on gender and sexuality points to her interest in these ideas.

The gender-bending opening lines imagine Sand as the embodiment of disparate forces and the poem imagines this embodiment is “pure genius” (l.12), a figure

...whose soul, amid the lions
Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance
And answers roar for roar, as spirits can:
I would some mild miraculous thunder ran
Above the applauded circus, in appliance
Of thine own nobler nature’s strength and science,
Drawing two pinions, white as wings of swan,
From thy strong shoulders, to amaze the place
With holier light! that thou to woman’s claim
And man’s, mightst join beside the angel’s grace
Of a pure genius sanctified from blame,

²² Naming is a recurring theme throughout this dissertation, though I do not theorize what “naming” does within the poems, I do suggest that naming is part of a greater conversation about the struggle within these sonnet sequences for recognition and legibility of intimacy and identity that falls outside of Victorian norms. More specifically, it seems that naming becomes a way to think through problems of marriage and identity. I return to the trope of naming most extensively in my chapter on Michael Field.

Till child and maiden pressed to thine embrace
To kiss upon thy lips a stainless fame. (l.2-14)

The melding of disparate forces suggests not only Sand's biography and persona, but her writing as well. Sand herself is a defiant, a "mild...thunder" (l.5), best of both nature and science (l.7), and looking to both "child and maiden" for her "stainless fame" (l.14).

Critics have suggested that these two sonnets to Sand engaged debates surrounding the printing and publication of her work in England, making them also a comment on the status of women writers in the mid-century. Indeed George Sand's writing had been criticized as too masculine and these poems sought to take on that critique, exploring both the possibilities of an androgynous mind and its limitations.²³ The sonnets juxtapose issues of gender and of literary production, offering a nationalistic thread in English literature which pits itself against French literature. The desire of "A Desire" is a dream-like crowning ceremony where Sand is singled out by God (the thunder which booms from "Above the applauded circus") who then draws forth wings from her "strong shoulders, to amaze the place." These wings, the speaker suggests, justify her and erase her blame: "as mightst join beside the angel's grace/ Of a pure genius sanctified from blame." What seems most pressing for an intervention into the *Sonnets* is that this poem is a "desire." This is a fantasy for the female writer who garners praise from both men and women as both "large-brained" and "large-hearted."

Perhaps less well known, "A Recognition" appeared directly following "A Desire" in *Poems*. The octave of this second sonnet outlines the speaker's 'recognition' of Sand's struggle and imagines an empathetic intervention in which she compliments her on her ability to be "true genius" and also "true woman":

²³ Morlier sketches out the controversy surrounding George Sand and her work in "The Hero and the Sage" (320-2). Marjorie Stone's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* also recounts Sand's impact on the poet.

True genius, but true woman! dost deny
The woman's nature with a manly scorn,
And break away the gauds and armlets worn
By weaker women in captivity?
Ah, vain denial! that revolted cry
Is sobbed in by a woman's voice forlorn,—
Thy woman's hair, my sister, all unshorn
Floats back dishevelled strength in agony, (l.1-8)

The first quatrain praises Sand; however, the second quatrain mourns the realization that while a theoretical view of Sand renders one image, the actual Sand is a real woman with an audible female voice and long messy hair. The speaker first imagines Sand breaking women free of their “captivity” by denying that there is an inherent “woman’s nature.” Unfortunately, just as the speaker imagines that Sand has moved beyond that naturalized captivity, she realizes Sand as embodied—she sees her messy hair, hears her woman’s voice. The shock of this realization moves EBB’s speaker to rethink their shared project as poet-women. The sestet revises the desire for Sand’s public recognition as an angelic androgyne:

Disproving thy man's name: and while before
The world thou burnest in a poet-fire,
We see thy woman-heart beat evermore
Through the large flame. Beat purer, heart, and higher,
Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore
Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire! (l.9-14)

The almost violent realization at the end of “A Recognition” follows the kind of painfulness of the realization of the “revolted cry.” Like in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the word “beat” appears in “A Recognition”: “We see thy woman-heart beat evermore/ Through the large flame. Beat pure, heart, and higher”(l.11-12). The speaker conflates poetic purity with saintly and angelic purity in both sonnet sets. For Sand her ascent to heavenliness occurs concurrently with her un-sexing in front of the other spirits. To be taken out of body recurs as a fantasy throughout the poems and imagining an androgynous poet spirit is a fascinating transformation of the very bodily and too-gendered sonnet tradition.

In relationship to the *Sonnets*, these two poems also suggest a repetitive and recursive meditation. Even the title of the poems suggests an interrelation with the subject of the *Sonnets*. Desire and recognition serve as the two main issues within the sonnets to Sand and also appear in the *Sonnets*. Indeed the very name of the second sonnet, “A Recognition,” suggests a return to or a recursive motion; the sonnet attempts to re-imagine or re-recognize the writer Sand. Interestingly, these two sonnets to Sand are never read as a narrative in the way that the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are. Of course, their relative brevity might be reason enough for the two poems to stand alone, but possibly they are not read as a narrative because of their complex (not to mention violent) rendering of Sand and Sand’s work. In other words, the poems do not imagine a clear progression for either the subject (Sand) or the speaker’s feelings about Sand. In the end, Sand’s sex and gender are still complex and the speaker’s ambivalent feelings about her are not resolved. By revisiting the sonnets to Sand, and placing them in conversation with the negotiation of female identity present in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the longer sonnet sequence begins to look more like part of an ongoing working-through of problems of gender, poetics and Victorian norms than previously suggested by other critics. *Sonnets from the*

Portuguese and the sonnets to George Sand explore queer possibilities through non-normative genders and temporalities.

Aurora Leigh

While the two sonnets to George Sand are never read as a narrative, *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is, of course, EBB's verse novel.²⁴ Moreover, if *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and the two sonnets to George Sand do not, as I argue, present a narrative of development but instead remain deeply ambivalent and recursive meditation on poetry, marriage and identity, then *Aurora Leigh* is the narrative of development in EBB's oeuvre. A *künstlerroman* and *bildungsroman*, the poem follows its title character on her quest for identity as a woman and as an artist, culminating in her marriage. Though *Aurora Leigh* relies on a narrative and embraces marriage in the end, nevertheless the poem interestingly intersects with the tropes introduced in the *Sonnets*. While I argue that the *Sonnets* do not necessarily end with marriage, *Aurora Leigh* presents a narrative which overtly ends in marriage, but which also overtly questions marriage as an institution.

Aurora, an intelligent and curious young orphan lives with her aunt and cousin in England. As the two children grow up together, an intimacy develops. In the second of nine books, cousin Romney, the caring yet austere aspiring-cleric, asks Aurora to be his wife:

...Ah, my sweet, come down,
And hand in hand we'll go where yours shall touch
These victims, one by one! Till, one by one,
The formless, nameless trunk of every man

²⁴ In a letter to RB about *Aurora Leigh*, EBB wrote "...my chief *intention* just now is the writing of a sort of novel- poem... That is my intention. It is not mature enough to yet be called a plan. I am waiting for a story, & I won't take one, because I want to make one, & I like to make my own stories, because then I can take liberties with them in the treatment." (*Letters I*: 204) (27 Feb 1845)

Shall seem to wear a head with hair you know,
And every woman catch your mother's face
To melt you into passion (Book II; l. 384-390)

Attempting to appeal to Aurora's love of poetry in this stanza, Romney presents his case for marriage in what he calculates will be the best rhetorical style—poetic allusion. Romney almost directly quotes to Aurora the final lines of *Paradise Lost*; she understands his allusion, but reframes his appeal to her “passion” saying, “What you love/ Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause: / You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir, / A wife to help your ends, —in her no end” (l. 400-3).²⁵ Aurora defends what she sees as her right to marry for love and her right to have an “end” for herself, to have her own pursuits. Stated more broadly, she does not simply want a husband who will quote poetry to her; she also wants the freedom to write it herself. Romney refuses to understand Aurora's argument because he cannot comprehend both producing art and advocating for social inequities of the day. Aurora continues, “...you are married long ago/ You have a wife already whom you love,/ Your social theory...” (Book II; l. 407-9). While the overt issue of the argument centers on Romney's patriarchal sense of female agency and social place, the underlying disagreement between Aurora and Romney is about a specific understanding of gender and the work of poetry. Romney and Aurora seem to have an ideological incompatibility around the concept of what “work” wives can do.

Aurora's dilemma recalls the dilemma of Sonnet 6 in which the speaker worries that the entrance of the beloved indelibly changes her relationship to individuality. In that poem the speaker also attempts to refuse the beloved saying: “Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand/

²⁵ Sarah Annes Brown's article “*Paradise Lost and Aurora Leigh*” (1997) addresses the Miltonic connection more thoroughly. She claims, “The tensions within *Aurora Leigh*, the way the poem's ostensibly measured plea on behalf of women seems to conceal hints of a more inflammatory view lurking beneath its surface, are mirrored in the poem's slippery relationship with *Paradise Lost*” (724).

Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore/ Alone upon the threshold of my door/ Of individual life, I shall command/ The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand/ Serenely in the sunshine as before, Without the sense of that which I forebore—” (1.1-7). In Sonnet 6, the speaker worries that she will lose command of her own life and choices. Aurora chooses to be a poet, and she fears marriage will require her to forgo that profession.

When Romney again proposes to Aurora she again refuses and tells him she has decided to go to London and live by writing books. When she asks what will become of him, he replies:

... For me,
Aurora, I've my work; You know my work;
... While you sing
Your happy pastorals of the meads and tress,
Bethink you that I go to impress and prove
On stifled brains and deafened ears, stunned deaf,
Crushed dull with grief, that nature sings itself,
And needs no mediate poet, lute or voice,
To make it vocal. While you ask of men
Your audience, I may get their leave perhaps
For hungry orphans...

...for beaten and bullied wives. (Book II; 1.1195-1208)

Romney accuses Aurora of wholly removing herself from the economic plight of those ill-treated by society. He imagines “grief” needs no mediation in language. Instead, he argues that scenes of such suffering fall somehow outside of what needs to be made “vocal” by poets. Here he calls

attention to the physical violence done to women, who are “beaten and bullied,” and accuses Aurora of ignoring them.

Romney voices a very real concern—that poetry could only be a pastoral space, a space divorced from any suffering humanity, and, in this respect, he acts as the voice of Aurora’s deep fears. Romney continues:

Such work I have for doing, elbow deep
In social problems, —as you tie your rimes,
To draw my uses to cohere with needs
And bring the uneven world back to its round,
Or, failing so much, fill it up, bridge at least
To smother issues some abysmal cracks
And feuds of earth, intestine heats have made
To keep men separate, —using sorry shifts
Of hospitals, almshouses, infant schools,
And other practical stuff of partial good
You lovers of the beautiful and whole
Despise by system. (Book II; l.1215-26)

Those whom he will help, those who have “social problems,” are those who have no economic standing—the deaf, the blind, the orphaned and the battered, abandoned wives. Romney’s metaphor of eruption—”rimes” which “smother issues some abysmal cracks/ And feuds of earth”—are his imagining of poetry as an inadequate glue to hold together what men have rent apart.²⁶ He imagines she disdains the “system” of charity and he is half correct. Aurora’s

²⁶ This metaphor is almost exactly what Aurora imagines happening with herself earlier in the book and is again part of a metaphor of fire and melting. In Book I, as Aurora discovers her father’s library, she

project is to show Romney that poetry does not exist as a realm wholly separate from his and suggests that her poetry can help to change this position for women.

Thus, in response to Romney, Aurora begins to explain what her ‘work’ entails:

...Ah, you force me, sir,
To be overbold in speaking of myself:
I too have my vocation, —work to do,
The heavens and earth have set me since I changed
My father’s face for theirs, and, though your world
Were twice as wretched as you represent,
Most serious work, most necessary work
As any of the economists’. Reform,
Make trade a Christian possibility,
And individual right no general wrong; (Book II; l. 453-461)

She argues he will work to move a “wretched” world toward one of reform. Romney will bring those wretched people money with which to survive—the work of the economists—but also a greater wealth in “Christian possibility.” However, what she most wants is for Romney to see that his work of reform is only made possible by her creative work:

...what then,
Unless the artist keep up open roads
Betwixt the seen and unseen, —bursting through
The best of your conventions with his best,
The speakable, imaginable best

describes reading his books as a volcanic eruption: “...As the earth/ Plunges in fury, when the internal fires/ Have reached and pricked her heart.../—thus my soul,/ At poetry’s divine first finger-touch” (l. 845-7, 850-1).

God bids him speak, to prove what lies beyond

Both speech and imagination? (Book II; 1.466-72)

Aurora desires to ask the question: How can you urge people to a better life when they cannot imagine such a thing? Poetry and art are that which helps to show the promise of the “unseen.” Her point is that she does not in fact despise his systems of practicality and partial good, but she maintains that only through the creative fictions of poets can anyone conceive of a good that is more whole. Aurora heralds her need for individualism, implicitly suggesting that marriage destroys that individualism. She continues:

I hold you will not compass your poor ends

Without a poet’s individualism

To work your universal. It takes a soul,

To move a body: it takes a high-souled man,

To move the masses, even to a cleaner style:

It takes the ideal, to blow a hair’s-breadth off

The dust of the actual. (Book II; 1. 475, 477-82)

Aurora argues that only through aesthetic mediation, “the ideal,” can any one person blow even a little of “the dust” off the “actual.” *Aurora Leigh* argues for aesthetic intervention in social problems. Aurora sees the poet as not just necessary, but crucial to social reform.

In her article “Anomalous Ownership, Copyright, Coverture and *Aurora Leigh*” Cheri Larsen Hoeckley argues for a connection between Aurora and Romney’s debate and marriage law of the nineteenth century:

Barrett Browning’s participation in copyright debates together with her support of the Married Women’s Property Movement validates a reading of the verse novel with

attention to female literary property. The property plot in *Aurora Leigh* highlights conflicts between Victorian copyright struggles and the debate over wives' property reform. Together these debates figure harmoniously married women as outside the literary marketplace, even while married female authors were earning independent incomes. I argue that since Victorian coverture denied writing wives independence, it created a conflict between cultural definitions of "wife" and "author." Barrett Browning's verse novel reflects the complexity of this dilemma, tracking Aurora's growth through various plot intricacies where she earns considerable literary profit, but culminating in the final inability to narrate the poet's egalitarian marriage. (138)

While *Aurora Leigh* does end in "egalitarian marriage," with Romney, it is because Romney finally recognizes the role of the poet and women. Hoeckley's argument also helps make sense of the hesitation and repetition within the *Sonnets*.

In his final speech to Aurora, Romney echoes metaphors found in the *Sonnets*. He recognizes "Art's a service" and praises Aurora for her poetry:

... Art's a service,—mark:
A silver key is given to thy clasp,
And thou shalt stand unwearied, night and day,
And fix it in the hard, slow-turning wards,
And open, so, that intermediate door
Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form
And form insensuous, that inferior men
May learn to feel on still through thee to those,
And bless thy ministration. The world waits

For help. Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both, commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers, born. (Book IX; l.915-28)

Recalling the “silver iterance” and the “silver answer” of Sonnet 1 and 21, Romney’s speech suggests that it is Aurora who holds the “silver key.” Whereas in the *Sonnets* it is beloved who possesses the silver object, here the poet is assured of her own position. Romney also emphasizes form. Suggesting that Aurora, the poet, can move between “sensuous form” and “form insensuous,” suggests that poetic form (form for the senses) can intercede in social and political form (insensuous forms). This moment in *Aurora Leigh* underscores the interrelation of forms. As Caroline Levine argues, “formalist insights [can be used] to make the case that social hierarchies and institutions can themselves be understood as *forms*. What emerges is a cultural-political field in which literary forms and social formations can be grasped as comparable and overlapping patternings operating on a common plane” (626). Romney’s speech underscores my own argument about *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. By reading the sonnet sequence as an anti-teleological and as a questioning of heteronormativity and marriage law (rather than upholding it), EBB’s poems present themselves as serious meditations on subjectivity and the legal bond of marriage. They are “sensuous forms” interrogating “form insensuous.”

How do I love thee?

In conclusion I turn to that most famous of EBB’s sonnets. Sonnet 43 is, in many respects, a response to the poem with which I opened this chapter—sonnet 21. In 21, the

lover/speaker asks the beloved to declare love over and over again. In that poem, the speaker needs the beloved to help assuage doubt that the lover can love enough, and in enough ways. In 21 the speaker repeats “love me” five times in a kind of plea for the beloved to return the words. The repetition also conveys the insatiability of desire and love. While sonnet 21 cries out “love me,” Sonnet 43 replies with “I love thee.”

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death. (XLIII; 1.1-14)

The anaphora of the six lines creates a visual as well as aural reiteration within the poem. It also suggests, however, that as the poem moves forward, the reader will better understand how that “loving thee” is transformative. If there is transformation, though, it is not the expected transformation of sadness into love. Instead the enjambment of lines 11 and 12 suggest loving is

always a losing game: “I love thee with a love I seemed to lose/ with my lost saints...”

Ultimately, love is about deferral; for this poem really great love comes only “after death.”

Returning again to a queer formalism which attempts to question heteronormative impulse through the poetic form, I argue that Sonnet 43 arbitrates “love” with form. What the speaker argues for cannot be measured and cannot be put *into* measure. In this reading, it is the word “count” in the opening line of the sonnet, however, that seems most suggestive. “Count” can be read as an assertion by the female poet to “Let *me* count,” as in ‘let me be valued’ as well as ‘let me compose this verse.’ Count also implies the numerous ways in which the lover loves (like the flowers, stars...etc of poem 21); she too is as insatiable as she has asked the beloved to be. Moreover, each of the “ways” is entirely subjective and constitutive as well as recursive, calling on all the love she “seemed to lose” and the “smiles, tears of all my life.” To reread this sonnet and place it in context with the rest of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* it seems that the speaker of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets* does not love “thee” easily, or readily, or freely. Instead, love comes only through slow reflection, meditation, tears and, possibly, death.

CHAPTER II

Modernizing Love in George Meredith

In the previous chapter, I argue that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* does not portray a teleological narrative, but instead presents a hesitant and recursive meditation on desire and intimacy. Suggesting that the desire for a narrative “plot” which ends in happy union is actually a textual imposition overlaid onto the text by the reader, I argue instead that EBB’s *Sonnets* paint a much more ambivalent portrait of marital union through both their form and content. This discomfort, the unfulfilled dream of simple and innocent Victorian Love, is what links the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* most usefully to George Meredith’s sonnet sequence *Modern Love* (1862). In *Modern Love*, Meredith takes the critique of love one step further than EBB in the *Sonnets*, to call into question the relevance of the institution of marriage. Meredith crafts a biting and ironical satire by calling the sequence “modern” all while suggesting that there is little love left in his modern marriage. If *Sonnets from the Portuguese* troubles a reading of courtship, then Meredith’s poems challenge what happens after marriage; in *Modern Love*, he re-imagines the amatory tradition by taking as his subject not courtship, but the demise of love.

“This is not meant for little people or fools.”

Printed as the preface to George Meredith’s 1862 volume of poetry, the line “This is not meant for little people or for fools,” issued a warning to Meredith’s Victorian audience. The volume was entitled *Modern Love*, however the poems were anything but typical “love” poems. Meredith’s title, like his preface, was laden with irony and sarcasm: the “modern love” recounted

in his sonnet sequence tells of doomed marriage filled with adultery, resentment and mutual disgust. Comprised of 50 poems, the verses modify the courtly tradition of amatory love poetry to chronicle the decline of a nineteenth-century marriage. In his Introduction to a 1948 edition of *Modern Love*, Cecil Day Lewis writes, “If mid-Victorian English society was intolerant of sexual irregularity, it had even less tolerance for the open discussion of it. Meredith offended against the strongest tabu of his time...the family was the keystone of society” (xii-xiii) (*sic*). Day Lewis’ remarks recapitulate the criticism that *Modern Love* received upon its first publication. Victorian reviewers accused Meredith of attacking the institution of marriage which they took as at the heart of Victorian culture—its “keystone.” *Modern Love* incurred outrage, even leading a reviewer from the *Saturday Review* to call into question Meredith’s patriotism.¹ He wrote that the poems were “a grave moral mistake...it is one of the most disastrous calamities that can befall a nation” (Williams 106).² Moreover, another reviewer for the *Spectator*, suggested Meredith was a “clever man” but that “his form of the versification makes the smartness look still more

¹ As cited in Lewis’ Introduction (xi-xii). Interestingly, and perhaps predictably, A.C. Swinburne argued vehemently in favor of Meredith’s poems. In a direct response to the *Spectator* critic’s review, he wrote a letter to the editor saying:

Praise or blame should be thoughtful, serious, careful, when applied to a work of such subtle strength, such depth of delicate power, such passionate and various beauty, as the leading poem of Mr. Meredith’s volume: in some points, as it seems to me (and in this opinion I know that I have weightier judgments than my own to back me) a poem above the aim and beyond the reach of any but its author. Mr. Meredith is one of the three or four poets now alive whose work, perfect or imperfect, is always as noble in design, as it is often faultless in result. (205)

² The review also interestingly suggests some sort of social contagion by likening the poems to some kind of ode to “small pox.”

So far from a condition of doubt and uncertainty on the general tone of matrimonial morality being in any sense an interesting or attractive thing, it is one of the most disastrous calamities that can befall a nation. To write of the rotten places of our social system as if they were fitting subjects for the Muse is just as reasonable as it would be to compose a sonnet to the gout or an ode to the small-pox. Besides, the subject is old and outworn, exhausted by far abler hands than those of Mr. George Meredith. With the great literary error of *Don Juan* before his eyes, it was scarcely worth his while to commit the sickly little peccadillo of ‘Modern Love’. It was no doubt his conviction, derived from French authorities, that there is a species of nineteenth-century infidelity, more recondite, more interesting, more intellectual, forsooth, than those which have gone before, and that this novelty was not undeserving of a bard. (Williams 106-107)

vulgar,” and in short, called Meredith worse than “French.”³ By placing the emphasis of his criticism on Meredith’s “versification,” this critic suggests that what was really at the heart of *Modern Love*’s vulgarity was its form. Indeed it seems unusual that Meredith, who was famous as a novelist, would choose an amatory sonnet sequence for this narrative.

In this chapter, I draw a connection between the form of the “sonnet” and the strict norms recognized in Victorian “marriage.” I build on Alan Barr’s suggestion that “by taking as his subject the dissolution of a marriage [*Modern Love* makes] visible the fissures in society’s conventions” (284). In terms of the subject matter, Meredith’s political project seems overt. But, I want to also argue that Meredith’s formal poetics recapitulate his political critique. If Meredith’s “form of versification” was vulgar, then it reflected the vulgarity of the institution of marriage. By comparing the legal form of marriage to the changing form of the sonnet in

³ Many of the reviewers call *Modern Love* the new *Don Juan*, including the review of the previous note. These critiques seem to suggest that Meredith was as scandalous as Byron. The particular review to which I refer here, was published on 24 May 1862, by R.H. Hutton (first published anonymously). It states more fully of *Modern Love* and Meredith:

Clever bold men with any literary capacity are always tempted to write verse, as they can say so much under its artistic cover which in common prose they could not say at all. It is a false impulse, however, for unless the form of verse is really that in which it is most natural for them to write, the effect of adopting it is to make the sharp hits which would be natural in prose, look out of place—lugged in by head and shoulders—and the audacity exceedingly repellent. This is certainly the effect upon us of this volume of verse. Mr. George Meredith is a clever man, without literary genius, taste, or judgment, and apparently aims at that sort of union of point, passion, and pictorial audacity which Byron attained in ‘Don Juan’. There is, however, no kind of harmonious concord between his ideas and his expressions; when he is *smart*, as he is habitually, the form of versification makes the smartness look still more vulgar, and the jocularities jar far more than it would in prose. On the whole the effect of the book on us is that of clever, meretricious, turbid pictures, by a man of some vigour, jaunty manners, quick observation, and some pictorial skill, who likes writing about naked human passions, but does not bring either original imaginative power or true sentiment to the task. The chief composition in the book, absurdly called ‘Modern Love’, is a series of sonnets intended to versify the leading conception of Goethe’s ‘elective affinities’. Mr. Meredith effects this with occasional vigour, but without any vestige of original thought or purpose which could excuse so unpleasant a subject, and intersperses it, moreover, with sardonic grins that have all the effect of an intentional affectation of cynicism. This is not quite always the case, however, or we should soon throw the book contemptuously aside; for the jocularities are intolerably feeble and vulgar. The best, or one of the best sonnets, describes the concealed tragedy of social life when the hero (if he is to be so called) with his wife and the lady for whom he has since formed a passion are walking on the terrace before dinner with a brilliant party... (Williams 92-93)

Meredith's poems, I offer a queer reading of the sonnets and suggest that the poems expose the concept of "marital union" as a fantasy. Ultimately, I return to the notion of vulgarity in Victorian England in an attempt to tie together my claims about poetic form and legal and social institutions.

In his 1906 *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith*, G.M. Trevelyan hints at the political power of Meredith's sequence: "Here is one of our own modern 'problems' treated, like some ancient tragedy, with the same kind of spiritual and intellectual beauty as saves *Othello* from being morbid, and *Hamlet* from being decadent" (21). Trevelyan suggests that the widespread and "modern problem" is unhappy marriage. Indeed even until the 1920s and 30s—well past Trevelyan's publication—divorce in England was granted only to those able to afford substantial legal fees and only on grounds of adultery.⁴ Only those with enormous wealth could secure a divorce, and even then the terms were painfully public and discriminated against women. Nineteenth-century spouses were provided with few alternatives if the match proved unsuitable. As suggested in the Introduction, while the limitations of the domestic ideal may have been under scrutiny, the laws, sadly, did little to rectify the social stigma and emotional strain of a bad marriage. Composed only a few short years after the Matrimonial Causes Act, *Modern Love* itself exposed the domestic ideal of Victorian marriage as merely performance, an outdated social play that emphasizes pain and heartache.

Most of the sonnet sequences to which I turn in this project have a biographical correlation. For Meredith, his own marriage suffered a fate similar to that laid out in *Modern*

⁴ Day Lewis goes on to say, that *Modern Love* was revolutionary "because it adumbrated our present-day attitude towards the sexual relationship, our belief that marriage imposes obligations but does not confer rights. Meredith, however, saw very clearly the weakness of this attitude" (xx). What about *Modern Love* seems to speak across time to the very center of Day Lewis' emotional understanding of marriage in 1948, 86 years after the first publication of the *Sonnets*? Day Lewis suggests that even in 1948 marriage's obligations obliterated individual rights.

Love. Meredith's wife, Mary Ellen Nicholls, eloped with friend and painter Henry Wallis.⁵ Meredith never made amends with Mary Ellen, who died in 1861. While *Modern Love* at times mirrors Meredith's own marital troubles, I do not read the sequence as simply autobiographical. The poems present a husband and wife who are already unhappy in their marriage, but who continue to pretend to be a happy couple. As the sequence progresses, it is revealed that the wife has committed adultery and that the husband contemplates his own act of infidelity. The couple attempts reconciliation, but the sonnets end with the wife's suicide and the husband's grief and guilt.

Sonnet 17 is perhaps Meredith's most overt commentary on modern marriage, calling attention to marriage as a performance and a social fantasy. In this poem, the husband and wife of the sequence perform parts as though they are acting in prescribed roles. In the sonnet the two host a dinner party for guests:

At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.
Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
The Topic over intellectual deeps
In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.
With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:
It is in truth a most contagious game:
Hiding the Skeleton, shall be its name. (XVII; l. 1-7)

⁵ Mary Ellen Nicholls was the widowed daughter of Romantic novelist and poet Thomas Love Peacock. Meredith, famously, was the model for Wallis' *The Death of Chatterton* (1856). Some contemporary critics characterized *Modern Love* as a vindication of Meredith's role in the failure of the relationship, but surprisingly the poems present a marital decline in which *both* the husband and wife bear equal burdens. In fact, the poems are striking in their empathetic portrayal of the wife as a trapped and unnecessary victim of a larger system, the institution of marriage.

The pressures of performing a happy married life become a macabre enactment. The two keep the “ghost” of marital unhappiness from their guests and Meredith names this dance of effrontery “Hiding the Skeleton.” Suggesting their game is a kind of social contagion, and hinting at its wide prevalence, the speaker exposes the ludicrousness of the couple’s interactions, sardonically enquiring, “Went the feast ever cheerfuller?” (l.2).

The “game” or performance, in which the husband and the wife play, is strictly monitored by those in attendance. Meredith’s first-person speaker (who, in this sonnet, is the husband) takes sarcastic glee in their superb demonstration. The sonnet concludes with the revelation that “Love” and “marriage” are long-dead corpses only reanimated by their game:

Such play as this the devils might appal!

But here’s the greater wonder; in that we,

Enamoured of an acting nought can tire,

Each other, like true hypocrites, admire;

Warm-lighted looks, Love’s ephemerioe,

Shoot gaily o’er the dishes and the wine.

We waken envy of our happy lot.

Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.

Dear guests, you now have seen Love’s corpse-light shine. (XVII; l. 8-16)

The rotting body which shows its own decline is hidden by the pair’s performance. This single corpse, a kind of nuptial-zombie, is the single body of the husband and wife under marriage law. Their ‘one flesh’ under the law comes under scrutiny in the poem and, as Meredith’s metaphor suggests, he deems it putrefied and dead. Most devastating is the envy the husband feels emanating from the guests. The line, “We waken envy of our happy lot,” brutally stresses the

“we” of the poem, underscoring the complicity of both the husband and wife; the husband and wife are bound together in their task. Unaware of the catastrophe, the guests are made to covet the host’s “happy lot” and “fast, sweet, golden...marriage knot.” The “corpse” of poem shines because of this skillfully played game. The performance is beautiful because the husband and wife come together in a mutual creation of an otherwise dead love. Marriage, Meredith seems to emphasize, is a reanimation of a long-dead skeleton and is useful only for social performance. Although the emphasis of the poems is on the fictional marriage presented, Meredith’s correspondence suggests his indictment of the institution as a whole.

Socially and legally bound together as “one flesh,” Meredith’s poems expose the marital body as a monstrous composite and as an impossible subjectivity. Whether a figure with diseased skin, as Meredith suggests in a letter to a friend, or a skeleton in the closet, marital union in *Modern Love* demands a new kind of representation.⁶ The two-in-one subjectivity of legal marriage no longer works, and the sonnet sequence suggests a need for some new, more viable, alternative. In *No Future*, Lee Edelman writes that queerness “[alters] us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain” social reality (6-7). As a theoretical approach, “queer,” as Edelman defines it, uses non-normative sexuality as leverage for an ideological intervention. He continues to suggest that queerness “engage[s] those fantasies through the figural logic, the linguistic structures that shape them” (7). Meredith’s poems expose the single body as social fantasy encoded in law and linguistic structures; he then goes so far as to figure these cultural fantasies as grotesque.⁷

⁶ This letter, addressed to Mrs. Simons, Meredith likens the married body to a body with “spots” on its fair skin. I return to this letter in more detail at the end of the chapter.

⁷ For example, EBB’s name change from Barrett Barrett to Barrett Browning highlights the linguistic and legal structure which makes wives part of their husbands and erases them as autonomous beings. By engaging martial union as a fantasy, then the linguistic structures (such as the problem of naming) suddenly manifest themselves.

Even though Meredith's poems portray a heterosexual couple, *Modern Love's* project is not invested in sustaining marriage as a cultural ideal. Instead, the sequence queers the matrimonial body by exposing it as a construct and a normative fantasy. Exposing these sites of queerness in Meredith's poetry also exposes the text's resistance to and critique of the social and political structures of marriage. Moreover, while the subject of the poems is a critique of marriage, I also argue that *Modern Love's* expanded poetic form acts as a metrical/metaphorical institution. Through the poem's structure, Meredith exhibits the problem of representation and subjectivity in the face of the two-in-one subjectivity demanded by marriage.

Queering the Marital Body

In EBB's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and in Meredith's *Modern Love*, union with the lover is a source of anxiety for the speaker. Whereas in *Sonnets*, the speaker of the poems hesitantly embraces the beloved, and worries about what a union with the beloved will do to the beat of her heart, Meredith's poems chronicle the union after marriage. In other words, while *Sonnets* imagines what a union with the beloved might do, *Modern Love* reflects on the violence that that union has already done. One sonnet sequence imagines the consequences while the other laments their realities. In this way, the two sonnets sequences nicely bracket my argument about desire and marriage. Both sonnet sequences unexpectedly expose love, desire, and marriage as normative fantasies and in so doing make room for other kind of intimacies and sexualities which I will explore in future chapters. As in to my argument about *Sonnets form the Portuguese*, I turn to the form of *Modern Love* as my main evidence for their queer aesthetic and political intervention.

Formally, Meredith modifies his sonnet expanding it to sixteen lines instead of the typical fourteen, composing the verses with four quatrains which rhyme *abba*. Even though he changes the poetic form, Meredith still refers to the sequence as sonnets.⁸ After the publication of *Modern Love*, the sixteen-line form will be known as the Meredithian sonnet, or, as Swinburne called them, “mock” or “caudated sonnets” (Houston Peterson 199). This new stanza creates a poem which lacks the *volta*, or turn, found in traditional English and Italian sonnets. Omitting any kind of sestet, octave or final couplet, the poems deprive readers of a visual or aural progression, turn, or closure.⁹ There is no final couplet or witty turn of Shakespearean sonnets. There is not even the more meditative turn after the octave usually found in Petrarchan and Spenserian sonnets. By withholding the turn, the poem withholds a sense of closure or resolution and the form of the poem reflects the marriage as a frustrating and inescapable institution. Moreover, the poem is built around two rhyme sets which make up each quatrain. Thus, the poems are comprised of four quatrains emphasizing the constant coupling of the two rhymes. The poems and Meredith’s marriage are marked by their iterations of two-ness and both suffocate under the pressure of that doubling. The claustrophobia set out in this formal revision is recapitulated throughout the sequence in the endlessly repeating quatrains and enveloped rhymes. The individual sonnets contain little to no cross-rhyming from one quatrain to the next,

⁸ He writes to his friend and confidant Maxse shortly after his wife’s death: “My Dear Maxse, I send you a portion of the proofs of the tragedy of *Modern Love*. There are wanting to complete it, 13 more sonnets. Please read, and let me have the honest judgment” (London, Jan 1862) (*Letters; Vol. I* 60).

⁹ In her preface to a 1995 edition of *Modern Love*, Gillian Beer writes:

The poems...are often described as sonnets, though in fact they are sixteen lines long, not fourteen, and composed of four quatrains. They have neither the emphatic turn of octave and sestet nor the summary ending of the alternative sonnet form. Rather, their form outgoes, literally, the containing sonnet which it also uses: instead of fourteen lines, producing crisis, musing, resolution sometimes, here we have a surplus that refuses to be curtailed, the beat of thought and rhyme continuing past expected limits. (ix)

thereby effectively quarantining each four-line set.¹⁰ In this way, Meredith's form imitates his content—a highly-regulated style for a too-regulated intimacy.

Modern Love's opening sonnet is a sonnet of suffocation. There, Meredith links poetic form and the marriage bed to take us to the center of the marital decline. The sequence opens in a kind of *medias res* of emotional distress—the husband already knows that his wife, next to him in bed, is awake and weeping:

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
Were called into her with sharp surprise,
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away
With muffled pulses... (I; l.1-8)

Meredith's husband *already* knows, or thinks he knows, in what state his wife lies. Not only are we presented, in the first four words, with the husband's supposed understanding of the situation, but the sonnet opens with a declaration of knowledge. Cathy Comstock argues that from the outset, the poem exhibits what she calls, "the need for a center of understanding" (134).¹¹ This is true for sonnets more generally and the convention and form requires a kind of turn of

¹⁰ This is quite different from *Sonnets from the Portuguese* which are marked by their cross-rhyming and internal rhymes.

¹¹ Her article, "The Problematics of Truth in Meredith's *Modern Love*," also argues that though the poems open with an assertion of knowledge, the 3rd person, poetic voice is an unreliable narrator. She writes, "And, even as we put together a picture of the narrator/husband's agonized search for understanding, our sympathetic involvement is apt to be so shaken by signs of the contradictory and anomalous impulses of that quest that not only the motivations, but even the very construct of a narrator become questionable" (129).

knowing. For *Modern Love*, the scene of knowledge is the marriage bed, their “common bed.” What should be the center of intimacy for the couple’s marriage, Meredith figures as a cold and fraught space; the bed is at the center of the marital trouble, both literally and metaphorically. What should be the center of normative heterosexuality is not.

Until line six, the sonnet’s lines are generally end-stopped: “eyes,” “head,” “surprise” and “snakes” are all followed by a colon or commas. Meredith’s enjambment in line 6, however, arrests the reader. “She lay/ Stone still” breaks the line and the spondee—”Stone-still”—brings the meter to a screeching halt. The “long darkness” which flows away with “muffled pulses” is the wife’s resumed grief and the muffled pulses are her muted sobs. But for the reader, who is stopped at the in-sucked breath of the wife, the flowing and muffled pulses mark out the poem’s meter which resumes, finishing the sonnet. To put it another way, the verse models the wife’s grief as it moves forward. Her sobs and the poem’s own meter are presented as the same; Meredith constructs the poem to represent the emotional distress it narrates.

In the second half of this opening sonnet, Meredith introduces the image of a tomb and describes the couple as a pair of stone effigies atop a sarcophagus. This trope of the monument often appears in the sonnet tradition and is yet another moment in which Meredith heralds his choice of the antiquated form:¹²

...Then, as midnight makes
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
Sleep’s heavy measure, they from heart to feet
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,

¹² This is evident in moments like Shakespeare’s line from sonnet 81 “your monument shall be my gentle verse” (l.9), and (even though it is after Meredith’s sequence) Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s suggestion that his sonnets are but “a moment’s monument”(“Introductory Sonnet” *House of Life*; l.1)

By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
Each wishing for the sword that severs all. (l.8-16)

The third person speaker of the poem suggests that the funerary statue is the monument most evocative of his poetic sequence. Meredith makes this line into a simile, the two are “Like sculptured effigies” on the bed/tomb. The image of the sword in the sonnet is at first a strikingly violent moment—seemingly the instrument by which the husband and wife have died, the sword also echoes courtly poetry. Most notably it is an allusion to the high-German courtly romance *Tristan and Isolde*. In the poem, as well as the later opera, Tristan and Isolde sleep with Tristan’s unsheathed sword between them in order to prove their continued chastity.¹³ Meredith’s sword then is not just a weapon of death, but the wish for chastity—the wish for one of the only legal loopholes that would dissolve an already existing marriage. Unfortunately, the husband and wife of *Modern Love* have already engaged in a sexual relationship; it is too late to annul the union.

Implicit in the “tomb” simile is another tomb-like structure: the sonnet itself. Meredith writes that midnight makes the two “Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat/ Sleep’s heavy measure, they from heart to feet/ Were moveless” (l.11-13).¹⁴ The couple’s silence is metered,

¹³ The story was revised by Wagner in the mid-nineteenth century and premiered it in Germany in 1865. In his edition of *Tristan and Isolde*, Francis Gentry writes: “The use of a sword to separate a man from a woman with whom he does not engage in carnal knowledge is an ancient legal symbol” (Gentry 264).

¹⁴ Meredith’s emphasis on the poetic beat of the marriage bed not only anticipates his critics, but implicates those that read the poems. Subtly, he makes us as readers complicit in his exploration of oppression. Still looking at the opening poem, in the lines, “they from heart to feet/ Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,” Meredith’s enjambment again fractures the lines at a crucial moment. “. . .From heart to feet/ Were moveless” asks us to look again—does the poem read *were* or *we’re*? The line breaks “were” from its syntactical context and requires us to read it visually as the beginning of its own sentence. Metrically both “were” and “we’re” fit, and the homographs make the

measured and poetic; “beat,” “measure” and “feet” are the language of versification. Meredith’s poetics are disheartening to say the least—even while the “feet” of the line beat forward, it is only “vain regret” that is “scrawled over” a “blank wall.” The blankness of the last four lines of the poem stand in contrast to the beginning. There is no poem written from the marriage bed. There is no epitaph written above the sarcophagus. The wall remains blank and the metonymous bed/tomb/sonnet is an unbearable little space built only for the dead or the statuesque. Like the “Skeleton” or the “corpse-light” from sonnet 17, the marital couple in the opening sonnet are reduced to a moribund effigy, bound together not just in death, but even in death’s representation.

The excess of measured nothingness is what Meredith sets forth as his project in the opening sonnet: silence is beating, sleep is measured, feet are moveless, and there is no writing on the wall. Collapsing the metaphors of immobile bodies and measured lines, Meredith conjoins the intransience of hearts and metrical feet. *Modern Love* begins with the assertion that marriage and poetics are linked, and both are fruitless. In this way, the initial poem of *Modern Love* becomes a synecdoche for the sequence as a whole and lays out Meredith’s marital tale: there will be versification and there will be a marriage, but each is a kind of “nothingness.” In other words, there will be no happy resolution and no love-filled union of husband and wife. On one hand, the poems seem to have a narrative arc which chronicles the decline of the marriage and ends in the wife’s suicide, but on the other, the poems meld this suggestion with a pervasive feeling of being stuck, of stasis and entrapment.

If Meredith’s initial sonnet seems designed to mimic the arc of the entire sequence, then his individual sonnet form is designed to mimic the bodies in their moveless marriage bed. This

reader not only an accomplice to, but part of the movelessness of the poem and the marriage. The oppressiveness of doubling is not the only cause of marital failure, but the static institution of Marriage implicates us all—we’re all moveless.

link, the slide between the bed/tomb of marriage and the sonnet as a tomb, places emphasis on sonnets and marriage as formal structures. Each poem is an exercise in double and triple containment and the lines truly “beat” into the reader the futility of existence outside of the form. Meredith likens his sonnets to the little rooms or tombs and his sonnet form recapitulates his marital metaphor. Foreclosing the possibility of traditional sonnet form as well as a marriage plot which ends well, Meredith creates each sonnet as a microcosm of the relational failure as a whole, drawing on what he calls in Sonnet 30 the “tomb for text” (l. 4).

Little Rooms, Cruel Muses and Cursed Snakes: Metaphors of Decline in *Modern Love*

Meredith evokes the metaphor of enclosure and of the tomb elsewhere as well. After the first sonnet delineates the poems’ project as a whole, *Modern Love* explores different variations of the “little room.” Slightly less than halfway through the sequence, the husband and wife embark for travel during the Christmas holidays. When gone from their own house and their own marriage bed, the two must take rooms at a boarding house. Unfortunately, the only room available is the attic. In a tongue-in-cheek reference to another Christmas story, Meredith sets up his marriage as quite the opposite of the Biblical version. It is not a stable which is vacant, but a little room in the peak of the house. The speaker admits he has come to the holiday in an attempt to join in merriment (another performance), but to no avail. In this sonnet he finds a different version of the opening poem’s tomb. Here it is a little attic room, and instead of the “blank wall,” in this sonnet it is a “hollow door”:

‘Tis Christmas weather and a country house
Receives us: rooms are full: we can but get
An attic-crib. Such lovers will not fret

At that, it is half-said. The great carouse
Knocks hard upon the midnight's hollow door,
But when I knock at hers, I see the pit.
Why did I come here in that dullard fit?

I enter, and lie couched upon the floor. (XXXIII; l. 1-8)

In the room, which is as suffocating as the tomb from the first sonnet, the husband evades the marriage bed and takes his place on the floor instead. But as he passes by his wife lying under the covers of the rented bed, Sonnet 33 echoes the opening poem's image of the beating and muffled sobs emanating from the wife:

Passing, I caught the coverlet's quick beat:—
Come, Shame, burn to my soul! and Pride, and Pain—
Foul demons that have tortured me, enchain!
Out in the freezing darkness the lambs bleat.
The small bird stiffens in the low starlight.
I know not how, but shuddering as I slept,
I dreamed a banished angel to me crept:
My feet were nourished on her breasts all night. (1.9-16)¹⁵

Unlike the first sonnet, where the husband longs for a “sword that severs all” (I;16), here he turns to self-revulsion and asks for shame, pride and pain to torture him. He does not get his wish, *per se*, and instead dreams of a new muse and a new inspiration which feeds him. His “feet” are nourished elsewhere and a “banished angel” still provides a poetic force for the poet. This banished angel recalls the kind of poetic muse of desire and longing from the tradition of the

¹⁵ Gillian Beer annotates this final line in the sonnet with the words “head to toe, intimate and alienated” (24).

sonnet sequence, but the image also serves as a reminder of what the wife is *not*. In other words, she is not Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House" (1854), but a fallen and banished angel instead.¹⁶

By invoking the famous poem of wifely duty, Meredith again exposes the fantasy of domestic bliss. Meredith pokes fun at the trope of wifely muses who inspire poetry. With biting irony, he exposes the wife/muse as yet another construct of idealized marriage. In other sonnet sequences, the speakers long for the possibility of love, but *Modern Love* longs for freedom from marital 'love.'¹⁷ While the poems occasionally engage the tradition of unrequited desire for the love object, what the speaker of this sequence desires most is to be free of the once-loved object.

The sequence returns to the figure of the muse in other poems as well. Exactly halfway through the sequence, the husband directly turns to critique his wife. In Sonnet 25 the husband chastises his wife for her dislike of French novels:

You like not that French novel? Tell me why.

You think it quite unnatural. Let us see.

The actors are, it seems, the usual three:

Husband, and wife, and lover. She—but fie!

In England we'll not hear of it. Edmond,

The lover, her devout chagrin doth share;

Blanc-mange and absinthe are his penitent fare,

Till his pale aspect makes her over-fond:

So, to preclude fresh sin, he tried rosbif. (XXV; l. 1-9)

¹⁶ Adella Pinch's article "Love Thinking" pairs Patmore and Meredith to read the two versions of wifeliness in juxtaposition.

¹⁷ Meredith marks his sequence's difference because of the marriage—what seems to set him apart is that the wife has, at one time, acquiesced sexually and emotionally to the husband. Their marriage makes the pining in the poems markedly different from Petrarch's, whose Laura never physically touches him.

Brutal in tone, the husband criticizes the wife for snubbing the plot of the French novel. The poetic voice both raises the question, “Why?,” and supplies the wife’s answer, “You think it quite unnatural.” The unnaturalness of the French novel stems from the very plot of the affair. Exposing the wife’s pious stance as hypocritical, Meredith’s suggestion that the tale of adultery is too vulgar for English eyes is also an anticipation of the critical response to *Modern Love* itself, which critics called too “French.”

Meredith makes much of this perceived vulgarity and plays out its absurdity. The second quatrain points out the ridiculousness of the pious lovers’ stance stating that Edmond’s, the lover, favorite meal is “Blanc-mange and absinthe.” Then, to stave off new sin, the lover chooses instead, “rosbif,” or the French term for roast beef which is also a common French insult for the British. Self-deprecating, the now third-person poetic voice implicates the husband himself, who is not free from the absurdly performative shows of penitence:

Meantime the husband is no more abused:
Auguste forgives her ere the tear is used.
Then hangeth all on one tremendous IF: —
If she will choose between them. She does choose;
And takes her husband, like a proper wife.
Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:
And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse. (l.10-16)

Auguste, a famous Victorian parody, is a clown who is duped again and again by the master for whom he does bidding.¹⁸ Meredith suggests that the husband is this fool hanging onto the possibility that the wife will come back to him. The sonnet ends with the continued rhetorical

¹⁸ See Bartton and Featherstone’s *The Victorian Clown* for a discussion of nineteenth-century circus performers.

conversation between the married couple. “Unnatural?” asks the speaker, repeating the wife’s answer to the initial question. The sonnet then levels the crushing blow: that the “unnatural” *is* life; it is *their* life. The French novel she so despises is revealed as the very plot of their own lives and it is the very inspiration of the poems—the cruel and “unnatural” Muse is revealed as simply re-inspiring life. Meredith makes a connection here between realism and idealism. The wife of *Modern Love* is a kind of muse for the poet’s poems, but she is far from ideal. Instead she is a muse of realism.

Not an “angel” in the house, but a fallen or “banished” angel, Meredith’s muses are also figured as Medusa-like. Indeed a recurrent image in *Modern Love* is that of the snake. In the opening sonnet, “gaping snakes” lash out at the husband: “By this he knew she wept with waking eyes/ That at his hand’s light quiver by her head/ The strange low sobs that shook their common bed/ Were called into her with sharp surprise,/ And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,/ Dreadfully venomous to him” (I; l. 1-6). Followed by the image of the wife as “stone-still,” the poem suggests not that she is the Medusa, but, nonetheless, that a Medusa of sorts comes between them—a horrid monster which lies between them in their marriage bed making both, ultimately, into stone statues on their bed.

Meredith’s speaker is perhaps invoking in this poem Shelley’s “On The Medusa Of Leonardo Da Vinci” (1819) which depicts the Medusa head as “tempestuous loveliness of terror” (l.33).¹⁹ It may be the humanness of the Medusa that Meredith also finds a compelling reference for his *Modern Love*; Shelley’s Medusa is pitiable and above all, human:

Yet it is less the horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone;

¹⁹ Thanks to Rachel Teukolsky for this suggestion.

Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
Are graven, till the characters be grown
Into itself, and thought no more can trace;
'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown
Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,
Which humanize and harmonize the strain (l.9-16)

Snakes, as a repeated trope in the poem, usually appear in the context of Meredith's empathetic portrayal of the wife. This understanding, even in horror, is much like Shelley's Medusa whom he pities and suggests was made a monster by circumstances. But the snake is not only Medusa-like in its deployment. The snake, even in the first poem, seems to be connected to knowledge. The poem opens with a statement of knowledge—"By this he knew"—and toys with the images of Eden and Adam and Eve as the first marital couple. Implicit in this reference is the thought that the utopian ideal of marital bliss—of wedded Edenic bliss—is ruined by the knowledge which comes to them through the tempting snake. In Meredith's marriage, the two are doomed because they know what they could have had (the happy marriage) but cannot now enjoy. The recurrent image of the snake is itself is multivalent; it is never fully allegorical. Sometimes the snake represents Medusa, other times it is Satanic, pagan, even phallic. The snake, however, is always a sign of cursedness, and of knowledge which leads to agony and pain.

In 26, the sonnet begins as a meditation on love as an eagle, but ends with the "I" of the husband whose high flight of love has been grounded—cursed to slither as the snakes. The poem begins, "Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies" and then continues:

A subtle serpent then has Love become.
I had the eagle in my bosom erst:

Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed.

I can interpret where the mouth is dumb.

Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth.

Perchance my heart may pardon you this deed:

But be no coward: —you that made Love bleed,

You must bear all the venom of his tooth! (XXVI; 1.1,9-16)

The poem is full of mythic allusions. In this poem the eagle of love has fallen. The eagle is grounded, and like the snake of Eden, is cursed. Meredith's speaker is critiquing an institution of marriage which, he claims, has become synonymous with "Love." He reveals that his curse is to recognize his wife's infidelity and lies. Moreover, his curse forces him to recognize that their marriage is in turn a lie—he can see the "side-lie of a truth."

The snake is overtly connected to the snake of Eden in Sonnet 3. "This was the woman; what now of the man?" (1.1), the sonnet asks in its opening line. It then continues:

But pass him. If he comes beneath a heel,

He shall be crushed until he cannot feel,

Or, being callous, haply till he can.

But he is nothing:—nothing? Only mark

The rich light striking out from her on him! (III; 1.2-6)

The "nothingness" of the second quatrain is remarkable; the poem creates a caesura which emphasizes the no-thing of the center of the line. A linguistic lapse, the dash links nothing to nothing. Here again is the measured nothingness set out in Sonnet 1. In the opening sonnet the husband suggests that from the marriage bed there will be no poetic progression (only this static return) and in 3, the husband realizes he is only the "mark" which is made by their marital

decline. His curse is the only thing which is created by their marital failure. The snake is the snake of Eden which comes to be “crushed” under the woman’s “heel.”²⁰

Interestingly, in Sonnet 3 and 26, the snake and the husband/man are conflated. The two poems employ a kind of strategic catachresis which mingles the images of snakes, the husband and the wife. The poems continually elide any kind of easy relationship of metaphor or signification which, I think, continues to make the subjects of the poem inextricable from one another. In fact the husband in 3 is marked only by the light of the woman which reflects out from him: “rich light striking out from her on him!” (1.6). Her eyes act like a spotlight bringing into focus only the man she wants and leaving all else in darkness. The verse continues:

Ha! what a sense it is when her eyes swim
Across the man she singles, leaving dark
All else! Lord God, who mad’st the thing so fair,
See that I am drawn to her even now!
It cannot be such harm on her cool brow
To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!
But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well
I claim a star whose light is overcast:
I claim a phantom-woman in the Past.
The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell! (III; 1.7-16)

²⁰ Genesis 3:15-18 NIV reads: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it.’ Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.”

Here the poem shifts from third to first person in line twelve—it moves from “he” to “I.” Time also shifts from the present to a kind of time immemorial and the speaker realizes his mistake—she is his woman, he creates her monument in his verse, but she is a “phantom-woman in the Past” whose spirit he cannot own. Though the speaker knows his wife possesses her own autonomy and subjectivity, this moment in the poem is a brutal reminder. The speaker is resentful that his poetic muse is this woman.

Later in the poems, the husband decides to take his own mistress as an act of retaliation against his wife for herself engaging in an extramarital affair. Here the poem is even more self-consciously calls on the courtly-love tradition. In the sonnets 27-30, the husband composes sonnets to his “Lady.” Here there should be a clear narrative of premeditation and adultery, but this too seems static in its progression. A doctor tells the husband “Distraction is the panacea, sir!” (XXVII; l.1) prescribing the husband find an affair himself. The husband replies to this suggestion that he has tried:

Doctor! that same specific yesterday
I tried, and the result will not deter
A second trial. Is the devil’s line
Of golden hair, or raven black, composed?
And does a cheek, like any sea-shell rosed,
Or clear as widowed sky, seem most divine?
No matter, so I taste forgetfulness.
And if the devil snare me, body and mind,
Here gratefully I score: — he seemèd kind,
When not a soul would comfort my distress! (XXVII; l.3-12)

Appreciative of the doctor's suggestion, the husband turns to the Lady afraid she might "wake/
The passion of a demon" (l.15-16) but also hopeful for comfort. While the sonnet is skeptical of
the curative powers of another affair, the poem is also marked by its deep suffering. The line
"No matter, so I taste forgetfulness" is haunted by the pain the husband feels for the betrayal of
his wife and the general failure of the marriage. To be tormented by the devil would be "kind" in
comparison to the hell thus endured. Meredith's husband, and by extension Meredith himself,
underscores the horrid realities of ill-fated marriages. The distress of the sonnet is very real.

The next sonnet begins hopefully, positive that the interaction with the mistress, his
"Lady," will prove soothing, but instead the husband finds himself once more in a performative
moment. Only this time instead of performing in a marital role, he endures the "game of
Sentiment":

I must be flattered. The imperious
Desire speaks out. Lady, I am content
To play with you the game of Sentiment,
And with you enter on paths perilous;
But if across your beauty I throw light,
To make it threefold, it must be all mine.
First secret; then avowed. For I must shine
Envied,— I, lessened in my proper sight!
Be watchful of your beauty, Lady dear!
How much hangs on that lamp you cannot tell. (XXVIII l.1-10)

Reminiscent of Sonnet 17, the husband and the Lady play a "game." Only, in this sonnet, the
game is called "Sentiment."

Meredith uses the metaphor of light to suggest that the Lady's beauty, illuminated in his sight, must be his entirely and that he wants to turn her beauty into the envy of his wife. The light is perverse—like the corpse-light at the dinner party. He completes the poem with a sneer, "...men shall see me as a burning sphere;/ And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan/ To be the God of such a grand sunflower!/ I feel the promptings of Satanic power,/ While you do homage unto me alone" (l.12-16). The husband wants to possess her fully, not for companionship or interchange but so he can ignite the jealousy of others. She will worship him and him alone while he cultivates and rules her.

But the sonnets do not move forward in their progression—there is no actual affair between the husband and the Lady. Instead there is the miserable knowledge of their stagnancy followed by the wife's suicide. In sonnet XXIX the husband recognizes the gross misogyny he feels for all women and he chastises himself for it: "Is my soul beggared? Something more than earth/ I cry for still; I cannot be at peace/ In having Love upon a mortal lease./ I cannot take the woman at her worth!" (XXIX; l.4-8). In the final lines he calls attention to the ludicrous position of the couple: "But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,/And eat our pot of honey on the grave." (l. 15-16). The sequence suggests that after this recognition, there is nothing left, except poetry. In the next heartbreaking sonnet, the speaker—both the husband and also distant from the husband—meditates on the monument of their own entrapment:

What are we first? First, animals; and next
Intelligences at a leap; on whom
Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
And all that draweth on the tomb for text. (XXX; l. 1-4)

Returning to the tomb as a synonym for the text, the poem progresses to offer the poet's understanding of how we pass along these ideas of Love from one generation to the next. The poem is, as its final line indicates, Meredith's response to Shakespeare's famous sonnet to his "Mistress." The fantasy of love is broken:

Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:
Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.
We are the lords of life, and life is warm.
Intelligence and instinct now are one.
But nature says: 'My children most they seem
When they least know me: therefore I decree
That they shall suffer.' Swift doth young Love flee,
And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.
Then if we study Nature we are wise.
Thus do the few who live but with the day:
The scientific animals are they.—
Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes. (XXX; 1.5-16)

In Meredith's poem, Nature cruelly enacts revenge on those who do not understand her power. Shakespeare's sonnet opens "My mistresses eyes are nothing like the sun," but Meredith does not even entertain that kind of metaphor (Sonnet 130). Nature is cruel, the poet's wife is cruel, and marriage is cruel. In this sonnet idealism is again thrown out and instead of love poems, the speaker suggests poems of "nature" and "scientific animals." The sonnets in *Modern Love* are tombs and their muse is a Medusa-like figure who curses all those involved. Even Nature decrees "They shall suffer."

A Question of Poetry: Meredith and Vulgarity

In her article, “‘Trifles light as air’ in Meredith’s *Modern Love*,” Pauline Fletcher argues that *Modern Love* took:

Victorian psychological poetry to a new level of complexity. He did this by creating a hybrid form derived from a very mixed ancestry: the traditional sonnet sequence, Shakespearian drama, the dramatic monologue, and poems such as *Maud* that were themselves hybrids. Moreover, since Meredith was a novelist, we can add the novel to the list of ancestors. (97)

Implicit in her claim is that the sonnets approach marriage from *all* of these conventions at some point or other in the 50 poems.²¹ Cathy Comstock argues, “The frequent ruptures of narrative conventions—such as chronology, location, image pattern, and the form of the narrating voice—continually disturb the hope of a progressive development of insight” (129). In this way *Modern Love* withholds a kind of narrative teleology found in novels; however, it toys with narrative conventions such as a shifting narrator, such as in Sonnet 3 when the poem suddenly moves from “he” to “I.”

Even while the problem of marriage and its legal implications were being debated in Parliament, Victorians were well aware of tales of unhappy marriages. Novelists such as Dickens wrote tales in which pitiable husbands such as Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* (1854) were trapped in marriages with alcoholic and abusive wives. Moreover, lives of women such as Charlotte Smith and Caroline Norton, who were caught in legal battles over property and custody of their children, were widely known and publically acknowledged. Indeed Caroline Norton’s

²¹ Fletcher also says that the poems should be read “as psychological poetry. It may profitably be seen as a complex flowering of the tradition that produced Spasmodic drama; it certainly has more in common with Tennyson’s monodrama, *Maud*, than with the traditional sonnet sequence; and above all, it owes much to the example of such dramatic monologues as ‘My Last Duchess’” (88).

case was particularly of interest to Meredith in his later work.²² Though it was later in his career, Meredith composed his novel *Diana of the Crossways* using Caroline Norton's life as the main inspiration for the plot.²³ In it Diana is the witty, beautiful and talented writer drawn through heartache by her scheming husband. If Meredith found the problems of marriage useful in his later novels, then the question remains: Why would Meredith, generally known as a novelist, have chosen an amatory sonnet sequence for this type of narrative?

In her article, "Poetry as Fiction," Dorothy Mermin asserts that *Modern Love* occupies a liminal space of overlap between Victorian novels and poetry (100). In fact many critics take up the connection between *Modern Love* and Meredith's novels. In his 1962 edition of the poems, Graham Hough writes:

Among the phantom projects that haunted the imagination of the mid-nineteenth century was the poem of modern life, the poem that could deal with contemporary circumstances and settings as naturally as earlier romantic poetry had dealt with historical and legendary themes. It was part a reaction to the growing power of the novel, in part a reaction to the tide of industrial and social positivism on the back of which the novel rode. The new dominance of the novel meant an immense and almost uncriticised prestige for the low mimetic mode—the kind of fiction in which

²² Caroline Norton (1808-1877) was the granddaughter of the prominent Irish playwright and statesman Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and married George Chapple Norton at a young age. Said to have been beautiful, smart and witty, Norton quickly rose to the top of social circles. Her husband, jealous of her success, accused her of adultery with the soon-to-be Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne. George Norton brought a legal suit against Melbourne, most likely as a way to extort money from the wealthy admirer of Caroline's charm and writing. Even though she was found innocent of an affair, Norton was publically humiliated. Furthermore, she was badly physically abused by her husband. In 1836 George Norton refused to let their four children see their mother, arguing that they were legally his and he could do with them as he wished. As a result of her marital difficulties, Caroline Norton lobbied extensively for women's rights and became a well known pamphleteer. Her case was, in large part, responsible for the Infant Custody Act of 1838 (Roberts 205) (see also Ellis 274-8).

²³ Meredith repeatedly refers to her in his letters. See pp 530-532 and 542-43.

the characters are subject to the same canons of probability as we meet in our daily lives; what is ineptly but inevitably called ‘realism.’ Poetry begins to experience a sense of guilt at not being able to move more easily in this realm. (5-6)

Hough’s critique of the realist novel is rather pointed, and his suggestion that poetry felt some sort of “guilt” at not tackling similar subjects, salient to Meredith’s poems. Hough suggests the need to deal with “contemporary circumstances” haunts poetic form; he also directly ties social and political changes to the shift from poetry to the novel. For him, *Modern Love* is a poem of “modern life” composed as a kind of verse form of the novel.

In his 2004 article, Alan Barr argues that the poems contrast narrative with lyric for effect. For Barr, Meredith’s choice of the sonnet only stands to serve his larger narrative impetus. He suggests that Meredith’s achievement is in ‘bending’ poetic form to make it more novelistic: “he achieves this sense of the novel and the modern within the sonnet tradition that he borrows and bends” (284). For these critics it is Meredith’s choice to describe a marriage that solidifies its narrative arch and, to them, it seems that the marriage plot is to be played out in (and *only* in) the Victorian novel as opposed to the “static” form of the sonnet sequence. As mentioned in my Introduction, Houston Peterson’s characterization of sonnet sequences as a “naked novel” (vii) further upholds this kind of reading, but William Going hesitates at this designation, stating in his chapter on *Modern Love* that, “it is Meredith who pushes the genre in its new direction without destroying its indirect lyric quality. To view *Modern Love*, therefore, as entirely made up of fifty chapters of a ‘naked novel’...is unwise. It is neither; rather it is both” (114).

It is Going’s understanding of the poem’s hybridity and its simultaneity that most compels me. The poem critiques the genres of literature even as it employs them, urging the

reader to reconsider the trope of the amatory sonnet even as it re-imagines the novelistic form. The form pushes poetic tropes and genre boundaries. *Modern Love* is unusually caught between static return, typical to sonnet sequences, and a progressive narrative of decline. I want to suggest that instead of always reading the subject of marriage as part of the realm of the novelistic project, *Modern Love* engages the sonnet and the amatory sonnet sequence in order to use the form as a critique of the subject of marriage. In other words, Meredith's formal manipulations of the amatory sonnet sequence—subject, line length, poem length—establish a new poetics of individual representation and marital union.

The sonnets interrogate the “realistic characteristics” (Barr 284) of the novel but in a fixed and relatively minute space. The form of the sonnet, which should not be large enough to encompass a novelistic narrative, does. Moreover, it challenges an ideology of realism by suggesting that realistic narratives have gaps and fractures. The poems portray the experiences of desire, anxiety and intimacy as fractured. In order to effectively present a dead marriage, Meredith turns to an archaic and long-dead poetic form—the amatory sequence. *Modern Love* employs the amatory tradition as a way to critique what he sees as a modernity which has changed little over time. Furthermore, he uses the poems to offer a critique of realism and the novel suggesting again and again within the sequence that *Modern Love* is itself inspired by the realism.

Modern Love was composed during the prime of the novelistic form and serial publication and the sequence is suggestive of a narrative influence and of a kind of serialization. Reviving an archaic form, Meredith's narrative impetus, the form of the “naked novel,” is not a novel at all, but actually an *alternative* to the novelistic narrative or some liminal space between

poetry and the novel. Meredith writes in 1864 to his friend and cleric Augustus Jessopp regarding the success, or lack thereof, of *Modern Love*:

As to the Poems: I don't think the age prosaic for not buying them. A man who hopes to be popular, must think from the mass, and as the heart of the mass. If he follows out vagaries of his own brain, he cannot hope for general esteem; and he does smaller work. 'Modern Love' as a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days, could only be apprehended by the few who would read it many times. I have not looked for it to succeed. Why did I write it?—Who can account for pressure?...
(20 September 1864) (*Vol I*; 156-7)

The pressure, both the social pressure of the poem's subject as well as the pressure of such a history-laden form weighs on Meredith. He is wary of the "mass" and instead suggests that his work is a "dissection." These poems undo and expose the popular "sentimental passion" and, therefore, will be widely disliked.

In the same letter, Meredith suggests the poems fuse realism and idealism. His description of the two conventions imagines them as a kind of marriage of earth and atmosphere, a necessary melding. He continues:

Between realism and idealism there is no natural conflict. This completes that. Realism is the basis of good composition: it implies study, observation, artistic power, and (in those who can do more) humility. Little writers should be realistic. They would then at least do solid work. They afflict the world because they will attempt that it is given to none but noble workmen to achieve. A great genius must necessarily employ ideal means, for a vast conception cannot be placed bodily before the eye, and remains to be suggested. Idealism is as an atmosphere whose effects of

grandeur are wrought out through a series of illusions, that are illusions to the sense within us only when divorced from the groundwork of the real. Need there be exclusion, the one of the other? The artist is incomplete who does this. Men to whom I bow my head (Shakespeare, Goethe; and in their way, Moliere, Cervantes) are Realists au fond. But they have the broad arms of Idealism at command. They give us Earth; but it is earth with an atmosphere... (157-8)

Modern Love's hybridity is analogous to the dual subjectivity of marriage itself. To succeed, the work of literature must successfully contain two seemingly disparate forms in one body.

Meredith's quip that "Little writers should be realistic," recalls the opening of *Modern Love* in which Meredith warned that "This is not meant for little people or for fools." 'Littleness,' it seems, is an insult directed at those unable to appreciate forms which come together despite their opposition—like earth and atmosphere, as well as realism and idealism. Marriage also necessitates this kind of cooperation and Meredith suggests that his project is one which exposes the difficulties with this kind of project.

If the tomb of marriage and the sonnet form signify one another, then the arc of Meredith's poetic project only exposes the futility of the marriage described. Slightly more than half way through the sequence, Meredith invokes the poet and the poet's rewards in Sonnet 31:

Great poets and great sages draw no prize
With women: but the little lap-dog breed,
Who can be hugged, or on a mantel-piece
Perched up for adoration, these obtain
Her homage. ... (XXXI; l. 7-11)

Enjambling the line “Great poets and great sages draw no prize/ With women,” Meredith jokes at and anticipates that he will “draw no prize” from these poems. The dig is also at a kind of aesthetic which can be displayed on a mantel “perched up for adoration.” Meredith points to women as those tasteless enough to prefer lap-dogs over great sages, but his critique, I think, is more widely aimed. ‘Women,’ and the wife in the poems, stand in as examples of tastelessness, placeholders for a wider group of people who disgust Meredith—those who cannot distinguish between actual marriage as it is lived by husbands and wives and its sentimental representations. This anticipates and therefore includes those critics who think it “vulgar” to question in verse marriage as an institution.²⁴

Almost half a century later, Meredith was still confounded by Britain’s refusal to overhaul its marriage laws. He wrote to Mrs. Simons in 1904:

Dear Madam,—The condition of the union of men and women is so delicate a subject that a mere touch on it, in the form of a suggestion, rouses an outcry from the whole army of Mrs. Grundy. Yet that powerful person might reflect on the number of Divorces, and consider that when distaste is between the couples, it is worse for the offspring. Happily there is a majority of marriages where the two jog on contentedly—with, however, too great an indifference to the minority. So we have a figure that presents a tolerably fair front to the world, and is conscious of spots on an

²⁴ Meredith himself read widely about the oppression of women. Though published after *Modern Love*, Meredith was reported to have devoured John Stuart Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) in one sitting. In January of 1862 Meredith wrote to his dear friend Captain Maxse, praising Mill’s work on marriage and law more broadly: “Read John Mill on ‘Liberty’ the other day; and recommend it to you. It’s a splendid protest against the tyranny society is beginning to exercise; very noble and brave” (*Letters*, Vol I; 67). Indeed Meredith had a reputation for being a social liberal, even while he also had the reputation for being quite fatalistic (see Woods’ “Introduction”).

irritated skin. All I have suggested is for the matter to be discussed.— (17

November 1904) (*Vol II*; 561)²⁵

Concerned not only with the couples involved in a bad marriage, Meredith also worries about their children (and one cannot help but think of the Merediths' only child). He too levels a critique of empathy at those “contented” marriages which “jog on” with “too great an indifference” for those in the unhappy minority. Interestingly, Meredith returns to the metaphor of presentation and performance in Sonnet 17, suggesting that “we” unquestionably imagine marriage as whole and un-diseased. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, Meredith personifies marriage as a social figure who “presents a tolerably fair front” all while hiding the irritating—and presumably contagious—skin disease. His letter also imagines the figure as one body, a “fair front,” metonymically sliding between the married couple and the single diseased or skeletal social body which stands in their place.

At the heart of the poems' project is a navigation of the bounds of social and aesthetic conventions. If, as I argue in chapter one, the sonnet tradition lay so deeply rooted in English national literature and English as a language, Meredith's choice of a sonnet sequence is all the more calculated.²⁶ Meredith calls the sequence *Modern Love* and uses formal poetics explore the institutionalization of marriage which inhibits and binds together two lives (the husband and wife of the poem). *Modern Love* presents a portrait of Victorian desire and marriage that engages a different mode of realism than its novelistic counterparts, specifically because of the sonnet

²⁵ Mrs. Simons was a friend of Meredith's. Meredith's invocation of “Mrs. Grundy” refers to a character from Thomas Morton's play *Speed the Plough* (1798). She was, as defined in the *OED*, “the personification of the tyranny of conventional propriety.” Evoked in a number of Victorian texts, she was a cultural figure of speech, a short-hand for disapproval and self-censorship (Hughes 218).

²⁶ If *Modern Love* is not unusual because of its portrayal of a dysfunctional marriage, but it is because of its form, then Meredith's decision to tell the ‘story’ of unfaithfulness in poetry rather than in a novel is significant. I argue that it is his poetics which make his critique of marriage so unique and, to Victorian sensibility, “vulgar.”

form's ability to represent the conflict between structuring and fracturing. The poetic form necessitates these gaps and breaks in the form of stanza ends. The sonnet sequence captures the narrative arc of Meredith's tale unexpectedly—it emphasizes the experiences of desire, anxiety and intimacy as multifaceted rather than as whole and seamless. The marriage, as fractured as its unusually lengthened stanza form, only underscores the unbearable restraint of each verse.²⁷

Pressing against the institutional restrictions and forced intimacy encoded in Victorian marriage, Meredith's poetics emblemize this endless charade he calls "modern love."

²⁷ *Modern Love* was read in America too. Pirated by Thomas Mosher, there was a review of his printing of the text in the periodical *The Mahogany Tree* in Boston on January 2, 1892:

It seems rather queer to get hold of an edition of Mr. Meredith's 'Modern Love' hailing from far down in Maine. But such an edition has been produced very prettily printed, too, on good paper. It is published, we believe, in three sizes. Mr. Meredith's original book, containing some other poems besides 'Modern Love,' notably his 'Juggling Jerry,' perhaps the best known piece of verse he has done, was brought out in 1862, and has become very rare,—indeed, almost inaccessible outside of a few libraries. Yet the fifty sonnets (as, in spite of the scrupulous, we must call them) composing 'Modern Love,' are wonderfully beautiful,—half Browning, half Elizabethan, and wholly Mr. Meredith and modern; indicate they are in thought, but simple and clear in expression, forming, as Mr. Swinburne says, a 'great processional poem.' This American edition is published by Mr. Thomas B. Mosher, at 37 Exchange Street, Portland. (qtd. in *The Mosher Press*)

CHAPTER III

A Spectrum of Victorian Sexuality: Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti

In his book *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet*, Joseph Phelan argues that Christina Rossetti's poem *Monna Innominata* (1881) "illustrates the way in which the form becomes for most of the century the site of a contest (albeit a decorous and literary one) between male and female writers" (6). The form to which Phelan refers is the amatory sonnet sequence, and what makes Christina Rossetti's poem particularly interesting is that the 14 sonnets that make up *Monna Innominata* are written in the voice of the silenced Laura and Beatrice of Petrarch's and Dante's poetry. Christina Rossetti turns the amatory tradition around, giving voice to the otherwise voiceless women of past poetry, and writing in her introduction to the poems: "one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover's poetic aptitude" (294). The poems, as Phelan suggests, emphatically make an argument that women could write love poems too.¹

In the same year that Christina Rossetti published her *Monna Innominata*, her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, issued a revised and largely expanded edition of his amatory sonnet sequence *The House of Life*.² In this chapter, I place the poems of *Monna Innominata* in conversation with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnets in *The House of Life* in order to explore what Phelan suggests is the "site of contest." These two sets of poems offer dramatically different understandings of intimacy and love. When read in conjunction, the two sequences expose a

¹ William Rossetti wrote: "It is indisputable that the real veritable speaker in these sonnets is Christina herself, giving expression to her love for Charles Cayley" (*Family Letters* 97). I want to ignore this biographical reading, however, in order to think about the poems' interrogation of the amatory tradition.

² Gail Lynn Goldberg looks at the brother and sister in terms of their publishing and illustration relationship. Goldberg quotes from Christina Rossetti's note in her 1893 *Goblin Market* volume where Rossetti wrote, "And here I like to acknowledge the general indebtedness of my first and second volumes to his [DGR's] suggestive wit and revising hand" (145).

broad spectrum of Victorian ideas of sexuality and subjectivity. This spectrum includes, at one end, celibacy and physical abstinence and, at the other end, a capacious sexuality which encompasses everything around the speaker of the poems.

While the two sequences revise the amatory tradition which usually chronicles courtship and heterosexual desire, the poems relish a description of sexual autonomy not related marriage. Whereas Meredith and EBB questioned the institution of marriage, in these sequences marriage becomes only a metaphor for working through problems of sexual intimacy and subjectivity. Marriage, in these poems, is shorthand for sexual encounter. Christina Rossetti's sequence addresses the difference between the poems of the lover and the poems of the beloved. Her poems emphasize distinction and separation, ultimately refusing marriage and, therefore, sexual intimacy. DGR, however, melds the lover and beloved allowing only the lover/poet to speak in the poems. In his most sexually explicit poem, "Nuptial Sleep," the speaker insists on marital vows as justification for the intensity of the sexual intimacy related in the poem.³

Both Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti draw on the amatory tradition and while, at first reading, the two sequences seem to suggest a similar notion of love and intimacy (that the lover and beloved are one in Love), syntactical and formal differences reveal radically different imaginings. Through their interrogation of subjectivity as formed through love and desire, CR and DGR not only underscore a debate over sameness and difference, but they open conversations about sexuality. At one end of the spectrum is CR's speaker who demands her difference from the beloved but who also refuses sexual touch. DGR's speaker, in contrast,

³ In the footnote discussion of Sonnet 36, University of Toronto's online poetry archive relates: Rossetti denied any autobiographical significance in his sonnet sequence, saying: "The 'life' recorded is neither my life nor your life, but life purely and simply as tripled with love and death," and associated with auxiliary themes of "aspiration and foreboding,... ideal art and beauty." Despite Rossetti's denial, it is now generally recognized that his sonnets are deeply personal, inspired in part by love and regret for his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, who died in 1862, and in much greater part, especially after 1868, by his love for Jane Morris, the wife of William Morris. (RPO)

imagines continual mixing and melding with the beloved and others, suggesting a more capacious sexuality where all bodies are intertwined and impossibly intermingled. However, both sequences, I think, offer queer understandings of sexuality in that neither poet easily settles into heteronormative sexuality. Again, neither CR nor DGR explores the institution of marriage in the way that Meredith or EBB do in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Modern Love*. Instead, these poems explore subjectivity. While marriage is suggested within the poems, the form of the verses seem most interested in sameness and difference as implied through rhetorical structures, rather than marital union or law.

For ease, I have structured this chapter so that I address each sequence separately, looking first at *House of Life* and then turning to *Monna Innominata*. In *The House of Life* I close read DGR's revisions of the myth of Narcissus and Orpheus in order to explore his understanding of love and union with the lover and to argue that the poems rely on a metonymy that elides difference between the self and the beloved. In *Monna Innominata*, I explore the particular structures of inversion and repetition to argue that the poems emphasize difference between the lover and beloved. Finally, I place the sequences in conversation with one another through CR's sonnet "In an Artist's Studio." That poem, I argue, presents the two modes of intimacy in a single sonnet, as the octave summarizes DGR's *The House of Life* and the sestet represents the unnamed lady of CR's *Monna Innominata*.⁴

Love's Metonymy: Eliding Difference in *The House of Life*

The first 60 poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* were separately entitled "Part I: Youth and Change" in the 1881 publication. Most critics agree that "Youth and

⁴ All poems by Christina Rossetti are from *The Complete Poems* (Penguin, 2001) and all poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti are from Jerome McGann's edition of *Collected Poetry and Prose* (Yale UP, 2003)

Change,” as opposed to “Part II: Change and Fate,” are DGR’s meditations on love and desire.

In his recent book *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Late Victorian Sonnet Sequence*, John Holmes writes of *The House of Life* that:

...the sequence can both juxtapose and interweave contrasting themes and visions... In the absence of formal bounds or restrictions of scale, the sonnet sequence can and does expand through reading, rereading and revision, each reading experience and textual state re-evaluating its predecessors. (7)

Holmes seeks to delineate a reading of DGR which allows for the capaciousness of *House of Life* (a quality for which DGR’s critics spurned him), while he also charts the poem’s influence on and inspiration of the many sonnet sequences composed in the wake of *The House of Life*’s 1881 publication. Holmes’ approach to DGR through the tension of reading and rereading is particularly useful for thinking about DGR’s sequence in conjunction with his sister’s *Monna Innominata*. DGR’s poetics suggest a consistent widening of the poems as opposed to the restriction found in CR’s poetry and syntax.

The House of Life was heralded as widely influential even as it was famously denigrated by Robert Buchanan as the “Fleshly School of Poetry.”⁵ Buchanan excoriated Rossetti:

Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness. ... It is simply nasty. (338)

⁵ Holmes deals more thoroughly with the scandal in his book (13-5).

Buchanan takes particular offense to DGR's poems of "sexual connection." While the article became almost instantly infamous, even DGR's own friends expressed their doubts about with his poetry. A. C. Swinburne wrote that *House of Life* was intense and overwhelmingly beautiful. "Much of Mr. Rossetti's work," wrote Swinburne, "is so intense in aim, so delicate and deep in significance, so exuberant in offshoot and undergrowth of sentiment and thought, that even the sweet lucidity and steady current of his style may not suffice to save it from the charges of darkness and difficulty" (63).

Swinburne tried to save his friend from critiques of impenetrability and vulgarity by suggesting that DGR's great mastery of language required the reader to allow the poems to wash over him. Swinburne continues:

He is too great a master of speech to incur the blame of hard or tortuous expression...But such work as this can be neither unwoven nor recast by any process of analysis. This "House of Life" has in it so many mansions, so many halls of state and bowers of music, chapels for worship and chambers for festival, that no guest can declare on a first entrance the secret of its scheme. (63-4)

Swinburne's overwrought defense of DGR's poems as "exuberant," "sweetly lucid" and "steady," attempts to deflect the kind of criticism all too often levied against *The House of Life*. Swinburne goes so far as to suggest that analysis of the poems is futile; analysis will not "recast" the work and to break the poems up to read them individually will disrupt the "wealth of life which breathes" there. He bars any kind of analysis, even that of "praise or comment." Indeed, he sees the poems as evoking some other reaction that is beyond the scope of cerebral critique. Swinburne suggests that the reader experience the poems, with the whole body, rather than

analyze them. He suggests we approach the volume like a guest at that House of Life, refraining from commenting until we have been shown the massive estates' many luxuries:

Spirit and sense together, eyesight and hearing and thought, are absorbed in splendour of sounds and glory of colours distinguishable only by delight. But the scheme is solid and harmonious; there is no waste in this luxury of genius: the whole is lovelier than its loveliest part. Again and again may one turn the leaves in search of some one poem or some two which may be chosen for sample and thanksgiving; but there is no choice to be made. Sonnet is poured upon sonnet... (64)

Sonnet "poured upon sonnet" is how Swinburne imagined DGR's sequence, and in fact the sonnets themselves require the reader to imagine a kind of continual metonymy where bodies stand in for bodies and sonnets blend into other sonnets. Swinburne's metaphors of "absorption" and the indistinguishable sounds and colors of the poems are pulled from DGR's poetry. *The House of Life* imagines a world narrated by the poet/lover who moves in and out of the beloved's thoughts and body, at times making it impossible to distinguish one from another.

For example, Sonnet 4 of *The House of Life*, is entitled "Lovesight" and begins with a question: "When do I see thee most, beloved one?" (l.1). The question suggests that the lover/speaker imagines himself as different than the beloved, but the poem undoes this, suggesting that he sees her best when looking at the light in his own eyes:

When in the light the sprits of mine eyes
Before thy face, their alter, solemnize
The worship of that Love through thee made known? (l.2-4)

The poet imagines a kind of third vantage point from which he can see his eyes with his beloved reflected therein. This continual refraction occurs again in the poem and while the speaker seeks the beloved, what the poem records is only a reflection of her in him:

Or when in the dusk hours (we two alone)
Close-kissed and eloquent of still replies
Thy twilight-hidden glimmering visage lies,
And my soul only sees thy soul its own?

O love, my love! if I no more should see
Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,
Nor image of thine eyes in any spring,—
How then should sound upon Life's darkening slope
The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,
The wind of Death's imperishable wing? (IV; 1.5-14)

In the second quatrain the poet sees the beloved's soul but only as a repetition of his own. The beloved is not a separate being, but always already bound up in the lover: "my soul only sees thy soul its own." While the speaker attempts to distance himself from the beloved, the poem only further intertwines their souls making it increasingly hard to distinguish one from another. Moreover, colors and bodies intertwine. "Twilight," the blending of dark and light, hides the "visage" of the lovers. Bodies, light and color all mix together and blend into one another.

DGR continues this metonymy of lover and beloved in the subsequent sonnet which contemplates the power of the poem as mediation between lovers, and between man and God. Sonnet 5 uses much of the same language as CR's fourth sonnet in *Monna Innominata*—to which

I will return—working through the issues of “mine” and “thine” as they pertain to love and intimacy. In DGR’s sonnet, the speaker contemplates how one captures love. He imagines a “word” could unlock all the mysteries and miracles of love and if he were but a poet in “some poor rhythmic period” he would “draw” from his heart all the “evidence” of “all hearts.” He imagines he might be able to speak to all things with his poem, allowing the words to “tell” the story of his love and his beloved’s love.

By what word’s power, the key of paths untrod,
Shall I the difficult deeps of Love explore,
Till parted waves of Song yield up the shore,
Even as that sea which Israel crossed dry-shod?
For lo! in some poor rhythmic period,
Lady, I fain would tell how evermore
Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor
Thee from myself, neither our love from God.

Yea, in God’s name, and Love’s, and thine, would I
Draw from one loving heart such evidence
As to all hearts all things shall signify;
Tender as dawn’s first hill-fire, and intense
As instantaneous penetrating sense,
In Spring’s birth hour, of other Springs gone by. (V; l.1-14)

Again DGR imagines a kind of metonymy in which the poet/lover can stand in for the beloved. He suggests that he inherits from his poetic predecessors, those in “some poor rhythmic period.”⁶ This metonymy allows for the mixing of the beloved’s soul and body with his. The poet can no longer tell one from another, nor can he tell “thee from myself” and, ultimately, “our love from God.” In the metonymic slipping, bodies and souls, mortals and God, mix without recognition; love stands in for God and from this pooled unity the poet draws “such evidence/ as to all hearts all things shall signify.” DGR’s poem longs for a universal voice which will “to all hearts all things shall signify.” His poem does not contemplate what might be lost if the lover and beloved become one; instead he fantasizes about the collapse of subjectivities into “one loving heart.” While CR’s poems by the unnamed lady assert a difference between the lover and the beloved, the poetic voice in DGR’s poems attempts to elide all difference to speak one song. This song is all knowing and forever arising from “Spring’s birth hour,” while also speaking of “other Springs gone by.”

John Holmes argues that it is counterintuitive to appropriate DGR’s poems to make a case for “queer” poetics when they are overtly about a marriage of man and wife:

In the face of it, this is bizarre claim to make about a poetry in which sexuality manifests itself exclusively through heterosexual relations. But this heterosexuality is circumstantial rather than essential. The aspects of sexuality to which Rossetti draws attention—the centrality of sexuality to the self, its social and domestic pervasiveness, the power of desire and jealousy, sexuality, *as* power—all translate into non-heterosexual contexts. In effect, privacy and decorum had hidden all overt

⁶ This also seems like a dig at DGR’s own contemporaries. They, the poem suggests, are stuck in some “poor rhythmic time” where poets still contemplate the soul/body divide as well as the God/mortal divide.

sexuality from the public gaze within literature and art. Rossetti throws open the door on what Buchanan calls ‘the most secret mysteries of sexual connection’. (67)

Holmes divides queer/homosexual and normative/heterosexual, placing emphasis on the fact that the two sets are not synonymic duos. What is essential to Holmes’ argument is the private domestic and the decorous. He argues that DGR separated heterosexuality from the socially acceptable sphere; even though the poems chronicle marital sex, it is a sexuality not confined by the boundaries of social decorum. I take up Holmes’ suggestion that DGR places sexuality on display and that this display makes the poems themselves queer. Furthermore, I argue, that the form of DGR poems, recapitulate this queerness through the metonymic melding of bodies into one another, regardless of sex or gender (or even death).

The structure of the individual sonnets particularly lends itself to this almost impossible union of two bodies into one and two narrations of love into a single voice. DGR breaks most of the sonnets in *The House of Life* into octave and sestet with a stanza break.⁷ DGR uses the imbalanced structure of his sonnets to his advantage—the octave and sestet become an added way he can emphasize the inability of his poems to reach a resolution (Wagner 129). DGR’s friend and critic Thomas Hall Caine wrote in 1882 that, “Rossetti was not the first English writer who deliberately separated octave and sestet, but he was the first who obeyed throughout a series of sonnets the canon of the contemporary structure requiring that a sonnet shall present the two-fold faculty of a single thought or emotion” (as quoted in Wagner 129). Caine’s emphasis on “two-fold faculty” of individual thoughts or emotions is a way of conceptualizing DGR’s project as a whole. The poems depend upon a kind of continual binding into one, whether it is the lover and beloved into one united being or two meditations bound together into one sonnet.

⁷ Only a few of the poems from the 1871 edition do not break the stanza. Interestingly, however, the US edition (printed by Mosher) does not retain the break in the stanza.

While DGR continually presents two ideas in his sonnets, a kind of dual meditation, he also uses the sonnet form to his advantage. The visual space between the octave and sestet of the verses creates a kind of visual as well as textual imbalance in the dialectic. The verse is weighted unequally, suggesting the never-ending project of the poems: there is no easily attained and happily resolved equilibrium in desire and longing. In fact, the unequally weighted structure is what keeps desire continual; there is an unending desire to be one with the beloved, but that desire is never quite fulfilled.⁸ Sonnet 11, entitled “The Love-Letter,” personifies the kind of debate within the sonnets themselves. Here the poet praises his beloved’s letter which mediates between her warm body and his:

Warmed by her hand and shadowed by her hair
As close she leaned and poured her heart through thee,
Whereof the articulate throbs accompany
The smooth black stream that makes thy whiteness fair,—
Sweet fluttering sheet, even of her breath aware, —
Oh let thy silent song disclose to me
That soul wherewith her lips and eyes agree
Like married music in Love’s answering air.

Fain had I watched her when, at some fond thought,
Her bosom to the writing closelier press’d,
And her breast’s secrets peered into her breast;
When, through eyes raised an instant, her soul sought

⁸ In her book, *A Moment’s Monument*, Jennifer Wagner actually goes so far as to suggest that the octave and sestet are the two side of the coin that DGR describes in his opening sonnet on the sonnet.

My soul, and from the sudden confluence caught

The words that made her love the loveliest. (XI; 1.1-14)

The poem ends with a “confluence” of words and bodies which unite the lovers in “loveliest” love. The speaker imagines that the letter is a conduit through which he can feel her fluttering breath. Through the mediation of the paper and its writing the lover and beloved unite, albeit fleetingly. She composes a letter about which the poet writes a poem. The “words that made her love the loveliest” are both her own, composed in her letter, and also his, structured in his verse. Even when the poems raise the possibility of difference in subjectivity, they foreclose it. The beloved is only allowed representation through the lover.

The section of *The House of Life* entitled “Willowwood” engages concepts of metonymy through a retelling of the Narcissus myth. The verses describe the speaker leaning over a “woodside well” only to see Love’s face reflected back to him. As the first sonnet moves forward, the reflection morphs into that of the lost beloved, the “dark ripples” of the water spreading into her “waving hair” (I; l. 12). Similar to “The Love-letter,” the poet leans and drinks from the water, pressing his lips to hers. While the two lovers “kiss” at the surface of the water, the figure of Love sings to them a song about the Willowwood, a mystical place which holds the beloved, keeping her in a state of perpetual wandering. The poems narrate the fantasy of seeing a lost love again and the agony of losing her once more, but the poems are also confusing because the Narcissus backdrop reminds the reader that the poems are nothing more than poetic fancy. The poet always only sees himself reflected in the well, even while he fantasizes that he can see the lady again.

The first poem of the sequence tells of the poet/lover at the well. The octave is entirely dedicated to the meeting of the speaker and a personified Love. Love plays for the poet a song

on his lute which reminds him of his lost beloved. It is not until the sestet that the beloved enters the poem:

I sat with Love upon a woodside well,
Leaning across the water, I and he;
Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,
But touched his lute wherein was audible
The certain secret thing he had to tell:
Only our mirrored eyes met silently
In the low wave; and that sound came to be
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.

And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;
And with his foot and with his wing-feathers
He swept the spring that watered my heart's drouth;
Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth. ("Willowwood" I; l.1-14)

As Marianne Van Remoortel suggests, Rossetti positions the poetic voice to be Lover, Beloved and Poet from the outset. The poetic voice sees Lover and the Beloved in his own reflection. Interestingly, the form of the poem is in conversation with this reflection and metonymy that the poems narrate. Van Remoortel argues of DGR that:

In truly Petrarchan fashion, the dead beloved's voice, eyes, and hair shed most of their metonymical force as they transform into metaphors for poetic mastery, indices

of the poet's amputating subjectivity rather than reminders of the body to which they once belonged. While the speaker watches them materialize alternately in the well, he contemplates at the same time, in the semi-transparent mirror of the water surface, the contours of his own genius. (469)⁹

In other words, DGR's reflections in "Willowwood" and in *House of Life* in general are continual comments about his own position as poet. Building on Van Remoortel, I suggest this move is strategic. The speaker of the poems imagines and desires a realm in which he can enter any subjectivity. The poems desire metonymy which elides difference and allows for unadulterated union.

"Willowwood" alludes to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and fuses it with the Narcissus myth, complicating how we determine distinct bodies in the verse. The reflection is of the poetic voice; he is, all at once, Love (the poet), the lover and the beloved. While the form of the poems creates this return, the repeating trope of Narcissus and Orpheus through the poems also requires an endless looping of desire and union. In his book *Reflecting Narcissus*, Steven Bruhm writes that:

The story of Narcissus is the most suggestive in the way it gathers up significations—gender transformations, homo-othered desire, self-other identifications, self-knowledge that is self-destruction/self-apotheosis—and attempts to contain them within an artistic signifier, a signifier that all too readily betrays its overdeterminations. (17-8)

⁹ She goes on to claim that: "Rossetti's unconventional adaptation of the Narcissus myth thus visualizes what Julia Kristeva is hinting at when she writes in *Tales of Love* that 'the object of love is a metaphor for the subject- its constitutive metaphor, its *unary feature*, which, by having it choose an adored part of the loved one, already locates it within the symbolic code of which this feature is part'" (470).

The narcissus myth allows for a doubling of bodies that the Orpheus myth alone does not provide. While Orpheus is a poet and has lost his love, DGR blends the two myths to double the face of the poet. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's collapse of distinct subjectivities into one poet and his reflection approaches the amatory tradition in a fairly conventional way. The Lover/Poet tells the story of the lost relationship without the interference of the beloved. For "Willowwood," the poetic voice lets tears drop into the pool only to then to drink them back in with his kiss. His love is self-consuming and self-reproducing. The poems are built on a metonymy of bodies and the narrative of the Willowwood is dependent on this sliding between bodies. However, those bodies are not just one body, but many bodies. DGR revises the amatory tradition to imagine encounters both homoerotic (Narcissus) and heteronormative (Orpheus and Eurydice). The speaker mingles with all of the bodies presented in the poems. The verse itself layers the physical encounters and the poem stops differentiating individual bodies: "And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers/... Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,/ And as I stooped, her own lips rising there/ Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth" (l.9, 11-4). The Poet's eyes are the beloved's eyes, which are really a reflection of the lover's own eyes. Following the logic of the reflection then, the speaker kisses is at once his own, the Poet's and the dead beloved's. One body stands in for another which, in turn, stands in for a third.

Orpheus is figured elsewhere in *The House of Life*. In poems VI and VIa entitled "The Kiss" and "Nuptial Sleep," the poetic voice describes what he emphasizes is a married couple on their wedding night. The poems are, in typical DGR fashion, dark and smoldering. The first opens with a quatrain which openly questions death's place in the wedding night:

What smouldering senses in death's sick delay—
Or seizure of malign vicissitude

Can rob this body of honour, or denude
This soul of wedding-raiment worn to-day?
For lo! even now my lady's lips did play
With these my lips such consonant interlude
As laurelled Orpheus longed for when he wooed
The half-drawn hungering face with that last lay.

I was a child beneath her touch, —a man
When breast to breast we clung, even I and she,—
A spirit when her spirit looked through me,—
A god when all our life-breath met to fan
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,
Fire within fire, desire in deity. (VI; 1.1-14)

Here Orpheus is named outright in an image similar to that of Willowwood. The two lovers of the poem have been married in body, and in soul, and in song. Their kiss is music to rival that of Orpheus' own songs. Their sexual encounter is humbling even for the poetic voice/man who becomes "a child beneath her touch" (1.9) as they cling breast to breast. The poem then unites the two though in seamless oneness: "A spirit when her spirit looked through me—/A god when all our life-breath met to fan/ Our life-blood..."(1.11-3). The beloved is subsumed into the lover. In a sense, she makes him; it is when they meet that he becomes spirit and god, but after that meeting they no longer exist independent of one another. Instead breath and blood are now shared, "our life-breath" and "our life-blood." At the end of the poem, the two are even further melded together: "till love's emulous ardours ran,/ Fire within fire, desire in deity."

Generously reading the gender politics of the poem, it does not necessarily erase the woman of the marriage completely; she too is elevated to “deity.” But in this transformation it is the poetic voice who reaps the real benefits—poetic inspiration. In the poem DGR presents this transformation and inspiration as occurring at the moment of bonding of husband and wife. The next poem, “Nuptial Sleep,” continues this trope of union and inspiration. This poem describes, even more overtly, the sexual union of the husband and wife. Rossetti did not publish this poem with the 1881 version of *The House of Life*, instead withholding it supposedly because of its intense sexuality. The poem was reinserted in an 1894 American edition published by Copeland and Day. William Michael Rossetti also included it in his 1904 edition of his brother’s poetry.¹⁰ In these two volumes, the poem is linked with its preceding verse through the subject and by the numbering of the sonnets (this one becomes VIa).¹¹

The octave of “Nuptial Sleep” describes the physical union of the married couple. Through the title, Rossetti emphasizes that the lovers are married. Their “kiss” is, at length, over and their bodies drip like lagging storms. The two lie “fawning” over one another until, at the turn of the poem, they drift into sleep.

At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart:
And as the last slow sudden drops are shed
From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,
So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.

¹⁰ The Rossetti Archive lists the history of the poem: “First published in the 1881 *Ballads and Sonnets* text. Later collections regularly print this version (rather than the 1870 version) but augment it by adding the “Nuptial Sleep” sonnet, which DGR withdrew from the 1881 version. The latter was first restored to the sequence in the 1894 American edition of the sequence published by Copeland and Day, and WMR restored it to the authoritative works in his collected edition of 1904. The Copeland and Day edition is especially interesting because it not only prints the entire complement of sonnets (i.e., it includes “Nuptial Sleep”), but it restores the set of lyric “songs” that had been part of the 1870 version of the work.”

¹¹ See Phelan on this sonnet: pp116-8

Their bosoms sundered, with the opening start
Of married flowers to either side outspread
From the knit stem; yet still their mouths, burnt red,
Fawned on each other where they lay apart.

Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,
And their dreams watched them sink, and slid away.
Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams
Of watered light and dull drowned waifs of day;
Till from some wonder of new woods and streams
He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay. (VIa; 1.1-14)

The turn from a physical union to the dreamland in the sestet suggests a kind of connection between sexuality and inspiration which is found in other poems of the sequence as well. While DGR emphasizes their marriage, “married flowers to either side outspread/ From the knit stem” (5-6), the metaphor imagines a being inherently bound together at the “knit stem” emphasizing both unity and difference.¹² The poem’s overt sexual imagery only upholds this understanding of oneness. With the conjugal act comes physical and mental union. But for the rest of the poems of *The House of Life*, it is the male lover/poet who gets to record these “wonder[s] of new woods and streams” and not the female beloved. In fact the beloved, in “Willowwood,” becomes only the conduit for poetic inspiration; they may share a union, but only the poet has a voice.

¹² This moment recalls CR’s line in *Goblin Market* which reads “Like two blossoms on one stem,/ Like two flakes of new-fallen snow,” (l.189-90).

The lady gets lines within some of the sonnets of *The House of Life*, but by and large acts as muse rather than coauthor, inspiring rather than composing herself.¹³

The sestet of “Nuptial Sleep” describes the inspiration as a dream that the two lovers share, but that, in the end, only the husband holds in consciousness. Even though they sleep “apart” (which I read as no longer physically joined in the act of sex) their minds travel together through sleep. DGR emphasizes this repeating “them” and “their” to reinforce their collective dreaming: “Sleep sank *them*” (l.10), “*their* dreams” (l.11), “*Their* souls” (l.12) (emphasis mine). But the last lines find the husband awake: “Till from some wonder of new woods and streams/ He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay” (l.13-4). In this moment, DGR severs the union of the two. The husband possesses a sentient consciousness apart from the bride who sleeps on next to him. In that consciousness, the husband appropriates a privilege of poetic voice; he can remember and record the moment while the wife cannot.

DGR’s repeated emphasis on the union of the lovers in his amatory poems metonymically links the lover, the beloved and the poem in a chain which does not allow the reader to distinguish easily the three. In the “Willowwood” poems as well as in “The Kiss” and “Nuptial Sleep,” Rossetti chooses liquid metaphors to emphasize this melding together. The riverside, the well of water, the blood, the sea of dreams and the drops of bodily fluid all illustrate how indistinguishable individual subjects are in the poems. *The House of Life*’s emphasis on union of lover and beloved is challenged in CR’s *Monna Innominata*. In that poem, the poetic voice rethinks the separation of beloved and lover, ultimately refusing the lover and choosing to be alone.

¹³ She is allowed to speak in sonnet IX, but it is again mediated though the poet who tells us what she says.

The metonymy, the easily sliding union of bodies, is what critics such as John Holmes have described as DGR's "queerness." Sexuality becomes polymorphous and all things meld into the sexual touch. The physical interaction is shared with more bodies than just those of the lover and the beloved. Holmes writes that "Rossetti locates sexuality at the center of identity, but he does not compartmentalize that sexuality into different sexual identities...Rossetti's is a queer poetry" (67). Rossetti's queerness, which I argue is his refusal to limit sexuality exclusively to a marital relationship, also seems to be what DGR's contemporary critics, like Buchanan, accused him of by suggesting his poetry too fleshly or "Greek." The poetry is abundantly full of sexual encounters. DGR's speaker attempts to imagine what the beloved thinks, dreams and looks like; however, the poems only ever present the lover's own thoughts, dreams and visions. DGR's poems attempt to portray difference but end up only enforcing a fantasy of sameness within the poems.

CR's poems maintain a distance between the lover/poet and beloved/love object, while DGR's sonnets desire the lover and beloved to unite with one another with the word around them. I argue that DGR uses metonymy to elide difference, making the bodies within the poems meld into one being. In contrast, CR emphasizes difference through her syntactical inversions, chiasmus and antimetabole. What makes this differentiation between the two sonnet sequences so compelling is that each poet suggests that his/her sequence does the opposite. In other words, while CR's poem heralds "both are one" her syntax undoes her claim, ultimately enforcing difference rather than sameness. And, while DGR's speaker watches the beloved while she sleeps, imagining her dreaming, those dreams are always already his own fantasy; her subjectivity is always mediated by his. These distinctions regarding CR and DGR's poetics are significant because they change the way these poems are often read. The juxtaposition of the

subject of the poems with the poetics of the sonnets allows a new take on the poems. The revision of the amatory tradition is more complex than originally suggested by both sonnet sequences. In different, albeit parallel ways, both poets craft a sonnet sequence which renders, with enormous complexity, experiences of desire and intimacy.

Maintaining the “Barrier Between”: Christina Rossetti’s *Monna Innominata*

Christina Rossetti’s *Monna Innominata* expresses the agony of a failed love and a lost lover, but it is also particularly attuned to the female poet’s location in the history of amatory poetry and sonnet sequences. CR composes the sonnets to form a larger sonnet, the fourteen sonnets that make up the sequence functioning as the fourteen lines of the verse. At the close of the first “quatrain” of the sonnet’s sonnet, (i.e. in the fourth poem of the sequence) the female poet and lover voices concern about her position as lover and as poet in the history of amatory poetics:

I lov’d you first: but afterwards your love
Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song
As drown’d the friendly cooings of my dove.
Which owes the other most? my love was long,
And yours one moment seem’d to wax more strong; (IV; l.1-5)

In the first three lines, the poetic voice mourns the fact that the male sonneteer drowns the song the female poet sings; he sings a louder and “loftier” song than her self-described “cooings.” She suggests that his poems are remembered beyond her own only because of a momentary strength. Hers, by contrast were longer and more sustained: “my love was long,/ And yours one moment seem’d to wax more strong.” What precedes this statement of poetic sustainability,

however, is the language of exchange; “Which owes the other most?” the poetic voice questions. The language of commerce and debt—”owes,” “cost,” “spend,” “spent”—returns throughout the sequence of the poems. In this fourth sonnet, however, the metaphor of exchange suggests that these kinds of standards and measurements are not the best system of evaluating love or poetic prowess:

I lov’d and guess’d at you, you construed me—
And lov’d me for what might or might not be
Nay, weights and measures do us both a wrong. (IV; 1.6-8)

The rest of the second quatrain of Sonnet 4 accuses the male poet of “construing” the poetic voice, making her into something which she is not. The poetic voice of CR’s poem accuses the male poet of wrongly representing her, of weighing and measuring her love. There is no wavering in the octave over how the poet feels about this kind of poetic project. It is, simply put, “wrong.” However, the poetic voice demands that they are *both* wronged when she is misrepresented; if only the male poet’s songs are heard, both the beloved and the lover suffer. Instead of a contest of weights and measures, the poetic voice argues for a more seamless union of self and other in love:

For verily love knows not “mine” or “thine;”
With separate “I” and “thou” free love has done,
For one is both and both are one in love:
Rich love knows nought of “thine that is not mine;”
Both have the strength and both the length thereof,
Both of us, of the love which makes us one. (IV; 1.9-14)

At the poem's end, both poets and poetic projects have "strength and both the length thereof/ Both of us, the love which makes us one." CR's repeated and emphasized "both," which appears five times in the last four lines, works against the notion of primacy. Neither of the poets have the *best* position for recording their love; in fact, Rossetti argues that only through both their attempts can they make the whole of love represented. Line eleven does this most effectively: "For one is both and both are one in love." The line's inversion not only reinforces that one is both and both are one, but it elides any primacy in love and any temporality of poetics. Technically the line is an example of antimetabole, a rhetorical inversion of a sentence using the same diction, here "both," "one," and "love."¹⁴

While the line's inversion emphasizes its claim, it also forces its own reconsideration. Upon closer scrutiny, the parallelism enacts something quite different than what it declares. While the line says that the two are one, the line actually calls attention to the fact that actually both are *not* one in love. CR's antimetabole creates a kind of linguistic or aural gloss which neatly implies closure through the repetition of the words on the page. But in forming the inversion, CR betrays the fact that the line is not weighted equally, a point most readily suggested through the difference in verb conjugation; "is" must conjugate to "are" for the line to work grammatically. The form of the line undoes the parallelism rather than enforces it. In its attempted affirmation of sameness, the poem solidifies the difference between the lover and the beloved. Read as an allusion, CR's poem engages *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The speaker asks, like EBB's speaker: what happens to the woman's individuality when she enters into a contract with a male beloved? For CR's female speaker, loving the beloved does not just put her at risk of heartbreak, but it compromises her individuality and her autonomy.

¹⁴ Often referred to as chiasmus, chiasmus does not usually repeat the same wording. Instead, chiasmus usually inverts the syntax while using the same structure and different words.

In this sestet, the speaker tries to imagine a “oneness” in Love, but the octave’s decided argument for two poetic projects lingers. Both lover and beloved may be “one in love,” but CR’s syntax suggests that “one” is not “both.” Extrapolating from her metaphor, the poem suggests that one body does not do the work of representing both lover and beloved (as the husband’s would under marriage law) and one sonnet sequence does not do the work of representing the story of both lover and beloved. Sameness or oneness, according to CR’s sonnet, only masks particularized exclusions. For this reason, the silenced woman of Christina Rossetti’s “Preface” must also be allowed to speak; she must be allowed to tell her version of the story.

In the preface to her “sonnet of sonnets,” Rossetti suggests that the famous women of amatory poetry, like Beatrice or Laura, might have spoken themselves in response to their lover’s compositions. Those ladies, she imagines, might have also written poetry, but in their poetry they would have maintained the “barriers between” the male and female poet:

These heroines of world-wide fame were preceded by a bevy of unnamed ladies “*donne innominate*” sung by a school of less conspicuous poets; and in that land and that period which gave simultaneous birth to Catholics, to Albigenses, and to Troubadours, one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover’s poetic aptitude, while the barrier between them might be one held sacred by both, yet not such as to render mutual love incompatible... (294)

While CR points out the lack of female responses to the famous compositions of male poets, she also implicitly places her own work in conversation with those other sonnet sequences. In fact she opens each sonnet with a quotation from Dante and from Petrarch. These quotations act as epigraphs and inspirations for the poems which follow and frame each individual verse as responding to or elaborating on the lines. Marjorie Stone calls this Rossetti’s “quietly audacious

bid for fame” (“Sonnet Traditions” 46) and suggests that she not only emphasizes her “poetic aptitude” but is placing herself in conversation with those she believes to be the greatest amatory poets, Dante and Petrarch. In addition, Stone points out that Christina Rossetti also implicitly places herself in conversation with DGR, whose *The House of Life* was republished the same year as her *Monna Innominata*. While *The House of Life* only imagines what the woman and love-object of the poems thinks and feels, *Monna Innominata* voices female desire and love giving the “unnamed” woman of amatory poems, like her brother’s, a forum in which to reply.

CR forces the reader to acknowledge the possibility of female poets during the high days of sonnet sequences, and she acknowledges the amatory sequence of her own century and gender: *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The rest of the introduction is infamous in its opacity. It is clear Rossetti is invoking EBB, but it is unclear as to exactly what connection we as readers are suppose to draw between EBB and Rossetti. Imagining her own poems as the amatory poems of a woman scorned rather than a woman blissfully married to her male poet courtier, CR writes:

Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend. Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the “Portuguese Sonnets” an inimitable “monna innominata” drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura. (294)

As Tricia Lootens states, “For more than a hundred years, critics have speculated as to whether Rossetti’s notoriously elliptical preface challenges Barrett Browning’s right to a lyric throne” (162). What is clear is that Rossetti sees her poems as offering an added voice, one in

conversation with, but not exactly like EBB's or the host of male poets who precede and surround her. In part this is because CR's poem ends without physical union of any kind—legal or sexual. While EBB's sonnets do not assume marriage in my reading, they do convey an ongoing interaction (even struggle) with the beloved that includes physical touch and intimate contact (face-to-face meetings, secret letters, etc.).¹⁵ CR's speaker, however, embraces a desire which refuses physical touch or personal interaction. I acknowledge CR's intervention into the amatory tradition, but want to press harder on her claim that the lady could share her "lover's poetic aptitude while the barrier between them might be held sacred by both." *Monna Innominata*, I argue, reveals that only through a refusal of the lover can the female poet exist. The "barrier between" is final and total separation.

In the first four poems of the sequence, the poetic voice calls to the lover who comes to her only sporadically. The poems open on a note of longing: "Come back to me, who wait and watch for you:—" (l.1), the speaker cries to her beloved. The poems arise out of the separation of the two; she writes in his absence. Using the rhetoric of apostrophe, her sonnet to him is an invocation of the beloved. Also an apostrophe, the second sonnet is filled with longing of a different kind. In this poem, the speaker wishes she could remember the first time the two lovers met.

I wish I could remember that first day,
First hour, first moment of your meeting me,
If bright or dim the season, it might be
Summer or winter for aught I can say;
So unrecorded did it slip away,

¹⁵ In sonnet 6 she remembers his "touch upon the palm" (l.8) and even in the very last sonnet in the sequence, the speaker of EBB's poems tells us that "Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers" (l.1).

So blind was I to see and to foresee,
So dull to mark the budding of my tree
That would not blossom yet for many a May.
If only I could recollect it, such
A day of days! I let it come and go
As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow;
It seem'd to mean so little, meant so much;
If only now I could recall that touch,
First touch of hand in hand—Did one but know! (II; l.1-14)

Time has played a trick on the speaker by effacing the moment of meeting. She blames herself for being “blind” to “see and to foresee,” too “dull” to have noticed her own blossoming. As the poem progresses, the poet wishes to remember not just the first meeting, but the first touch she shared with the beloved. Indeed the “moment” to monumentalize in CR’s poem has been forgotten. The touch, which is so central to the story of the lovers in *The House of Life*, is not, the most important moment of connection for this sequence because it shifts the focus from physical touch to space between. Moreover, the touch in *Monna Innominata* is a chaste one; the touch is only “hand in hand” unlike the union of bodies and lips in DGR’s “A Kiss” or “Nuptial Sleep.”

The woman of the poem is disconnected from her own sexuality here; she suggests that she fails to notice or anticipate the “budding of [her] tree” and sees the meeting as “as traceless as a thaw of bygone snow.” While the speaker is metaphorically “blossoming” into her own spring, and recognizing her own body’s “thawing” she cannot, or will not, trace that blossoming to the lover himself. This hints at the kind of sexuality that Christina Rossetti’s poems present.

These poems chronicle a sexual awakening of the body, but one that cannot be traced to a physical connection with the lover. Instead, it is in the writing of the poem that CR's female speaker can create the story of that lost moment. In the poem, she can record it and allow it to function as the present absence of a touch because, at the time of the meeting, "It seem'd to mean so little." The poems themselves become the acts of mediation between lover and beloved. CR, as author, is not blind to the gendered aspects of this mediation and perhaps frames the poems with her introduction for this reason. The mediation in the poems is always inflected by the poetic struggle over *whose* voice is heard. Whereas DGR requires the presence of his beloved to establish (male) poetic subjectivity, CR requires an absence of the beloved to establish (female) poetic subjectivity. Both—lover and beloved—cannot be represented by one poem since what seemed to "mean so little" to one, may have meant so much to the other.

Sonnet III of the sequence further proves that the poems themselves stand in for a kind of sexual connection that cannot play out in physical touch. In this poem the poetic voice dreams of the lover only to find that he exists more readily in her dreams than in her waking life:

I dream of you to wake: would that I might
Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;
Nor find with dreams the dear companion gone,
As summer ended summer birds take flight.
In happy dreams I hold you full in sight,
I blush again who waking look so wan;
Brighter than sunniest day that ever shone,
In happy dreams your smile makes day of night. (III; 1.1-8)

A moment which is in waking life too scarce (a moment in the presence of the lover himself) can be visited and revisited in dreams. The dream-life is better than that waking-life; it is “Brighter than sunniest day that ever shone” (l. 7). In seemingly direct conversation with DGR’s “Nuptial Sleep,” where the male poet contemplates the sleeping female beloved, CR’s poem suggests that it may be best for the woman just to stay asleep.

The rhyming of the stanza changes in this second quatrain of the octave, and we feel the discordance between waking and dreaming. The full rhymes of “on” and “gone” give way to more slant rhymes and visual rhymes of “so wan” and “shone,” as well as imbedded rhymes of “you” and “who.” The full sound of unity within the octave is broken in that second quatrain. Rossetti then carries the visual rhyme into the sestet ending line nine with “one” which recalls (but does not audibly echo) “gone” and “shone”:

Thus only in a dream we are at one,
Thus only in a dream we give and take
The faith that maketh rich who take or give;
If thus to sleep is sweeter than to wake,
To die were surely sweeter than to live,
Though there be nothing new beneath the sun. (III; 1.9-14)

The sestet returns to full rhymes, pairing one/sun, take/wake and give/live, but the lingering discordance is felt to the end of the verse.¹⁶ Only in a dream can the speaker “hold you full” (l.5). The line is evocative of the project at hand: the speaker attempts to fully relate and fully see the beloved, but can do so only in dreams. In fact the poem suggests that to hold “full,” or completely, is itself a fantasy, only attainable in the mind. Sonnet III begins the meditation on

¹⁶ Indeed the sestets of CR vary among these poems. All the sonnets sestets are slightly different.

“full”-ness or “one”-ness that continues throughout the sequence: “only in a dream we are at one” (l.9). Sonnet IV, as I argued, picks this theme up again, complicating “oneness” in love and attempting to work through the paradox of capturing the love in a sonnet. (“For one is both and both are one in love.” (IV; l.11))

As the poems move into the second quatrain of the macrosonnet (poems 5-8) the tone shifts dramatically. In her article “The Economics of Ecstasy in Christina Rossetti’s *Monna Innominata*,” Krista Lysack argues that CR uses mysticism to break down the divide of male and female. She reads this second set of four poems as attacks on the tradition of courtly love:

Rossetti, too, finds that “there is no longer any need” for courtly love. The courtly love of the first five sonnets is translated into the autoeroticism of an ecstatic economy in the remaining sonnets. Here, bodies multiply to include three—lover, beloved, and God in a *ménage a trios*—to trade their losses between them in ecstasy. Sonnets 5 through 8—the second quatrain of the macrosonnet—mark a turning away from the conventions of courtly love, and establish a preoccupation with divine love. (409)

Lysack reads the poems biographically, in the context of Christina Rossetti’s charitable work at Highgate, a women’s prison in London. Lysack suggests that as the need for differentiation along lines of sex disintegrate because of CR’s move away from the courtly love tradition; instead, all the bodies in the poem become feminized. Lysack also suggests that what she calls the “feminized” bodies in *Monna Innominata* break down binaries about women. CR’s work in the women’s prison, Lysack writes, is the root of her desire to dispel these myths of womanhood:

... *Monna Innominata* (1881), written after the benefit of perhaps a decade’s reflection on her work at Highgate, offers a sustained development of productive

female desire in the form of an ecstatic body. This body is formed once Rossetti mines the discursive bodies historically available to her in Victorian culture, those commonplaces of the virgin/whore dichotomy and its counterparts, the fallen/unfallen woman, the angel of the house/prostitute, the Virgin Mary/Magdalene, distinctions implied in her earlier poems about fallen women. The bodily economy in *Monna Innominata* disrupts the one-to-one-ness, the symmetry, the mirroring produced by the opposing images (401-2)

Although I agree that the bodies of the courtly love tradition fade because there is less and less emphasis on touch or the desire for physical contact of any sort, I intimate that the mirroring CR disrupts is more localized. Whereas Lysack calls on biographical information to make her claim, I argue that the poems themselves disrupt a “one-to-one-ness” and “symmetry.” Furthermore, Lysack’s idea that all of the bodies become feminized is suggestive of the ambivalence within the text. That ambivalence about gender and sex is evocative of the project of the poems which challenge heteronormativity and question traditional gender roles. While the poems do not present enough textual evidence to read them definitely as about same-sex desire (a female poet to a female beloved), I do think that they effectively disrupt expected notions of Victorian desire.

The poems of *Monna Innominata* intervene and reframe the story of *The House of Life*. The reflecting and refracting being played out in the language of Christina Rossetti’s poems comments on the reflected and refracted poetic voice in Dante Gabriel’s poems. In her brother’s poems, the lover and beloved are indistinguishable because the poetic voice only imagines the beloved while he looks at himself. The myth of Narcissus conflates the poetic voice and the beloved making them essentially one. Christina Rossetti’s play on language, and on the amatory tradition itself, disrupts this conflation to suggest that even in repetition and mirroring, difference

exists. While DGR's *The House of Life* imagines bodies indistinguishable from one another in desire and eroticism, Christina Rossetti imagines a collaborative poetic project where the female poet, the male poet and the divine mingle only in a swirl of inspiration and verse, maintaining the sacred (and physical) "barrier between."

Monna Innominata serves this kind of macrocosmic purpose and CR goes out of her way to formalize the project into the strictures of the sonnet form. She creates fourteen individual sonnets which make up the larger sonnet of fourteen poems all in response to the tradition of sonnet sequences begun three centuries before. In the second quatrain, *Monna Innominata* moves on to thoughts of the divine and divine love, but the poems also start to repeat words and phrases within the stanzas. While the forms of the sonnets remain fairly standard, the interior of the poem starts to look quite different. The chiasmus increases as does the repetition of words and phrases. "O my heart's heart, and you who are to me/ More than myself myself..." (V; l.1-2) begins the fifth sonnet. The repetition of "heart" and "myself" calls attention to the differences between the "heart" and the "heart's heart." While the increasing parallelism of the poems would seem to suggest similarities between the lover and beloved it instead forces a recognition and distance between the two voices. Sonnet VII begins with the lover and beloved repeating the exact same phrase:

"Love me, for I love you" —and answer me,
"Love me, for I love you" —so shall we stand
As happy equals in the flowering land
Of love, that knows not a dividing sea.
Love builds the house on rock and not on sand,
Love laughs what while the winds rave desperately;

And who hath found love's citadel unmann'd?

And who hath held in bonds love's liberty? (VII; 1.1-8)

The octave indicates that the speaker believes that the two phrases "Love me, for I love you" are indistinguishable and that they have the same meaning even though they are spoken by different people. She imagines that they are "equals" and that love will conquer those troubles which will arise.

Although the octave is strong in its assertion that Love will prevail, the poem turns and the sestet allows the reader access to the sadness and bitterness of the speaker. The sestet suggests that the same phrase *does* change in meaning depending on who says it.

My heart's a coward though my words are brave

We meet so seldom, yet we surely part

So often; there's a problem for your art!

Still I find comfort in his Book, who saith,

Though jealousy be cruel as the grave,

And death be strong, yet love is strong as death. (VII; 1.9-14)

While CR writes that the beloved and lover are equals, she reveals that she doubts and that the first half of the poem is only a happy rendering of what she believes. The sestet accuses "there's a problem for your art!" suggesting that it is only in *his* art that the union of the two can be imagined. Instead, she reveals that the time spent together is far less significant than that spent apart. In the next sonnet, the speaker begins to give up the hope of meeting: "Thinking of you, and all that was, and all/ That might have been and now can never be" (IX; 1.1-2). Sonnet XII considers the possibility that the insistence on individuality may have cost her the happy life with

the lover. She imagines someone might take her “place” and decides that she wants not to “grieve” the lover. The tone of this poem is, as it progresses, more bitter.

The repetition continues throughout the stanza, becoming more pronounced in the sestet.

If there be any one can take my place
And make you happy whom I grieve to grieve,
Think not that I can grudge it, but believe
I do commend you to that nobler grace,
That readier wit than mine, that sweeter face;
Yea, since your riches make me rich, conceive
I too am crown'd, while bridal crowns I weave,
And thread the bridal dance with jocund pace.
For if I did not love you, it might be
That I should grudge you some one dear delight;
But since the heart is yours that was mine own,
Your pleasure is my pleasure, right my right,
Your honourable freedom makes me free,
And you companion'd I am not alone. (XII; 1.1-14)

As a reader, it is impossible not to notice that his “pleasure” is not her “pleasure” and his “right” is decidedly not her “right.” Indeed the self-effacement of the final line seems almost ludicrous since this new companion, a third interlocutor, absolutely leaves the speaker alone. The poem engages the amatory tradition which imagines the woman as turning from the lover to God for her companionship and with the lover’s desertion comes the freedom to devote her life to God. Even so, the poem’s repetition exposes the fundamental difference for the lover and the

beloved—he will be “companion’d” and she will be only “not alone.” Implicit in the claim is that the poetic voice will devote her life and her desire to an existence without physical touch; she will embrace celibacy.

The final sonnet of *Monna Innominata* narrates the ultimate decline of the female poetic voice. She has sung her song, she has composed her sequence, and in the end, poetry is all that she has. Abandoned, aging, and no longer beautiful, the poet meditates on what is left. In this poem CR repeats the opening line of the octave again in the first line of the sestet. The repetition of the line suggests that every reiteration of a word or line is repetition with a difference. The first line in the octave imagines what the poet will now do, and the sestet’s first line muses on what is left for her. The first statement is dramatically different for the speaker than its reiteration, because what she has left is silence:

Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there
Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;
Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?
I will not bind fresh roses in my hair,
To shame a cheek at best but little fair, —
Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn, —
I will not seek for blossoms anywhere,
Except such common flowers as blow with corn.
Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?
The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;
The silence of a heart which sang its songs

While youth and beauty made a summer morn,

Silence of love that cannot sing again. (XIV; l. 1-14)

While the poems portray the end of the love affair as “silence,” the poems betray this conclusion. Even if the poet no longer sings of love, the poems themselves return to and retell the love story again and again. In this sestet, the poet poses a question “what doth remain?”, and coyly answers “silence;” however, a different answer is encoded in the lines. Rossetti’s word choice “pent” puns on ‘pen’ or ‘penned’ suggesting that the poems are mediators of desire. The sonnet form ‘pens’ desire by writing it down and cordoning it off. The sestet’s rhyme scheme performs the work of this penning through an inversion of the rhyme scheme: *dceecd*. The sestet forms a kind of palimpsest, shifting the couplet to the center of the sestet and rhyming “longs” and “songs” to further cement the link between desire and poetry.¹⁷

Christina Rossetti and her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti both revise the amatory tradition through their sonnet sequences, only to each suggest a different kind of understanding of desire and love. While different from one another, these new understandings, which are set up against the tradition of the courtly love, nevertheless fall along a spectrum of Victorian sexuality. At one end of the spectrum, Dante Gabriel’s poems in *The House of Life* present a particularly queer reading of intimacy and formally rely on the sliding of referent through the rhetoric of metonymy. These shifting signifiers suggest that his revised understanding of intimacy is one in which bodies fuse. DGR’s sonnets represent a world of polymorphous arousal where bodies meld and blend in overtly sexual physical encounters. The speaker of the sonnets breaks down

¹⁷ This poem, in particular, is a revision of amatory poetry such as Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst” (1572-1637) and Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” (1591-1674) whose poems use garden metaphors to warn women of their waning beauty and fertility. CR’s lines “I will not bind fresh roses in my hair, / To shame a cheek at best but little fair, —” (l.4-5) recall and also refuse Herrick’s opening imperative “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, / Old Time is still a-flying:” (l.1-2). CR’s speaker instead sets her task to writing poetry, recalling the tradition but also rewriting it.

barriers of gender, death and myth in order to inhabit a more fluid and queer understanding of the amatory. Christina Rossetti, by contrast, formally employs chiasmus and repetition in a way that reminds the reader of the definitive difference and separation between the lover and the beloved. She suggests a different revision of the amatory tradition in which the lover and beloved remain distinctly separate. Her rendering of love and intimacy falls at the other end of the spectrum where physical touch and sex are not an integral part of poetic production. Instead, CR imagines a kind of intimacy which is also queer in that it rejects the sanctioned, domestic, union of male and female in favor of a love mediated by and through poetry; a love without physical touch. The structure of chiasmus in the poems only serves to remind the reader of the way in which the poem's speaker has refused to join in a union which binds the two lovers in one fluid state, as in *The House of Life*, but instead asserts their individual oneness.

“In An Artist’s Studio”: Where Sister and Brother Meet

If, as I suggest, these sonnet sequences are both interestingly queer, then one question remains: are CR and DGR's poems in conversation with one another? Or are they simply both engaged in returning to and revising the amatory tradition? In conclusion I turn to CR's sonnet “In an Artist's Studio.” Here CR takes the reader both through the space of the studio and through the artist's mind. The two spatial descriptions overlap in the sonnet, suggesting that the space of the studio and the mental conception of the artist are interlocked. In the space she describes, we hear echoes of the Narcissus myth from *The House of Life*. The face in the canvas is the same face, over and over:

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:

We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel—every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream. (l. 1-14)

The young woman of the paintings is, for CR's poem, the same woman over and over representing the female muse who inspires "every canvas" to mean "The same one meaning, neither more nor less" (l.7,8). In typical Rossetti fashion, CR withholds what that "one meaning" is, forcing the reader to locate meaning within context of her brother's paintings and poems.

If we place "In an Artist's Studio" next to *The House of Life*, the "one meaning" of the paintings seems most obviously representations of "Love": the woman in every canvas suggests love and desire. In *The House of Life*, though, the ideas of death and life are inextricably tied to love; the "one meaning" CR's speaker hints at is a full return to the Narcissus myth. The artist does not see the model as she is but as "she fills his dream"(l.14). In other words, he sees her as a projection of his own subjectivity rather than as a subject herself.

The sestet presents this darker reading of the studio where the artist-become-vampire sucks at his muse: “He feeds upon her face by day and night,/ And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,” (l. 9-10). This frightening turn in the poem leads the way for the sonnet to portray the artist as only ever painting himself, representing his own idea of beauty and love. CR invokes her own poems in the next three lines: “Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:/ Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;/ Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright” (l.11-3). These lines recall the waiting woman in *Monna Innominata* who in the first line of the sequence yearns for the lover to “Come back to me, who wait and watch for you:— “(I; l.1). However, in CR’s sequence that woman loses hope as the poems progress. By the fourteenth sonnet *Monna Innominata*, the poetic voice laments, “Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there/ Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;/ Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?” (XIV; l.1-3). The woman of this artist’s studio, by contrast, is forever young and hopeful. In part, the woman from Christina’s “In an Artist’s Studio” remains young because her beauty on the canvas is not subject to the same kinds of cruelties of time to which the actual body yields.

The last line of the sonnet reveals how the young woman remains youthful, ready, and bright. She is not as she is in her human form, but instead the woman of the canvases is “but as she fills his dream” (l. 14). Existing only in the male artist’s fantasy of her the model/muse is really only a reflection of him. She is the embodiment of *his dream*, of his ideal and of his yearning. Her subjectivity is removed and instead substituted with the projection of the artist’s idea of her. DGR, in his most famous lines on sonnets, suggests that the sonnet is a monument to a single moment in all eternity: “A Sonnet is a moment’s monument,—/ Memorial from the Soul’s eternity/ To one dead deathless hour...” (l.1-3). CR’s poem “In an Artist’s Studio” exposes DGR’s sonnet monument and painted monument as only half the story and as a

dangerous half of the story.¹⁸ While he suggests, in his sestet to the poem, that the sonnet is a currency which pays the toll for everlasting life, CR reminds that the life which is extended is not the beloved's or even love itself, but instead "his dream."¹⁹ "In an Artist's Studio" implies that the male poet/husband of DGR's poems is dreaming even though he thinks he is awake. CR's speaker exposes the male fantasy of sentience as itself a dream. The husband who watches his wife sleeping in "Nuptial Sleep" is not superior to his wife in a consciousness, but also simply dreaming himself.

¹⁸ Jennifer Wagner writes, "The monument-poem is a form that houses absences rather than presences, that looks backward rather than bursting out and forward into time" (134).

¹⁹ His sestet reads:

A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals
The soul, —its converse, to what Power 'tis due: —
Whether for tribute to the august appeals
Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,
It serve, or, 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,
In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death. (l.9-14)

CHAPTER IV

Intimacy and Familial Ties: George Eliot and Augusta Webster's Sonnets to the Family

In James Kincaid's *Erotic Innocence*, he argues that "we might try to manage without stark essentialist ideas about sexuality and sexual behavior, see what might be done by positing a *range* of erotic feelings within and toward children" (24). Victorian texts and their sexualization of children (such as Carroll's Alice, Dickens' Little Nell, and others) have long been under scrutiny by scholars. Kincaid, as well as Carolyn Steedman and Catherine Robson all investigate the confluence of desire and the erotic in child figures. Steedman argues, in *Strange Dislocation: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority*, that children were "distributed across the sex-gender system," but that "when the child was watched, written about and wanted, it was usually feminized set of qualities (if not a female child) which image was left behind for our analysis" (8-9). Steedman and Robson emphasize the feminization of children in these erotic contexts and suggest that gender, as well as adolescence, had a large part to play in the figuring of eroticized children.

If the last chapter's examination of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti's sonnet sequences chronicled a kind of spectrum of Victorian sexuality, then this chapter tries to reconcile familial bonds with the expansion of the amatory tradition. In her book *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus argues for a new way of looking at same-sex relationships in Victorian England:

As lenses for viewing the past, the heterosexual paradigm of the family, the deviance paradigm of homosexuality, and the continuum theory of lesbianism have all become

cloudy, preventing us from seeing the diverse forms family and marriage took during the very period that witnessed their consolidation as vectors of power and social coherence. (31-2)

Marcus uses female friendship as a way of troubling the norms of family and marriage. She argues that our “lenses for viewing the past” have barred us from seeing the many forms of family. Using a strategy of intervention like Marcus’, I turn to two sonnet sequences which trouble the definition of “amatory.” I use the family amatory sequence to broaden the ways we consider intimacy and desire in the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I discuss the taboo of incest, coupled with the paradigm of the heterosexual nuclear family, allow the sonnet sequences of Eliot and Webster to go unread as revisions and expansions of the amatory tradition.

I begin with Christina Rossetti’s poem *Goblin Market* and her verse “Song.” These two poems, both about sisterly love, are not sonnets; however the poems are famous poems of female intimacy, and overtly draw on amatory tropes. In *Goblin Market* and her poem “Song,” Christina Rossetti suggests that the bond between sisters prevails over outside intervention. Moreover, *Goblin Market* uses the narrative of sibling sacrifice and love to inspire a scene of storytelling and verse. Beginning with Rossetti’s poems, which are often read for their queerness, I suggest that the child is invested with a kind of sexuality that the speakers of the poems long for and long to revisit. Using Rossetti to set the stage for my intervention, I then move to two amatory sonnet sequences: George Eliot’s *Brother and Sister* (1874) and Augusta Webster’s posthumously published “Mother and Daughter” (1895).¹

Beginning with *Brother and Sister*, I explore the eroticism at play within the sonnets’ language as well as the power relation between siblings. The theme of nostalgia and memory

¹ “Mother and Daughter” was composed between 1881 and 1886, but not published until after Webster’s death in 1894.

within the sequence is placed at odds with the language of desire and suggests that the intimacy of the two siblings is something only possible in childhood; or rather, it seems like something only possible through reflection on past childhood moments. The poems are constructed as narratives of the lost childhood bond. Because of the connection between poetry and memory, I argue that the poems use childhood as a way to interrogate the powerful and erotic intimacy of the brother and sister without invoking the taboo of incestuous relationship. The poems yearn for the deep bond of intimacy that the sister and speaker of the poems does not find in the adult world. The poems echo the tropes of brother and sister intimacy from the Rossetti poems of the last chapter.

From Eliot's work, I move to the *fin de siècle* poems of August Webster and Mathilde Blind. Both Webster and Blind write poems about motherhood, and Webster's sequence, "Mother and Daughter," uses amatory tropes to describe her relationship with her daughter. Webster and Blind do not employ speakers who are remembering lost days of childhood, but they do emphasize the pre-adult through their description of the mother-child bond. Again, in these poems, the speakers explore desire, intimacy and erotic language within the familial relationship. These poems reexamine the domestic as a space of sanctioned intimacies. Whereas in other chapters I have interrogated the sanctioned relationship of marriage, these women explore intimacy and desire within the broader sphere of the domestic. No longer is it the marital union which catalyzes the poets' inspection of desire and longing, but now it is the nuclear family of parents/children and siblings.² This space is similar to the marital bond in that it is

² This may be the transferring the amatory sequence to something still domestic, but now wholly untainted by sexuality—family love. Of course, in a post-Freudian world, we know that the family is anything but untainted by sexuality. However, we can read the poems as attempting, once and for all, to break with the eroticism of courtly love poems, instead focusing on long for the past, rather than longing for a lover.

both socially and legally constructed and in fact all of the poets draw on marital metaphors to describe the bonds presented.

For these women, writing about familial bonds suggests passion which is connected to their creation of poetry. This passion is in part formed by those intimate bonds that preceded heterosexual love, adulthood and/or marriage. Eliot, Rossetti and Webster, however, are not the only writers exploring familial bonds as alternate or suggestive parallels to the heteronormative marriage plot. In her book *Family Likeness*, Mary Jean Corbett identifies what she calls:

a cultural tendency toward forging relationships with familial and familiar figures that testifies not only to the perceived perils of intimacy with strangers but also to the ambivalent attractions, for women in particular, of remaining within known or knowable first-family structures that may include sustained and sustaining relations with other women. (vii)

Corbett's argues that, for the novels she considers, these relationships represent "a compelling alternative to the romance between strangers that most critics have taken as to be the paradigm for the heterosexual marriage plot" (vii). The poems presented here, however, take Corbett's suggestion one step further by allowing the poems to be voiced by women themselves. In other words, while Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* explores the same kind of relationship as do her sonnets in *Brother and Sister*, the poems provide a space for the sustained and unmediated voice of the sister. Similarly, Christina Rossetti and Augusta Webster voice the poems through female speakers allowing the exploration of desire and intimacy within the "knowable first-family" structures to serve two functions. Firstly, the poems allow for the revision of the amatory poetic tropes by engendering the poet female and, secondly, the poems explore the taxonomies of desire using the space of kinship as a safe position of exploration. Working outside of the typical

marriage plot, these explorations of desire and intimacy are interestingly queer, presenting alternatives for understanding and articulating desire.

It is also not an accident that the poets, on whom I focus in this chapter and the next, are women. Revising tropes in order to lay bare desire and intimacy as it is figured in other forms than strictly heteronormative desire is also a gendered practice. Laura Linker argues that there is a “growing feminine aesthetic that, over the nineteenth century, increasingly tested questions about religion, marriage, domestic affection, and love either in new verse forms or in traditional verse forms that feature untraditional speakers, contexts, subjects and objects” (52-3). In all of these poems, the domestic space becomes a place in which desire and love is investigated. George Eliot troubles the usual reading that brother/sister relationships were supposed to be practice performances for later husband/wife relationships. Instead, the poems argue for a unique and special intimacy only fulfilled in the union of childhood siblings. Christina Rossetti also troubles the heteronormative courtship plot suggesting that sisterly affection is the more important lesson to pass along than heterosexual love. “Mother and Daughter” not only interrogates specifically feminized desire, but also tackles understandings of poetic creation and motherhood.

This chapter, and my final chapter on Michael Field, modify my definition of queer. In the previous four chapters, I have used the term queer to describe desire and intimate relationships not readily sanctioned by Victorian law or Victorian social norms. In these queer readings of amatory sonnets, I strove to elucidate the unexpected valences of sexuality in EBB, George Meredith, Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. There I was not using queer to argue that the sonnets were homoerotic or engaged in homosexual desire *per se*, but that the intimacies described in each sequence presented something different than the notion of a

Victorian heteronormativity. I emphasize the complicated sexualities at play in the sonnets which are too often read as simple, or simply heterosexual. In these final two chapters, however, I turn queer to think about familial bonds and bonds with animals as also ways of describing intimacy and sexuality and disturbing heteronormativity. Queer, for my interrogations, has little to do with proving actual sexual acts and more to do with the availability of language and poetic forms used to describe desire.

Sisterly Love

Widely popular during its period of publication, and often interrogated by queer theorists, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) explores the theme of childhood and familial intimacy.³ Though not an amatory sonnet sequence, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* usefully questions similar subjects as familial intimacy and devotion. The poem chronicles the forbidden desires of two young sisters. One sister, Laura, having given into the goblins' cries and sacrificed part of herself (a curl of her hair and a teardrop) for a taste of their fruit, wastes away without the fruits' further nourishment.⁴ Her sibling, Lizzie, risks herself to save her sister and in an encounter with the goblin men, they smash their fruit on her body in fits of rage. Lizzie then offers her fruit-laden skin to her sister as a cure for her unyielding thirst. The language is deeply erotic:

She cried "Laura," up the garden,

"Did you miss me?"

Come and kiss me.

³ See critics on CR such as Lysack, May, Hill, Carpenter, and Roden.

⁴ Laura gives her own body to the goblins: "She clipped a precious golden lock,/ She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,/ Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red" (l.126-8). And then, without the fruit: "Her hair grew thin and gray;/ She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn/ To swift decay, and burn/ Her fire away" (l.277-80)

Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me:
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men.”(l.464-74)

Lizzie does save Laura, who sucks the antidote from her sister’s skin and is cured. In her article on desire and *Goblin Market*, “‘Eat me, drink me, love me,’” Mary Wilson Carpenter argues that “Goblin Market suggests that female erotic pleasure cannot be imagined without pain, yet the poem not only affirms the female body and its appetites but constructs ‘sister- hood’ as a saving female homoerotic bond” (417). Sisterly love intervenes to save the life of Laura. Carpenter’s argument for a queer reading of the poem situates desire and the erotic within same-sex sibling bonds to suggest that “the female body is represented as the object of a female gaze” (418). I build on Carpenter’s reading of the poem, suggesting that not only is the poem negotiating the female body as a site of desire, but that the sibling bond presented in the poem is particularly useful for thinking through desire.

The poem does not end with the recovery of Laura, but instead continues for almost a hundred lines to end with a scene of storytelling. The sisters marry and have many children to whom they recount the terrifying story of the goblin men. The story, moreover, imparts to the little ones the importance of familial bonds:

Days, weeks, months, years
Afterwards, when both were wives
With children of their own;
Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
Their lives bound up in tender lives;
Laura would call the little ones
And tell them of her early prime,
Those pleasant days long gone
Of not-returning time:
Would talk about the haunted glen,
The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,
Their fruits like honey to the throat,
But poison in the blood;
(Men sell not such in any town;)
Would tell them how her sister stood
In deadly peril to do her good,
And win the fiery antidote:
Then joining hands to little hands
Would bid them cling together (l.543-61)

The encounter with the goblin men is turned into a tale of familial devotion in Rossetti's poem:
"Their mother-hearts beset with fears,/ Their lives bound up in tender lives." *Goblin Market*
further the idea that familial bonds act as stages for practicing the kinds of intimacies to be
played out later in marriage. While, presumably, the sisters marry different men and leave the

comfort of one another's daily presence ("when both were wives,/ With children of their own"), their experiences together have taught them how to perpetuate the familial tradition. The narrative of sisterly love, moreover, is then used to teach the values of self-sacrifice—a self-sacrifice the poem suggests is only available through family bonds.⁵ This is then recounted to their children in the form of a nursery rhyme: "For there is no friend like a sister,/ In calm or stormy weather,/ To cheer one on the tedious way,/ To fetch one if one goes astray,/ To lift one if one totters down,/ To strengthen whilst one stands'" (l. 562-7). This rhyme is didactic, instructing the children on how to interact first with one another, and then with the world at large. In short, family comes first. Rossetti situates the sibling bond as something sacred. Laura does not tell the little children about domestic union with a husband, but instructs them about the bond of family. The marriage plot, in this instance, is placed on hold and is relegated to a secondary position.

Rossetti's poem is not, in this instance, an amatory sonnet sequence, but the poetry still pushes the boundary of poetic form. In 1861, Dante Gabriel Rossetti sent John Ruskin a manuscript version of Christina Rossetti's soon to be published *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). In his reply, Ruskin responded to the volume with sincere caution, saying:

Irregular measure (introduced to my great regret, in its chief willfulness, by Coleridge) is the calamity of modern poetry...your sister should exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public like. Then, if she puts in her observation and passion all will become precious. But she must have the Form first. (Rossetti *Ruskin: Rossetti* 258-9).⁶

⁵ The poem is also a cautionary tale about interactions with foreign men, the marketplace, and the value of the female body. These are all lessons learned together by the young girls.

⁶ William Rossetti, in his collection, *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti* writes to her sister-in-law Lucy Rossetti that she and her mother "have just read the *Memoir and Letters of Sara*

Attacking “Goblin Market” because of its resemblance to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ruskin suggests a link between the poetic projects of both poets.⁷ Buried in the critique of Rossetti’s (and Coleridge’s) poetics is a sense of public distaste for what those irregular metrics produce.⁸ For my argument, while CR’s *Goblin Market* is not directly revising the amatory tradition, as George Eliot and Augusta Webster’s poems do, it does draw on earlier poetic tropes and pushes the boundaries of acceptable verse forms.

In particular, Rossetti’s images allude to an often cited passage from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In Act II of Shakespeare’s comedy, Helena and Hermia have an exchange that includes a trope similar to Eliot’s. Helena appeals to Hermia to recall their childhood friendship: “So we grew together,/ Like to a double cherry, seeming parted;/ But yet a union in partition,/ Two lovely berries moulded on one stem” (III, ii; l. 212-5).⁹ Helena desires the two women to relate as they did before adult heterosexuality interceded. A similar image of the two siblings as uncomplicated children was often evoked in Victorian poetry. In *Goblin Market*, CR calls the Laura and Lizzie “two blossoms on one stem” (l. 189),¹⁰ and in one of her short poems entitled,

Coleridge (I reading aloud to Mamma), and perhaps, if you were at loss for a book, you might find some of it interesting” (149) (*sic*). Though the letter is dated 11 January 1886, twenty-five years after the first edition of *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, her letter indicates the family’s large educational and recreational interest in the Romantics. Later in the same letter she goes on to say:

...It seems as if those very artificial metres, dependent on syllabic quantity, could never in any degree have been written by ear, or otherwise than as such verse is written now. All critics, however, agree that the best and seemingly most easy and natural styles, both in prose and verse, are those that have been most artfully written and carefully elaborated. Art alone will do nothing, but it improves and educes the natural gift.”

⁷ Surprisingly there is very little written about Rossetti and the Romantic poets who influenced her poetry. James Routh points to the meter of DGR’s “Rose Mary” and “Christabel” saying DGR writes with “a similarity of irregular meter” (36).

⁸ Interestingly, Coleridge’s “Cristobel” is often read as, at least in part, about the anxieties of father/daughter incest as well as the anxiety of outside interlopers in the family.

⁹ A similar passage appears in *Richard III* describing the two young princes.

¹⁰ The passage, in full, carries this metaphor even further:

Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other's wings,

simply, “Song,” she also alludes to the metaphor. Both poems were published in her 1862 volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems* and both poems describe the closeness found in childhood relationships. “Song” suggests the events narrated in *Goblin Market* in a short lyric:

Two doves upon the selfsame branch,
Two lilies on a single stem,
Two butterflies upon one flower:—
O happy they who look on them.

Who look upon them hand in hand
Flushed in the rosy summer light;
Who look upon them hand in hand
And never give a thought to night. (l.1-8)

The poem obliquely alludes to the goblins of the night that torment the two sisters in the volume’s title poem. Read alone, however, CR’s short verse is filled with a similar kind of veiled eroticism. Here the two girls “flush” in the “rosy summer light” are innocent until the dark of night. Similar to Helena’s application to Hermia, CR speaker recalls a time when the two girls existed harmoniously. The language of the poem, however, suggests a doubling. On

They lay down, in their curtained bed:
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fallen snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipped with gold for awful kings.
Moon and stars beamed in at them,
Wind sang to them lullaby,
Lumbering owls forbore to fly,
Not a bat flapped to and fro
Round their rest:
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Locked together in one nest. (l. 184-98)

one hand, that the two girls are happy and “never give a thought to night” suggests that the innocence of the young sisters precludes them from knowing anything about “night.” Night implies something darker—goblin men or other creatures of the “night.” However, if we read the poem as ‘those that look at the two girls never think about the night,’ then the young innocence of the poem is questioned. If the poem is read from the position of the “they” who gaze upon the two young girls, then we can read the poem as a warning about the supposed innocence of the young girls. In this way the poem perfectly reflects what Catherine Robson suggests about the eroticism of the child. Victorian children were invested with an innocence and naturalness even while Puritan ideas circulated about “primary corruption,” viewing children as bearers of original sin and depravity. These two competing ideas, Robson argues, existed simultaneously and were “remarkably amenable to one another” (6).

The homoerotic valences, present in Shakespeare and CR, are coupled with the taboo of incest which lurks behind *Goblin Market*, “Song” and *Brother and Sister*.¹¹ While Christina Rossetti’s poems have received quite a lot of critical analysis, Eliot’s poems are often overlooked. George Eliot deploys this same trope of flowers on one stem in her opening sonnet to *Brother and Sister*. The sister and speaker of the sonnet sequence describes the sibling’s childhood through the metaphor of two buds on one stem:

When our two lives grew like two buds that kiss
At lightest thrill from the bee’s swinging chime,
Because the one so near the other is. (I; l. 2-4)

¹¹ Possibly because the same-sex bond between the two sisters elides overt implications of sexuality, in that lesbianism would be something not quite as thinkable as brother/sister incest. Also, Eliot worried that Lord Byron’s relationship with his sister would add a taint to the relationship she wished to portray in her sonnets.

Filled with the same kind of eroticism as CR's poems as well as that found in Shakespeare, Eliot revises the trope only to suggest that the same-sex relationship does not need to have primacy over the opposite-sex relationship of the brother and sister. While the sisters in CR's poems are doubles for one another, almost indistinguishable, Eliot suggests that brothers and sisters can share a similarly intense intimacy in childhood.

George Eliot's *Brother and Sister*

Composed in 1869, but not published until 1874, George Eliot's *Brother and Sister* is comprised of eleven sonnets. Those sonnets sketch out a tale similar to the narrative of brother and sister, Tom and Maggie Tulliver, in *The Mill on the Floss* (published in 1860). Like the novel, the poems recount the childhood relationship between a younger sister and her older brother.¹² Written in the voice of the sister, the poems explore the pair's childhood days spent along the banks of a canal. Often mentioned in critical work about *The Mill on the Floss*, the poems themselves have garnered less attention. The sonnets do not end as dramatically as their novel counterpart (the brother and sister of the poems do not drown), but instead are separated when the brother leaves for school. The voice of the poems longs for the lost childhood relationship. Eliot uses the amatory sonnet sequence to express the lost love and aching nostalgia for an intimacy that can never be regained.

Composed as modified Shakespearian sonnets, rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*, Eliot's chosen rhyme scheme eliminates a distinct octave and sestet found in the sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning or the Rossettis. Instead, the first twelve lines of each poem in *Brother and Sister*

¹² The poems, and the novel, are also semi-autobiographical explorations of Eliot's own childhood. Like the little sister of the poems, as well as Maggie Tulliver, Mary Ann Evans had a close relationship with her brother, Isaac Evans. See Mathilde Blind's biography of Eliot.

look more like three ballad quatrains than a traditional sonnet.¹³ Moreover, Eliot inserts stanza breaks, further separating the quatrains and the final couplet. This formal revision leaves the couplets standing alone, and makes the poems even more narrative in their construction. The three quatrains create three distinct thoughts on the subject of the poem, leaving the couplet to either recap the sonnet or give a pithy overview.

In the opening sonnet, which begins with the image of the sibling pair as two buds on one stem, the siblings are so close that the bee's tiny weight makes their petals bend and touch: "I cannot choose but think upon the time/ When our two lives grew like two buds that kiss/ At lightest thrill from the bee's swinging chime,/ Because the one so near the other is" (I; l. 1-4). The scene of pollination and of physical closeness is filled with an eroticism that is, as the poem tells us, compulsory. The speaker "cannot choose but think" about these moments, and the theme of nostalgia and memory continues throughout the sequence. The verse suggests that the intimacy known in childhood is not paralleled in her adult life and so the speaker returns to that time. The pair, grown from the same ground, shared both a physical and mental proximity. As in the case of Rossetti's two sisters and Shakespeare's two young women, their erotic bond indicates that childhood intimacies were not simply asexual bonds, but that they were filled with desire and eroticism.

In this first sonnet, the second two quatrains provide two more illustrations of the brother/sister intimacy. The first quatrain suggests they are like flowers on the same stem and in the second and third quatrain the sister is a puppy and a student to her brother's role as master and teacher:

He was the elder and a little man

¹³ The lines do not follow ballad measure, however. They are generally in iambic pentameter with some variation.

Of forty inches, bound to show no dread,
And I the girl that puppy-like now ran,
Now lagged behind my brother's larger tread.

I held him wise, and when he talked to me
Of snakes and birds, and which God loved the best,
I thought his knowledge marked the boundary
Where men grew blind, though angels knew the rest. (I; 1.5-11)

The final couplet only reaffirms the previous quatrain's suggestion that the brother held a position of authority in their relationship: "If he said "Hush!" I tried to hold my breath;/ Wherever he said "Come!" I stepped in faith" (I; 1.12-4). As the poem progresses the equality of the two buds is replaced by the hierarchical relationship between the two siblings. The sister is subjugated to the position of student and pet. While the final couplet reaffirms this—the brother is the elder, the more knowledgeable, and the sister places all of her faith and in him—the final rhyme of "breath" and "faith" is unexpectedly slant. The rest of the poem relies on fairly obvious hard rhymes: time/chime, man/ran, dread/tread, best/rest, and the less obvious me/boundary, and kiss/is. This final couplet of the opening sonnet is in fact the most slant rhyme of any of the eleven sonnet couplets. The unusual discordance suggests the unease of the sibling relationship present throughout the poems and perhaps suggests from the outset that the idyllic relationship is doomed. The imagery of the poem recalls *Paradise Lost* and the two young children resemble Adam and Eve, destined to be forced from the Eden of childhood.

In her book *Men in Wonderland*, Catherine Robson argues that the scene of Eden was increasingly offered up as myth of personal development in the nineteenth century. She argues that

the story of Adam's ejection from Paradise in Genesis, previously important to the perception of childhood because of its explanation of the source of original sin, increasingly offered itself as a myth of personal development to middle-class Victorian individuals, both religious and otherwise. (8)

Drawing on John Gillis' work, Robson maintains that "the Garden of Eden 'ceased to be a place, and became stage of life,' the time of childhood.... In a move that has huge significance...such retrospective imagining of the early years of life as a paradise of innocence and purity not only places an absolute line of division between childhood and adulthood, but also declared that same adulthood to be a time of postlapsarian guilt and gloom" (8). Eliot's sonnets are nostalgic for early childhood spent together in close intimate company. The *Paradise Lost* imagery continues in the second sonnet. There the two children wander hand in hand like Adam and Eve in the closing lines of Milton's poem:¹⁴

Long years have left their writing on my brow
But yet the freshness and the dew-fed beam
Of those young mornings are about me now,
When we two wandered toward the far-off stream (II; 1.1-4).

The sequence is called up from memories and the poems narrate the relationship that is long gone. The sister, and speaker of the poems, is old with wrinkled brow but the poem suggests that

¹⁴ *Paradise Lost* ends with the famous scene of Adam and Eve wandering through the post-garden world:
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.
They, hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way. (XII; l. 646-9)

those wrinkles are residues of the time spent together; they are “writing on my brow.” The poems act as more legible versions of what has been long written on her forehead. In other words, the time of their intimacy is left in the laugh and worry-lines on her forehead as well as recorded in her verses. Presumably the brother would have similar lines gracing his brow, except the poems insinuate that he does not. This divide—between what is written on her body and what is written on his—is a central problem of the sonnets. While the sequence opens with a statement of the sibling’s relative equality as two buds on one stem, the rest of the poems complicate the equality and union of their bond. The sister’s body and mind recall days spent with her brother, but there is little to suggest that his body and mind recalls days spent with her.

The sonnet is intent on giving a voice to the sister’s longing and to her experience. Eliot draws on amatory tropes which lament the loss of time with the beloved. Similar to Christina Rossetti’s *Monna Innominata*, the sister, or lover, longs to be in the presence of her beloved brother again. Eliot’s speaker remembers those “young mornings” with fondness and nostalgia similar to CR’s speaker who calls for the beloved to “come back to me, who wait and watch for you:—” (I; l.1) or EBB’s speaker who longs to hear her beloved “call me by my pet name” (XXXIII; l.1).

In the rest of Sonnet II the pair fish together and share lunch—though he, “elder and a boy” gets the larger share:

Our basket held a store

Baked for us only, and I thought with joy

That I should have my share, though he had more,

Because he was the elder and a boy.

The firmaments of daisies since to me
Have had those mornings in their opening eyes,
The bunchèd cowslip's pale transparency
Carries that sunshine of sweet memories,

And wild-rose branches take their finest scent
From those blest hours of infantine content. (1.5-14)

The metaphor of the basket is telling. Their time together, sanctioned by the basket prepared for “us only,” is enjoyed by both, but the speaker knows from the beginning that hers is to be a smaller portion.

As Elisabeth Rose Gruner notes, the sequence seems to reinscribe existing power relations between the older brother and younger sister (423). The poems elevate the brother while keeping the sister always in a subjugated position because of her age and sex. Gruner points out, however, that the poems, as well as the novel, explore the way that the sister is “empowered through boyish games... The brother, in other words, provides imaginary access to a world of power and freedom without cost” (423). Like Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, the sister of the sonnets experiences a world outside of the usual domestic sphere of the Victorian girl. Even while she knows “he had more,” the poem is still grateful for the experiences not usually available to a young girl. For this sonnet, it is fishing with her brother. The ambivalence of “infantine content” recalls the image of the two buds together. Those moments of proximity and intimacy have vanished, but the speaker thinks of them and writes about them. The sonnets allow for the sister to voice her own position. While the brother may have had the position of

power in childhood, the sister is now the speaker of the poems. It is her desire we see; it is through her memories that we meet the brother and experience love.

In her article, “Eliot, Wordsworth, and the Scenes of the Sisters’ Instruction,” Margaret Homans addresses the sequence in conjunction with Eliot’s relationship to Wordsworth’s poems about his sister. Arguing that Eliot takes her scenes of sisterly instruction from Wordsworth, Homans compares the relationship of Wordsworth to his sister in his poems to Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*:

[*The Mill on the Floss* is Eliot’s] novel most concerned both with female education and with the brother-sister relationship. Maggie Tulliver’s experience first as a reader and then as a sister may shed light on Eliot’s relation to instruction, especially to brotherly instruction. Maggie’s existence in the novel is framed by scenes of her reading. (226)¹⁵

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie is a perceptive reader, and a rather better reader than her brother. In one of the first scenes of the novel, Maggie states that she makes her own readings of books. When questioned about her choice of reading—*The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe—Maggie defends herself:

‘Well,’ said Mr. Riley, in an admonitory patronizing tone, as he patted Maggie on the head, ‘I advise you to put by the ‘History of the Devil,’ and read some prettier book. Have you no prettier books?’

¹⁵ “...She starts out as an accurate reader who distinguishes easily between elucidating a text foreign to her and inventing her own stories (the two kinds of reading that become confused in Eliot’s reading of Wordsworth). ...At this point in her story, Maggie feels free both to read independently and to imagine freely, but we see her being chastized as a girl for both processes indifferently. However Maggie reads, “‘a woman’s no business wi’ being so clever; it’ll turn to trouble, I doubt’” (bk. 1, chap. 3).” (Homans 226)

‘O yes,’ said Maggie, reviving a little in the desire to vindicate the variety of her reading, ‘I know the reading in this book isn’t pretty-but I like the pictures, and I make stories to the pictures out of my own head, you know...’ (*TMOF* 18-9)

Reading, for Maggie, becomes a means of escape, especially when Tom is absent. But for the speaker of the poems, who does not narrate life after the two have been parted, the means of escape seems to be writing itself. The sonnets, the verses which record her memories, are a means of escaping back in time to the moments spent with her brother. Where as Maggie Tulliver is at the mercy of the narratives she reads, the speaker of the sonnets has complete control over the story she tells. Maggie’s voice is mediated, in the novel, by other characters as well as by the narrative voice of the novel itself. The sonnets radically depart from this subject position; the poems refuse other narratives and instead give unadulterated primacy to the sister’s thoughts, memories and longings.

Sonnet IV describes the freedom the little sister receives through her brother’s company. The brother provides access to the world outside of the home, and the surrounding lands impress themselves upon the sister’s young mind:

Our brown canal was endless to my thought;
And on its banks I sat in dreamy peace,
Unknowing how the good I loved was wrought,
Untroubled by the fear that it would cease. (VI; l. 1-4)

The canal, the firmament of daisies, the grassy mounds, moat rushes, waving grasses, and meadow paths lush with forget-me-nots, fill the sister’s memory (II-IV). All these, she tells us in the final couplet of sonnet III, “...made a happy strange solemnity/ A deep-toned chant from life

unknown to me” (l.13-14). The brother provides access to these out-of-doors places and, in the first quatrain of Sonnet III, their mother sends the two off together:

Our mother bade us keep the trodden ways,
Stroked down my tippet, set my brother’s frill,
Then with the benediction of her gaze
Clung to us lessening, and pursued us still

Across the homestead to the rookery elms (l.1-5)

Like the basket she prepares for them in sonnet II, the mother’s gaze sanctions the adventures of the children. The sister revels in this once-had freedom that was both expected by others and encouraged. Desire is permitted and accepted through the familial structure. The desire the sister feels is not a childhood fantasy, but a longing encouraged by the familial configuration.

Sonnet V, however, marks a turn in the sequence. This poem describes how the relationship between the siblings shaped and formed the two young children. Their relationship “schooled” them in the ways of “fear,” “love,” and “primal passionate store.”

Thus rambling we were schooled in deepest lore,
And learned the meanings that give words a soul,
The fear, the love, the primal passionate store,
Whose shaping impulses make manhood whole.

Those hours were seed to all my after good;
My infant gladness, through eye, ear, and touch,
Took easily as warmth a various food

To nourish the sweet skill of loving much.

For who in age shall roam the earth and find

Reasons for loving that will strike out love

With sudden rod from the hard year-pressed mind?

Were reasons sown as thick as stars above,

‘Tis love must see them, as the eye sees light:

Day is but Number to the darkened sight. (V; 1.1-14)

The relationship between the two “schools” them both and their childhood “rambling[s]” provide them with their earliest lessons in life. The amatory tradition is strong in this sonnet – the speaker ponders how those hours spent with her brother taught her the “sweet skill of loving much” and shaped her understanding of the “primal passionate store.” In her letters, Eliot lauded the brother/sister relationship suggesting that “life might be so enriched if that relation were made the most of, as one of the highest forms of friendship” (Porter 383).¹⁶ Critics note, though, that the fear of incest was not far behind the face of the poems.¹⁷ While the brother-sister relationship is the “model for heterosexual relations” the relationship is a “complex interaction, full of desire and sublimation” (Gruner 445).

¹⁶ Eliot writes this in a letter to John Blackwood in 23 April 1873.

¹⁷ In her article, Gruner follows the trajectory and impact of the “Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill” which was debate in Parliament from 1835-1907. The bill, Gruner argues, “exemplify[ied] the broader cultural anxieties over the positions of women and the family in the period and demonstrate[s] the Victorian elevation of the brother-sister bond” (424). The bill made it illegal for a husband to marry his wife’s sister in the event of his wife’s death. The law stated that to marry the sister-in-law was to commit incest because the sister of the wife had become, at the moment of matrimony, the sister of the husband. The bill “offers an unparalleled glimpse of the ways Victorian culture dealt with female sexuality and suggests as well the origins of some abiding present-day anxieties about family and incest” (425).

As Gruner notes, “Within the fantasy of the sibling relationship, Eliot invents and articulates female desire in the sonnets: desire for power, identification, and autonomy, mediated through memory and connection” (423). Gruner places emphasis on the fantasy of the relationship, and the sonnets are filled with a nostalgia for childhood, those days before what Eliot phrases as her “hard year-pressed mind” (V;l.11). Gruner’s argument only further supports my claims that the poems are a site for working through female desire. However, while she points out anxiety over brother/sister incest, I want to emphasize the brother/sister relationship as one of sanctioned intimacy. While the incest taboo might forbid sexual intimacy, the childhood bond is still a site of emotional intimacy and desire that is encouraged, as evidenced by the mother of the poem. While Eliot may try to elide the sensuousness of the language in her poems by suggesting that these feelings of passion and love arose before an age of sexuality, the sonnets are also composed to mimic the longing and desiring speaker of the amatory tradition. The love object for Eliot is unattainable because he is only a memory. Moreover, the overt desire for the love of her brother is rendered taboo by the onset of adult sexuality, and with it, the threat of incest.

While the majority of the poems recount only the sister’s affection and passion, sonnets IX and X suggest that the brother learned as much about love as she did: “His years with others must the sweeter be,” the speaker says, “For those brief days he spent in loving me” (IX; l. 13-4). His interaction with her has prepared him for his future relationships, his future marriage. Loving her is figured as the practice space for his learning to love others. If the relationship is supposed to help in the formation of a good heterosexual future, then the poems are not as kind to the sister as to the brother. He grows to have relationships with others while she longs for the days they spent together. He progresses while she reminisces. In this way the sonnet sequence,

and its ability to return to and meditate upon a topic again and again, only underscores the sister's stunted growth. The sonnets do not portray a *bildungsroman*, instead the poems continually return to the same moment in time. In these poems the hesitation and return of queer time, suggest a refusal to enter into the heteronormative marriage plot and, instead, to relish the brother/sister love.

For the sister her world is shaped into being through her interaction with her brother. His "sorrow" is her "sorrow" and his "joy" hers too:

His sorrow was my sorrow, and his joy
Sent little leaps and laughs through all my frame;
My doll seemed lifeless and no girlish toy
Had any reason when my brother came.

I knelt with him at marbles, marked his fling
Cut the ringed stem and make the apple drop,
Or watched him winding close the spiral string
That looped the orbits of the humming top.

Grasped by such fellowship my vagrant thought
Ceased with dream-fruit dream-wishes to fulfil;
My aëry-picturing fantasy was taught
Subjection to the harder, truer skill

That seeks with deeds to grave a thought-tracked line,

And by “What is,” “What will be” to define. (X; l.1-14)

This sonnet plays out most overtly the strange movement of time within the poems. Here the encounters of the brother and sister are in past tense. The sister gives up her doll for the company of her brother. This poem chronicles the moment of disappointment in the amatory sonnets. Up until now the sister has enjoyed the love of her brother and the unencumbered company of him, but at this moment it changes. Her “aëry-picturing fantasy” is no longer sustainable and it is “taught/Subjection to the harder, truer skill.” For the sister, her desires no longer matter instead the “truer skill” bursts those fantasies with linear logic: “That seeks with deeds to grave a thought-tracked line,/ And by ‘What is,’ ‘What will be’ to define.” The future perfect tense of the line, “what will be,” is defined by the reality of “what is,” despite the desires of the speaker. At this moment the tone of the sonnets closely echoes those unrequited desires of Petrarch and Sydney. Desire, as strong as it might be, cannot define the future. In the case of the sister of Eliot’s poems, the happy childhood companionship of brother and sister must come to an end.

The last sonnet parts the two happy children. Knowledge, the institutionally sanctioned separation of “school,” comes between the two. While it is school that parts the pair in the sonnets, “school” seems to stand in for what will ultimately separate their happy union: adulthood, adult sexuality and, moreover, marriage. School, for the sonnets, intervenes before the children are old enough for marriage to split them. Nevertheless, their separation is final:

School parted us; we never found again

That childish world where our two spirits mingled

Like scents from varying roses that remain

One sweetness, nor can evermore be singled.

Yet the twin habit of that early time
Lingered for long about the heart and tongue:
We had been natives of one happy clime
And its dear accent to our utterance clung.

Till the dire years whose awful name is Change
Had grasped our souls still yearning in divorce,
And pitiless shaped them in two forms that range
Two elements which sever their life's course.

But were another childhood-world my share,
I would be born a little sister there. (XI; l.1-14)

The sister rejects her own future as a wife or mother, but instead imagines that, if reincarnated, she would choose to be a "little sister." While the poem is nostalgic for little-sisterhood because of its possible unencumbered fantasy life and uncomplicated union, the poem is strangely worded. The two suffer not just a separation of their "two souls," but Eliot frames it as "divorce." Change, a veiled and but symbolic force of the world comes and finalizes the split, "Till the dire years whose awful name is Change/ Had grasped our souls still yearning in divorce,/ And pitiless shaped them in two forms that range/ Two elements which sever their life's course" (l. 9-12). In the sonnets, separation from the brother is a divorce; the sister has been trained to understand herself in relation to her brother and the separation from him is tantamount to a breach of their "life's course."

The poems allow for the sister to live, grow up, and compose these poems looking back on the years spent with the brother. In the novelistic counterpart to the poems, the siblings suffer a much different fate. In the final pages of *The Mill on the Floss*, the flood rises as the siblings cling to a tiny boat:

“It is coming, Maggie!” Tom said, in a deep hoarse voice, loosing the oars, and clasping her.

The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water—and the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph. But soon the keep of the boat reappeared, a black speck on the golden water.

The boat reappeared—but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together. (521)

In the novel, the sister and brother send eternity together, in an “embrace never to be parted,” but the cost of such continued intimacy is death. Maggie and Tom die together in the flood. The novel’s final words are also the epitaph written upon the shared tombstone of brother and sister: ““In their deaths they were not divided”” (522).¹⁸

While the novel allows for the brother and sister to stay together forever, the poems require that the brother and sister grow up and be parted. The poems call on *Paradise Lost* in their last verse, longing for the time of intimacy: “Yet the twin habit of that early time/ Lingered for long about the heart and tongue:/ We had been natives of one happy clime/ And its dear accent to our utterance clung” (XI; 1.5-8). The Edenic time of childhood—now lost forever—is

¹⁸ Interestingly, the words Eliot chooses for the tombstone are taken from 2 Samuel 1:23 (n529) and spoken by King David upon the notification of the death of Jonathan and Saul. Often read for its homoerotic undertones, the story of David and Jonathan, as well the father/son Jonathan and Saul celebrate the homosocial bonds of men.

an “utterance,” an act of language. Perhaps the poems are commenting on their own poetic construction, suggesting that only through a sonnet sequence can the story of their love be told. Unable to end the novel with the marriage of the brother and sister, Eliot marries the two in the afterlife (“in their deaths they were not divided”). For the poems, however, the amatory tradition records the lost beloved in a recognizable poetic form complete with desire and longing. If the brother and sister are figured as “two forms than range/ Two elements which sever their life’s course” (l.11-2), then the poems grant that form legibility within the amatory tradition; in the sonnet sequence their love story can be told.

Augusta Webster’s “Mother and Daughter”

Augusta Webster’s sonnet sequence “Mother and Daughter” was composed between 1881 and 1886, but was only posthumously published in 1895. Like Eliot’s poems, the sequence is composed of sonnets suggestive of the amatory tradition. While Eliot charts the love of a brother and sister, an opposite-sex, childhood love story, Webster’s charts an intimacy of a slightly different sort. Her poems chronicle the love between a parent and a child. Laura Linker writes of Webster that her sequence, “...responds to earlier revisions of the poet’s relationship to the muse in sonnets by women writers” (52-3). Written in the *fin de siècle*, Webster’s sequence is part of the influx of sonnet sequences written after Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The House of Life*.

Generally overlooked by critics, Webster’s poems have come back into critical attention through their resemblance to DGR’s sequence. In *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Late Victorian Sonnet Sequence*, John Holmes argues that Webster was inspired by DGR’s metaphors of procreation and birth, and Marianne Van Remoortel’s article “Metaphor and Maternity” also places the two in conversation, reading Webster’s articulations of motherhood against DGR’s

metaphors which liken maternity to poetic inspiration. Finally, in her chapter “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Poetic Daughters,” Florence Boos looks at Webster in the context of other *fin de siècle* women writers and suggests that her poems are “in a rough progression from celebrations of her daughter’s unqualified trust to expressions of sympathy and solidarity with mothers whose children have died, regret that the simplicity and immediacy of the parental bond must diminish with age, and bleak reflections on ultimate death” (263-4). Webster, as Boos says, has an

...experimental sonnet sequence [which] reflected an idiosyncratic personal mixture of skepticism and ardent attachment, as well as careful study of Shakespeare, Barrett Browning’s ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ and Rossetti’s *The House of Life*. But she too drew on a common store of elegiac images for her more heterodox and independent meditations on broken attachment and generational loss. (266)

Boos points out that the tradition Webster works in is a composite one. She draws on amatory sequences, like those by DGR, EBB and Shakespeare, as well as invoking Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets*. Indeed what Boos gestures towards, but does not overtly state, is the way that Webster’s sequence is invested in continuing the long tradition of poetry about desire and longing.

Read in conjunction with Eliot and Christina Rossetti, Webster’s twenty-seven sonnets attempt again to articulate a particularly female position of desire as figured through familial bonds. Virginia Blain writes that the sequence is “unique in its celebration of maternal same-sex love within the classical format of traditional heterosexual romantic love... yet it goes a step further in its appropriation of [this] category” (*Victorian Women Poets* 11). While most critics focus on the mother/child bond as a way of exploring the reproductive possibilities of motherhood and the metaphors of creativity at play there, I want to locate in the poems the

language of intimacy and desire as they relate to the revision of the amatory tradition and the articulation of female desire. Instead of locating them in the tradition of DGR, however, I want to place them alongside the other poems of familial love to suggest the use of sanctioned domestic intimacy to explore ideas and problems of desire and love.

By and large, Webster's poems have been read in conjunction with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and indeed it is the Rossetti family to which Webster was indebted for the publication of her poems. A close friend of Webster, William Michael Rossetti, the elder brother of Christina and Dante Gabriel, oversaw the posthumous publication of the sonnet sequence. In the volume he added his own introduction, in which he praised Webster for her maternal sensibilities as well as for her combination of both feminine and masculine senses:

...Nothing certainly could be more genuine than these Sonnets. A Mother is expressing her love for a Daughter—her reminiscences, anxieties, and hopeful anticipations. The theme is as beautiful and natural a one as any poetess could select, uniting, in the warm clasp of the domestic affections, something of those olden favourites, *The Pleasures of Memory* and *The Pleasures of Hope*.¹⁹ It seems a little surprising that Mrs. Webster had not been forestalled—and to the best of my knowledge she never *was* forestalled—in such a treatment. But some of the poetesses have not been Mothers.

Mrs. Webster's reputation rests securely upon several volumes of verse—highly remarkable verse, at once feminine and in a right sense masculine... (12-3)

WMR's emphasis on the "naturalness" of the poet's subject hints that the poems are unexpected in their treatment of motherhood, and his assertion that "Mrs. Webster had not been forestalled"

¹⁹ Poems by Romantic poets Samuel Rogers and Thomas Campbell, respectively.

intimates that the poetic project was new, as yet untreated by other poets. He also hints at Webster's biographical link to the sonnets, suggesting only through her own experience as a mother could she compose these poems.²⁰ While WMR wants to emphasize Webster's maternal love as the source of her poetic inspiration, I argue that the poems themselves are part of the amatory tradition, inspired by love poems of the past.

The poems begin with a contemplation of the beauty of the daughter of the poems. Sonnets I-III all recount the child's lovely features. In the first poem it is the music of the voice of the daughter.

Young laughters, and my music! Aye till now
The voice can reach no blending minors near;
'Tis the bird's trill because the spring is here
And spring means trilling on a blossomy bough;
'Tis the spring joy that has no why or how,
But sees the sun and hopes not nor can fear—
Spring is so sweet and spring seems all the year.
Dear voice, the first-come birds but trill as thou.

Oh music of my heart, be thus for long:
Too soon the spring bird learns the later song;
Too soon a sadder sweetness slays content;
Too soon! There comes new light on onward day,

²⁰ Webster did only have one daughter to whom she devoted her self.

There comes new perfume o'er a rosier way:

Comes not again the young spring joy that went. (I; 1.1-14)

The child's laughter is music for the mother's ear. That music, she states, is as beautiful as the bird's song of imminent spring. Her little voice is like those "first-come birds," full of hope and absent of fear.

The sestet meditates on her beauty turning from the laughter/song to the mother's own mortality and the child's approaching maturity. The speaker/mother wishes that the sweet hopeful music could last, but also realizes the inevitable "later song," the "new light on onward day," is impending. While the verse ends on a melancholic note, "comes not again the young spring joy that went," the following sonnet returns to the joyous tone of the octave. Sonnet II is a blazon of the daughter, the octave contemplating how beautiful the daughter is to the mother followed by the careful description of the child's body in the sestet. The octave defends the speaker's position to describe her daughter. The daughter is not simply beautiful to the mother's eyes, but she is praised frequently by others and her beauty catches passing "questing eyes":

That she is beautiful is not delight,

As some think mothers joy, by pride of her,

To witness questing eyes caught prisoner

And hear her praised the livelong dancing night;

But the glad impulse that makes painters sight

Bids me note her and grow the happier;

And love that finds me as her worshipper

Reveals me each best loveliness aright. (II; 1.1-8)

The end of the octave returns to the mother's love in order to assert herself as the "worshipper" of her as an art object. Indeed the sonnet inverts the Pygmalion myth to place the daughter in the position of the love object and statute and the mother as the artist who created her and who now worships her. Bonnie J. Robinson also notes this allusion stating she is, "a baby Pygmalion...collude[ing] with her mother to return her to the stasis of Galatea—without male intercession" (5). The poem then likens the daughter to an art object crafted out of love by an artistic genius, her mother.

Webster's poem takes the story of love and artistic inspiration and finishes the poems with a blazon to the daughter's body:

Oh goddess head! Oh innocent brave eyes!
Oh curved and parted lips where smiles are rare
And sweetness ever! Oh smooth shadowy hair
Gathered around the silence of her brow!
Child, I'd needs love thy beauty strangerwise:
And oh the beauty of it, being thou! (II; 1.9-14)

The child's features are almost statuesque in their description. The "curved and parted lips" lack animation and the hair on her head is "gathered around the silence of her brow." The poem delights in her beautiful form and desires only to "worship" there. The unusual wording, "strangerwise," suggests both a familiarity and difference in the "beauty" of the "being." Reminiscent of the statue crafted and loved by Pygmalion, the child is both alienated and related to the mother.

The delight in sonnet II gives way to a more anxious tone in sonnets X and XI. These two poems, *Love's Counterfeit* and *Love's Mourner*, are the only individually titled poems in the

sequence. Their titles alone, as Marianne Van Remoortel suggests, places them in conversation with *The House of Life*. The two sonnets make up a kind of small grouping within the larger sequence. Both poems deal with the interference of heterosexual love, a love to which the mother/daughter bond presents an alternate structure. *Love's Counterfeit* draws strongly on Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, using the idea of the counterfeit manuscript as a way of understanding a bond with the daughter.

Not Love, not Love, that worn and footsore thrall
Who, crowned with withered buds and leaves gone dry,
Plods in his chains to follow one passed by,
Guerdoned with only tears himself lets fall.
Love is asleep and smiling in his pall,
And this that wears his shape and will not die
Was once his comrade shadow, Memory—
His shadow that now stands for him in all.

And there are those who, hurrying on past reach,
See the dim follower and laugh, content,
“Lo, Love pursues me, go where'er I will!”
Yet, longer gazing, some may half beseech,
“This *must* be Love that wears his features still:

Or else when was the moment that Love went?” (X; l. 1-6)

The speaker mourns for the days of Love because all she has now are the shadow, or memory, of those moments with Love. The sestet meditates on the easy confusion of Memory with Love.

She imagines it as a scene where hurrying people think they are being followed by Love, only to look more closely to find Love has gone and only Memory remains. But the moment when Love leaves and memory takes its place, is lost. “When was the moment that Love went?” (l.14) warns the reader to be vigilant and present lest Love leave him/her too.

The poem draws on early modern concerns with counterfeits and the concern with “shadow” in Webster’s poem recalls that in Shakespeare’s sonnet 53. He also interrogates the counterfeit only, in this poem, the counterfeit is the beloved, not love itself:

What is your substance, whereof are you made
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you; (53; l.1-14)²¹

For Shakespeare, Adonis—the beautiful mythical boy—is a counterfeit of the poet’s love. In other words, Shakespeare’s love object is more beautiful than any other, even a mythical boy. Webster changes this amatory metaphor which praises the beloved’s beauty in order to take as the object of counterfeit the temporary intimacy of the connection with the child (it is not the child’s beautiful body). For Webster’s poems the counterfeit of love is love’s memory. The

²¹ The poem continues:

On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new:
Speak of the spring and foison of the year;
The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
The other as your bounty doth appear;
And you in every blessed shape we know.
In all external grace you have some part,
But you like none, none you, for constant heart (53; l.7-14)

poem suggests that their love, their passionate and intimate connection, will fade.²² And for Webster the entrance of the memory of love, as opposed to the love in the present, is cause for the poem's melancholy. Similar to Eliot's longing for childhood days spent together, Webster's poems anticipate the separation of the lover and beloved. The poems dread the ultimate separation of mother and daughter, lover and beloved. The sonnets suggest that because their intimate bond will be replaced with another (marriage), the speakers of the poems—the sister and the mother—lament the structures which will ultimately displace their intimate bonds.

In the subsequent sonnet, *Love's Mourner*, the speaker contemplates the difference between women's love and men's love. This poem hints at what will be the event that will cause love to become memory. It is the entrance of adult heterosexuality that ends the mother/daughter bond. The octave contemplates why men call love "women's love," suggesting that it is but "dear patient madness retold," "grief" known by another name:

'Tis men who say that through all hurt and pain
The woman's love, wife's, mother's, still will hold,
And breathes the sweeter and will more unfold
For winds that tear it, and the sorrowful rain.
So in a thousand voices has the strain
Of this dear patient madness been retold,
That men call woman's love. Ah! they are bold,
Naming for love that grief which *does* remain.

²² This is not that unusual. Webster simply replaces the amatory trope of beauty—which fears the beloved's beauty will fade away—with the trope of present love and memory. The metaphor, however, still works similarly. In both time is the cruel interloper who steals beauty to replace it with age and, for Webster, steals love to replace it with the memory of love.

Love faints that looks on baseness face to face:
Love pardons all; but by the pardonings dies,
With a fresh wound of each pierced through the breast.
And there stand pityingly in Love's void place
Kindness of household wont familiar-wise,
And faith to Love—faith to our dead at rest. (1-14)

Webster tackles speech by men which address “woman’s love, wife’s, mother’s.” Their portrayal, she indicates, is “bold” and mistaken. Instead of reading the selfless love of a wife/mother as cause for celebration of their stoic martyrdom, she terms it a “dear patient madness.” That madness stems from the impending separation of mother and child. Resembling Eliot, who mourns the separation of brother and sister, Webster’s speaker knows some other lover will interrupt her time with her daughter. The mother/child bond is rendered only temporary and the poems suggest adult heterosexuality will eventually intercede.

Sonnet XIII meditates on the power of her song within the daughter’s heart when confronted with another lover:

My darling scarce thinks music sweet save mine:
‘Tis that she does but love me more than hear.
She’ll not believe my voice to stranger ear
Is merely measure to the note and line;
“Not so,” she says; “Thou hast a secret thine:
The others’ singing ‘s only rich, or clear,
But something in thy tones brings music near;
As though thy song could search me and divine.” (1.1-8)

The octave, in the voice of the mother, muses on how the child believes that her mother's song is sweeter than other music. The poem is a kind of meta-sonnet. The mother's music is the set of verses composed in "Mother and Daughter;" these poems are treasured by the young daughter who refuses to believe that to others they are "merely measure to the note and line" (4). The daughter, given voice in the second quatrain of the octave, argues that it is the mother's song which best moves her "But something in *thy* tones brings music near;/ As though *thy* song could search me and divine" (l.7-8) (emphasis added). The daughter believes it is the mother who sings best, loves best, and knows best; however, the poem knows that this phase will end. In the sestet the mother contemplates how her old age will come between her and the daughter. She also hints that the entrance of a lover who will also write the daughter love poems, and whose voice will ultimately upstage her own:

Oh voice of mine that in some day not far
Time, the strong creditor, will call his debt,
Will dull—and even to her—will rasp and mar,
Sing Time asleep because of her regret,
Be twice thy life the thing her fancies are,
Thou echo to the self she knows not yet. (l. 9-14)

Time will dull the mother's voice, but what she hopes is that life will be twice what "her fancies are," giving to her an even greater happiness than the mother can imagine. What is haunting about the verse, however, is the mother's sacrifice. She hopes to make a deal with Time so that, while she fades away, the daughter will continue. The mother's voice will be absorbed, now only an "echo to the self she knows not yet" (l.14).

In the penultimate sonnet tackles the issue of courtship and marriage. Here, she imagines her love for her daughter as like that between a suitor and his beloved, only better:

Of my one pearl so much more joy I gain
As he that to his sole desire is sworn,
Indifferent what women more were born,
And if she loved him not all love were vain,
Gains more, because of her—yea, through all pain,
All love and sorrows, were they two forlorn—
Than whoso happiest in the lands of morn
Mingles his heart amid a wifely train. (XXVI; l.1-8)

The octave of the poem explores this metaphor of love and passion between two betrothed. The speaker imagines herself like a young man who finds out that the woman he loves, loves him in return: “And if she loved him not all love were vain.” This marriage, of equal love and equal pain, is akin to the love for her daughter. The poem is highly eroticized; the daughter is her “one pearl” and the “passion” of “maternity” threatens to wash away all in its path. The sestet concludes, drawing out the comparison and marveling at how the bond between mother and daughter is even more precious, stronger and set out by heaven than that of the bride and groom:

Oh! Child and mother, darling! Mother and child!
And who but we? We, darling, paired alone?
Thou hast all thy mother; thou art all my own.
That passion of maternity which sweeps
Tideless ‘neath where the heaven of thee hath smiled
Has but one channel, therefore infinite deeps. (XXVI; l. 9-14)

Webster suggests that the power of her bond with the daughter will fade with the daughter's entrance into adulthood. The poems attempt to forestall this by making the argument that their love is just as deep, just as important as that of marriage. Sadly, however, the verses acknowledge their separation and the mother/speaker realizes that, even with eventual marriage and separation, the daughter and mother have a bond of "infinite deeps." Eliot and Webster's speaker know that their intimacy is finite, but they desire it anyway.

Van Remoortel states, "For the speaker-as-mother, the return to silence marks the ultimate triumph of maternal love over heterosexual love" (483). She argues that the return to a pre-linguistic connection marks the deepness of the mother/child bond as compared to the eventual heterosexual union she imagines for her daughter. Van Remoortel's argument is compelling noting that, in sonnet XXIII the poem suggests that it is a representation of the beating heart:

Oh heart can hear heart's sense in senseless nought,

And heart that's sure of heart has little speech.

What shall it tell? The other knows its thought.

What shall one doubt or question or beseech

Who is assured and knows and, unbesought,

Possesses the dear trust that each gives each. (l. 9-14)

Her argument about the sestet is that, "Through repetition, words empty themselves of meaning, until only the pulsation of the iambic pentameters remains, like the beating of the heart mentioned in the text" (483). Moreover, the repetition of the words as well as the sounds of repetition internally (hear/heart, sense/senseless) suggest a relationship which is rooted in shared similarity. It does seem true that all that is left in the stanza is the beating heart suggested by

Van Remoortel, but that heart is itself symbolic of the shared blood. It is the same heart; the poem in its repetition and reiteration emphasizes sameness. The mother and child share the same blood and the same heart. The final lines from sonnet XXVI hint at this deep binding blood. Read again, the tides and the “one channel” of “infinite deeps” suggests a connectedness that is eternal and irrevocable:

That passion of maternity which sweeps
Tideless ‘neath where the heaven of thee hath smiled
Has but one channel, therefore infinite deeps. (XXVI; l. 9-14)

Familial bonds, bonds of blood and flesh, trump the exogamous bond to some other lover. Though destined to be replaced with sanctioned heterosexual relationships, familial desire and love is that which these sonnets long to return to, long to relive, and finally compose in verse.

Conclusion: Family and Poetic Inspiration

Eliot, Rossetti and Webster all use children and familial bonds as vehicles for exploring passion, desire and longing. While Webster and Eliot call on the tradition of amatory poetics as a form through which to explore these concepts, Rossetti works through a different poetic form. What all three have in common, however, is the image of the child as a site different from that of adult sexuality and therefore able to be used as a way to explore female desire. All three poets use amatory tropes to investigate familial intimacy and its powerful erotics. Also common to all three poets is the way that familial bonds provide ways of exploring poetic inspiration and creative processes. The sonnet tradition has been recast as a not only domestic, but as reproductive—poetically.

In *Goblin Market*, Laura and Lizzie's ordeal is retold, in verse, to their children. For the narrative of the poem, the tale of the goblin men becomes part of an oral tradition passed on between mother and child. The tale is told in the form of a mini-poem recited by CR's Lizzie at the end of *Goblin Market*. It is the culmination of the entire verse: "For there is no friend like a sister,/ In calm or stormy weather,/ To cheer one on the tedious way,/ To fetch one if one goes astray,/ To lift one if one totters down,/ To strengthen whilst one stands" (l.562-7). In Eliot's poems, the speaker credits those days spent with her brother as those which inspired writing for the rest of her life.

Those long days measured by my little feet
Had chronicles which yield me many a text;
Where irony still finds an image meet
Of full-grown judgments in this world perplex. (VII; l. 1-4)

Eliot's poem lays bare the influence of the brother on her life. The stanza is full of the language of versification—"measure," "feet," "chronicles," and "text"—and hints not just at the poems themselves as text, but also at the novel also inspired by a brother/sister relationship. Webster too dabbles with language of creativity, using the occasion of motherhood to also muse about the "birth" of poetic projects.

Finally, Eliot and Rossetti look to relationships between children as the fertile grounds of the imagination from which they will later reap stories and poems and Webster's speaker uses her bond with her daughter as a direct analogy for her work. She creates the daughter in much the same way that she creates her poems and plays—her child is likened to the Pygmalion myth. However, Webster is not the only *fin de siècle* women writer to explore this idea. In Mathilde

Blind's poem "Motherhood," from *Songs and Sonnets* (1893), the metaphor of birth mixes with that of bodily ecstasy and poetic inspirations.²³

From out the front of being, undefiled,
A life hath been upheaved with struggle and pain;
Safe in her arms a mother holds again
That dearest miracle—a new-born child.
To moans of anguish terrible and wild—
As shrieks the night-wind through an ill-shut pane—
Pure heaven succeeds; and after fiery strain
Victorious woman smiles serenely mild.

Yea, shall she not rejoice, shall not her frame
Thrill with a mystic rapture! At this birth,
The soul now kindled by her vital flame
May it not prove a gift of priceless worth?
Some saviour of his kind whose starry fame
Shall bring a brightness to the darkened earth. (l.1-14)

Blind's sonnet suggests the convergence of female and maternal power. While the octave recounts the pain of childbirth, the final line finds the mother at peace, "serenely mild," and the sestet recounts her "victorious" labor. She is filled with "mystic rapture" and is responsible for the "soul now kindled by her vital flame." Interestingly, Blind herself had no children and instead she uses the moment of birth to explore what Florence Boos calls a "hopeful tribute to

²³ Florence Boos writes that Blind was close with both the Rossetti family and with the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In her 1893 volume she composed 33 sonnets in the tradition of *The House of Life* (259).

the literal matrix of human evolution” (258). Boos suggests that Blind’s “secularization of a traditionally religious subject and skillful uses of astral and generative imagery also suggest Rossettian sacralizations of *eros* and regeneration, but her central focus in the poem was quite remote for his erotic preoccupations in *The House of Life*” (259). Indeed, Blind’s poem is wholly vastly different from the erotics of *The House of Life*.

Instead this poem, like Webster’s, Christina Rossetti’s and Eliot’s, focuses on articulating the relational aspect of the scene. What is different for Blind, however, is the separation of the poem’s interrogation of intimacy and the poet’s own biography. Nevertheless the poem suggests that the bond of the nuclear family is a powerful nexus for exploring the connection of desire, eroticism and intimacy to the art of poetry, particularly for Victorian women. The little room of the sonnet provides the space in which to reevaluate domestic intimacy.

CHAPTER V

Radical Domestic: Michael Field and *Whym Chow, Flame of Love*

This dissertation has considered the place of intimacy and its representation through the poetic form of the sonnet sequence. In my chapter on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I explored the ways in which biography blinds us to the queer possibilities of her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. While I choose to separate EBB from the speaker in her poems in order to articulate the queer possibilities of the poems themselves, I imagine a slightly different yet parallel approach to the poet Michael Field. Poets, playwrights, lovers, and devoted pet owners, “Michael Field” was the pen name of aunt and niece, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper.¹ Extraordinary in many ways, the pair forged a literary and a personal bond which pushed the limits of Victorian propriety. Their familial connection, their lesbian love and their collaborative writing style radically revises the idea of a heteronormative couple like EBB and RB. However, in ways similar to EBB and RB, the biographical background of Michael Field serves to uphold a kind of reading of the pair.

¹Holly Laird argues for an understanding of their identities as socially based on their personal nicknames: Even when they composed separately, they did so under the signature of Michael Field (Cooper wrote *Poems of Adoration* and Bradley wrote *Mystic Trees* almost entirely). They referred to themselves not only publicly but privately as Michael and Field. While they played with various nicknames for each other, Michael Field retained its preferred status as their “poet’s” name. Michael Field was split between the two: Cooper first acquired the nicknames of both Henry and Field, then Bradley took on the name Michael. Thus they divided one name between the two of them: one Michael, the other Field. But they also shared the same surname, joining themselves in a happily married, albeit now entirely male couple, “Michael and Henry Field.” Friends called them “the Fields.” (115)

Michael Field: Adventures in Intimacy

This chapter, however, looks closely at Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper's later lives and writings in order to try and flesh out both the radical possibilities of their poetry as well as its investment in the norms of the Victorian domesticity. This negotiation between queer and normative makes the Fields' poetry and journals particularly rich for exploring understandings of intimacy. In this chapter, I am most interested in exploring their deep ambivalence—what I call their radical domestic—as a way to reimagine Victorian queerness.

Marion Thain argues that Michael Field's pseudonym came from "the women's private articulation of their lesbian identity" (*Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin De Siècle* 4). She suggests that the name came from the combination of their nicknames, "Katharine was known amongst her friends as Michael, and Edith was Field or Henry... The use of their pet names as part of their public face indicates how the poetry is inextricably linked to the Field's personal life and their relationship" (4). This understanding, that the choice of male nicknames (evocative of their lesbian relationship) played a role in the public artistic persona they presented through Michael Field, suggests that the couple sought to push the bounds of Victorian conceptions. However, Carolyn Dever, in "Modern' Love and the Proto-Post-Victorian" offers a mediating stance, arguing that: "As Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper had always put to use one persistent if contested logic of Victorian marriage: the subordination of women's personhood to a male social identity" (374). The "persistent if contested" position of the normative within the relationship of Michael Field is exactly what I am interested in exploring; this is the tension between upholding a Victorian ideal of marital bonding while also making it queer.²

²In addition to this slice of the debate in criticism about why Michael Field chose to publish under a pseudonym is the argument that, as women, the two would have been given very little thought. Thain has a thorough discussion of the gendered politics as they relate to the Victorian woman writer, which she lays out in her essay as well as the feminist critical responses to these ideologies (see *MF and Poetic*

Michael Field proclaimed that they were to be “Poets and Lovers evermore.”³ United in each other and in their continued devotion to their art, keeping the world at bay was not as easy as it seemed. In her article “Contradictory Legacies,” Holly Laird seeks to delineate Cooper and Bradley’s relationship in terms of Victorian norms. She recounts an exchange with Robert Browning in which the poet objected when he thought Cooper and Bradley defied “social conventions.” Bradley quickly responded that while they did not want to be “stifled” by social expectations, nonetheless, Laird continues, “they had *no* desire to challenge the ‘customs’ and ‘beliefs’ of men” (120) (see *W&D* 7-8). They did not see themselves as radicals who sought to overthrow social expectations, but they were not going to be held back by them. Instead, from their letters and jointly composed journal entitled *Works and Days*, it seems Cooper and Bradley were deeply ambivalent, both desiring a quiet domesticity together even as they longed for fame and literary renown.

Michael Field published 27 closet dramas, eight volumes of poetry and a masque. In addition, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper wrote countless letters and jointly composed 26 journals. The pair had a history of developing an intimate bond with a third person which influenced their work and, at times, divided their passions. Once the protégés of Robert Browning, John Ruskin, and then the art critic Bernard Berenson, Michael Field was not unaccustomed to negotiating through a third presence. In 1898, their partnership was again expanded to include a new third. Only this interlocutor, this new poetic muse, would be the last in their lifetimes and, perhaps, became the most significant for their understanding of their later

Identity, pp 20-25). Specifically, she cites a letter Katharine wrote to Robert Browning on 23 November 1884 which reads:

The report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn [...] we have many things to say that the world will not tolerate from a woman’s lips. We must be free as dramatists to work out in the open air of nature... we cannot be stifled in drawing-room conventionalities. (*W&D* 6) (as cited in Thain 6)

³ from “It was deep April” in *Underneath the Bough* (1888)

lives and work. Moreover, he was, perhaps, and was the most unusual of all their interlocutors. This triangulation inspired their final volume of poetry and, as a subject, wholly overtook their jointly kept journals. It is in this joint journal, entitled *Works and Days*, that Katharine Bradley's excited scrawl at the beginning of 1898 records the arrival of Whym Chow:

Friday evening, January 28th, Whym Chow arrived—a duske sable—a wolf with civilization's softness, an oriental with muskey passion—white rolling eyeballs, the power of inward frenzy—velvet mariners and little savages of eastern armies behind.
(11) (*sic*)⁴

This new muse was a dog; a small chow who instantly won their hearts and passions.⁵ While the notion of writing about a dog with such passion and devotion seems almost laughable, the Fields present Whym Chow in their journals with the utmost sincerity. I endeavor to take him as seriously as the Fields did in order to better understand his role in their poetic persona. Whym Chow, who lived until 1906, invigorated Michael Field and consoled them. His life and eventual death catalyzed the sequence of poems collected in *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* (1914) and even figured in the pair's decision to convert to Catholicism. On the brink of a new century, Whym Chow became a way for Michael Field to negotiate new Modernities of art while also holding onto Victorian ideals of domesticity and intimacy. The poems of *Whym Chow, Flame of Love*, exhibit Katharine's and Edith's understanding of intimacy as something which can exist beyond the dyadic bond of their marriage, even while upholding a fantasy of the domestic home. I argue that by reading the poems as rising out of amatory tradition, we see them as something more than mere eulogy for the lost dog. *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* explodes the form of the sonnet—

⁴ *Works and Days* is held in the British Library, London. Pages are recorded as written in the journals themselves (denoting *verso*).

⁵ At the time of the entry of his arrival, Katharine had already composed a poem to the little dog which is recorded in Edith's writing just above this notice of his "muskey passion." The poem is recorded in the next section (1898;10v)

breaking its bounds even while drawing on the form and the poetic tradition of the amatory sequence.

While the volume is not comprised of strict sonnets, it finds its origins in the form. The women's first poems to Whym Chow appear as individual sonnets in an earlier volume. "The Longer Allegiance" was published in their 1908 volume *Wild Honey*. This poem is most likely the one which, later, Katharine would slip into Whym Chow's coffin and it straddles the functions of sonnet as amatory, sonnet as memorial and sonnet as devotional/ meditational.⁶ The Chow stands at the center of the convergence of these literary tropes, becoming a kind of fulcrum of poetic union as well as of the women's connection with each other. This formulation results in multiple triangulations of love and poetic production. Chow, represented by his furry paw, stands in as muse, as saintly attribute and as art itself:

Nay , thou art my eternal attribute:
Not as Saint Agnes in loose arms her lamb,—
The very essence of the thing I am:
And, as the lion, at Saint Jerome's suit,
Stood ever at his right hand, scanning mute
The hollows of the fountainous earth, whence swam,
Emergent from the welter, sire and dam:
While Jerome with no knowledge of the brute
Beside him, wrote of later times, of curse,
Bloodshed, and bitter exile, verse on verse
Murmuring above the manuscript [in awe

⁶ The Fields meld the devotional sonnet and the amatory sonnet together. Moreover, the volume *Whym Chow* evokes Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in its eulogy for the lost dog.

The lion watched his lord, the Vulgate grew],

So it was wont to be betwixt us two—

How still thou lay'st deep-nosing on thy paw! (l.1-14)

Beginning as a typical Italian sonnet, the poem starts with an octave which praises Chow and melds the idea of the dog as a saintly attribute—an identifying element like Anges's lamb—and as a muse—the source of artistic inspiration. But Chow is also much, much more: “The very essence of the thing I am,” they write, as well as the vigilant overseer of Michael Field's poetry/prophecies. Like St. Jerome's lion, Chow watches the process of writing, guarding and protecting it as well as inspiring it. The poem is odd in its analogous positioning of the domestic pet as an eternal and mythical beast, but what is even more strange is the melding of figures in the poem: “[in awe/ The lion watched his lord, the Vulgate grew],/ So it was wont to be betwixt us two—/How still thou lay'st deep-nosing on thy paw!” The lines do not distinguish between the lion/dog and the two poets. Who are the ‘two’ in “Betwixt us two”? One imagines the dog lying between the two women as they write, or, possibly, the two women are imagined as one poet making the “two” simply the composite of the poet/lord and his dog. This sliding referent, “two,” is symptomatic of what I locate as the Michael Fields' articulation of a kind of intimacy which breaks free of dyadic bonding.

I suggest that the Fields are toying with ways of imagining subjectivity and intimacy. I do not intend to make any kind of claim of sexual acts, but instead want to revisit the institution of marriage and its sanctioning of dyadic bonding, to interrogate the relationship between these two women and the dog. Just a few of the questions that a reading such as this raises are: Is the dog a child? Does he stand in for a deity that they worship together? Does he mediate their relationship like a priest does for man and god? Is he a muse that inspires the writers Michael

Field? In a sense, the answer to all of the questions is “Yes,” in part because the writings of Michael Field return again and again to the theme of triangulation. Whym Chow is all of these things and more, according to the Fields. In her essay “Contradictory Legacies,” Holly Laird writes of the Fields’ marriage and their adoption of Whym Chow as a child-substitute:

Later, after they set up house together, they became attached to a dog, Whym Chow, for whom they felt as passionately as for a child. For the Fields, several familial relationships were simultaneously available and surely productive of complex kinds of friction. As open as they were about their mutual love, they were as markedly discreet about possible inequalities or irritating differences dividing them. They eventually hedged all this within the walls of a firmly monogamous “marriage,” living a quiet and carefully structured domestic life together. (120)

Laird suggests there is a “friction” which is at play in Michael Field, but she also suggests that that friction was contained “within the walls of a firmly monogamous ‘marriage.’” While I build on the work laid out by Laird, I argue that Whym Chow’s entrance into their lives inspired, in their poetry, a desire to imagine intimacy as not just bound by “marriage” between two. Instead the poems depart from dyadic bonding to allow for the entrance of a third interlocutor. This is not a full departure from marriage or its connotations of domesticity: instead, I argue that the poems and the poets promote a kind of radical domesticity. They embrace the heteronormative even as they expand and queer it.

It is because of this problematic structuring of radical domesticity that I want to suggest a third kind of reading of Michael Field, a reading in which the pair negotiate both convention and revision. Where I think we see this best is in the way the volume *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* shifts both in subject, and in form. The original sonnet to Whym Chow, “The Longer

Allegiance,” and the amatory tradition of poetry inform the volume, though the poems are not sonnets. In *Flame of Love*, the 30 poems range in length from six to eighty-eight lines. The sonnet’s literary history, however, lends itself to the Fields’ project of memorializing Chow as well as meditating upon their desire for Chow’s daily presence, and desire for each other (Bradley/Cooper) as mediated through Chow. Michael Field continues the amatory tradition by exploring desire and longing, but they explode the sonnet as a form. This reformulation of the amatory sonnet sequence seems only possible, however, because the form had been so firmly reestablished through the work of EBB, Meredith, the Rossetti’s as well as Eliot, Webster and others. Michael Field revises the Victorian revision of the amatory sonnet sequence. This kind of multivalence and polyphony is exactly what occurs see in the slippage of signifiers and the signified at the end of “The Longer Allegiance”—the troubling ‘betwixt’ and ‘two.’

Death and Triangulation

1897 had been a cruel year to Edith and Katharine and they had felt their relationship strained and tested by death and grief. “I suppose,” continues Bradley in the entry on Whym Chow’s arrival in 1898, “our new love of animals is a desire to get into another Kingdom—we reach after the Kingdom of the dead—we can penetrate into the Kingdom of animals [...] we seek companionship we can determine” (11). Death was fresh in the memories of both women; Whym Chow’s arrival came only months after the death of James Cooper, Edith’s father and Katharine’s brother-in-law. His disappearance in the Alps and the delayed recovery of the corpse took a toll on the two women. Their anxiety at his vanishing and then their grief at his death left them stressed, frail, and increasingly isolated. Chow provided a “companionship [they could] determine.” Their obsession and devotion solidified in his first few days in their.

Katharine exclaimed: “As for his religion, it is me. I can be a good god to anyone who loves me. He is infinitely beautiful” (1898; 12). Just after the entry which marks Chow’s arrival there is a poem. The poem is written in Edith Cooper’s hand, though it begins with “Michael Scribbles,” suggesting it is Bradley who originally composed the verse:

A Dog’s Sigh

Wee, wild-hearted, thou dost lie

Fast asleep—

That thy span, thou soon must die,

But I feel that thou will keep

Hard upon my soul for age

And this faith is founded deep

In the wonder of thy sigh:

For such sighing doth transcend

Life that ever can have end—

And I only can remit

The sore wrong, the pain of it. (1898;10v)

Beginning with three stressed syllables—”Wee, wild-hearted”— the poem recalls the Old English tradition stressing alliteration and composing the line with a medial caesurae. The stresses of “Wee wild-hearted” are also suggestive of an epic tradition which would praise a warrior. Instead of an epic poem, however, it is a short verse which meditates on that breath which gives life to the pup and which also inspires awe in the poet, “the wonder of thy sigh.” The poem already expresses worry about the death of Chow, even while he is a puppy. Mortality

was on the Michael Fields' minds and not even this new breath of life, this puppy, could wholly distract them.

The composition and entry of the poem into the joint journal is suggestive of the text of the journal as a whole. The poem, written by Michael, but entered by Henry is an indicator that the journal itself is a text which the two women consciously composed, entering and including some things, while leaving others out. Because of its crafted artifice, I suggest reading the journals as performative, possibly even as performative as the Fields' poetry itself. I turn to the journals before I focus fully in the volume of poetry, *Whym Chow, Flame of Love*, because I want to make an argument about the representation of death and marriage within the Fields' journal, *Works and Days*. The way the two choose to represent the role of (Edith's father) James Cooper's death in their own relationship and in their poetic visions, seems key to understanding the role of Whym Chow in their later work.

As in each of my chapters, the poetry I examine is biographically linked to the authors' lives. While, in my first chapter, I refused biography as essential to reading *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, I allow it to seep into my subsequent chapters. In this way the interplay of biography in Michael Field's work acts as a sort of bookend to that expressed in the first chapter. Whereas I tried to suspend EBB's biography as I read the text, I allow the biography of the Fields to frame my discussion of *Whym Chow*. Through *Works and Days*, I weave in parts of the Fields lives.⁷ What makes this reading so different, however, is that I do not allow the journals to suggest a kind of "truth" about the experience of the Fields. Instead, I read the journals as just as performative as the poems themselves. Crafted and woven together, the journal does not

⁷ I could imagine a reading of EBB in which her letters were also used to help better understand the *Sonnets*, however, this type of reading would only be useful if those letters were read as at least as performative as the sonnets themselves. Crafted and created by the poet, the letters would have to be refused a primacy of "truth."

explain the poetic works of the Fields, but instead allows for a textual interplay between the two genres of literary work.

In 1897 James Cooper and Amy Cooper, Edith's father and sister, were vacationing in Switzerland while Edith and Katharine took their own vacation to the Continent and enjoyed their time alone in England. In June, though, Edith and Katharine record that they received a telegram from Amy reading: "Am afraid father had met with an accident" (Donoghue 94) (1897; 76). In mid-July, Katharine and Edith traveled to Zermatt, Switzerland to aid in the search for James Cooper. Newspapers frequently reported the story, calling it the "Zermatt Mystery" (1897; 130v) and Edith and Katharine feared kidnapping or murder. An official police inquiry was opened and the two women worked alongside the consul, searching for signs and clues to James' whereabouts. In Zermatt, the two hired a guide with the goal of retracing James' steps and, hopefully, recovering his body. Katharine describes the work and their interaction with the police and their guide as "A day of hornets to our brains" (1897; 81v). The stress, as Edith records, slowly pushed them apart:

Sunday July 18th

We have had a terrible night: we are too much out of joint to be able to climb up to the Schwartzer See. Michael sobs and cannot eat and wildly straightens our room—there is the estrangement of grief between us. (1887; 87)⁸

In an attempt to repair their frayed nerves and their strained relationship, the journal recounts how Edith spread a scarf out on their couch. On it is printed a dancing "Bacchic bear" which makes Michael laugh and eases the tension (1897; 87). Edith's entry also records how they have begun to understand the death of James through literary metaphor: "The death of our Beloved

⁸ Throughout the journals the two women use pet names for one another. Katharine is referred to as Michael and Edith as Henry, Hennie or Field. It is also not uncommon for the two to use male pronouns when referring to one another.

was Sophoclean” (1897; 87). This move to understand James’ disappearance in literary terms is an attempt to provide a narrative of his death, a story for his disappearance.

Though they took many walks, they yielded no clues to James’ demise until, on Sunday, June 18th the two were arrested by a premonition:

About five in the afternoon we stroll up the village to meet Franz [their guide] and take him to the Gorges. Franz is not there. Michael is moved to say “Let us go a little way along the Schwartzer See Route.”⁹ “Yes” I add “to Zmutt Bridge.” Here we find a precipitous sheer over the guarding stream, a bridge that is treachery itself. Deep spiritual conviction, deeper than the witness of a dream, comes to us both—this is the spot. We shudder as we see—we feel for a moment the hideousness of that dread form... who has its lair in these Gates of Many guests—that horrid aspect of Death, the untamable horror of its portals... the rocks are so fierce, the stream so steep in its velocity. But all change, if sudden, must be a wrench—and our beloved could but have known a second’s cruelty. We see so clearly now how it all happened (1897; 87v-88) (*underlining in original text*)

Katharine and Edith’s conviction does not only ease their nerves and bring comfort, but it begins to restore their deep connection. In the journal, they record that the idea comes “to them both” and reunites them in a single vision. The journal during this period seems almost gothic in its description of steep mountain trails, mysterious disappearances and foreign lands and people.¹⁰

⁹ According to maps of Zermatt, I think this should be “Schwarzsee,” but I have left it spelled as they have it written in *Works and Days*.

¹⁰ In his book *Gothic Writing, 1750-1820: A Genealogy*, Robert Miles writes in his Introduction entitled “What is Gothic?” that the Gothic is marked by two influential models:

...Gothic writing is ‘disjunctive,’ fragmentary, inchoate, so that, as in the case of fantasy, theory is required to sound the Gothic’s deep structure in order to render the surface froth comprehensible. Second, the very repetitiousness of Gothic writing is regarded as mysteriously

Indeed, the Fields seem to draw from a kind of gothic imagination which lingers over the death and finds respite and rekindled affection in its aftermath. For Michael Field death ignites a need for reimagining their relationship. Cooper's death is neither the first nor the last. For my purposes, James's death, followed by the death of Whym Chow, and finally the death of Edith Cooper, are important for the changing understanding of intimacy in the Michael Fields' later lives. I want to link the portrayal of James Cooper's death to the portrayal of Whym Chow's death in 1906 and Edith's in 1914 in order to see how the Michael Fields use death as a moment to re-imagine and refigure their poetic persona and working relationship.

Since Katharine and Edith are now convinced of the place and details of James' death, the entry in the journal moves quickly to sublimate Cooper's death into the literary landscape of Michael Field. Death becomes a poem, a tragedy, something the two know how to compose together:

He is gone bravely—his going, if a tragedy, yet a poem; he has passed with life at his heart, resolution in his will, a yearning for his beloved making him glad. Round his death there is the privacy of the unknown, the glory of the perfect. For us Poets there is a deeply recognizable providence in these vital circumstances.

We confide him to our Rhone with benediction and with praise. May we die as solemnly and with beauty that has touched his end! (1897; 88v)

There is little in this passage to remember James' actual relationship to the two, only the rhetoric of bravery, literature and "us Poets." Just after this is copied a stanza from Shelly's "Adonis"

eloquent: in its inarticulate way, Gothic worries over a problem stirring within the foundations of the self" (1)

He then goes on to say that "the Gothic is a discursive site, a carnivalesque mode for representations of the fragmented subject" (4).

and then a discussion of how to bury the absent corpse. Again the literary comes into play and the two feel they must, like Antigone, symbolically cover the body of their loved one with dirt.

Last Monday at dawn, after I had been assured about the Zmutt's Bridge, I heard my spirit command that Michael's voice must mingle with the torrent's and the service for the Burial of the Dead be spoken for him. We know now the hour is come.

Shaken with tears, Michael reads the solemn earlier part at our bank; then, where the swirl of the stream is most unbridled, we stand together and throw clods of sweet earth, bound with thyme, into the midst. [...]

The inspiration of this moment cleanses us from the fear of his murder; we are solemnized beyond where dread can touch us. We may doubt and have fear again, but our conviction will not be taken away. (1887; 92v-93)

As they portray it, this funeral of sorts brings the women together in a collective action of eulogy and feeling of inspiration. This ceremony was written and performed by them and allows for at least a moment of unity in spirit. Though their resolve that they have solved the Zermatt Mystery is unshakable, Edith writes that she begins to feel bad omens are signaling a return of divisiveness to their relationship. Recorded in Edith's handwriting, *Works and Days* tells of the accidental ignition of Katharine's match case (a present from Edith) and Edith's lost scissors (a present from Katharine). These unfortunate incidents, however, are given narrative significance. In their recently refortified relationship, Edith demands that no ill fates will drive them apart again. She wants something to emblemize their devotion; they need a new metaphor for their union. But the object of such power is yet to be determined:

Afternoon—We go out to bring a little life into us by buying a few things. First of all we fill the beautiful little horn match box I gave Michael the other day with Lucifers.

We shut the lid and with the sound of blasting on the Gomergrat Railway, my little cadeau¹¹ is in flames and a ruin within. To Michael it is a distress mixed with augury—or is it the Spirits protesting in the heavens against a little cigarette? We lose heart for the shops and try a walk with Franz—it begins to rain saddest Alpine rain. Love grows ill with pure discouragement. [...] While one is in this state and I in alarm I recollect that she gave me some scissors at Berne. Something must be done to overcome these omens effectively. But what? I can but help the light-headedness away by making tea in the night and drinking it with Michael, softly talking. (1897; 95v-96)

Building a narrative suspense within the journal, Edith wonders, “But what?” How can the two emblemize their relationship, their newfound oneness of mind?

What they decide will banish these omens are new gifts: rings which they will use to bind their hearts and lives together in a ceremony on the side of the mountain. These rings promise a newly reinforced union of their hearts and minds. In short, they chose to marry themselves:

Brave assured sunlight. While I write to the Consul, Michael goes out and sees a ring of warm broad gold in the depths of which a sapphire grows blue or darkens like a mountain lake. The ring is almost a wedding-ring, yet something beyond. Here is the cadeau, the chain of love that will bind us together in spite of fire and scissors. I go to secure it and then my love insists I shall try some rings. They say nothing on my finger till at last a brilliant [one] takes possession. He cost £10...it is paid and the glorious chain of love and beauty is mine to bind me to my Love. But we do not give the rings

¹¹ French for “gift.”

to each other—that must be done by the Matterhorn Bridge. We are quite gay and eat little Madeline-cakes. (96)

The rings are “yet something beyond” mere wedding bands. Edith and Katharine had previously claimed that their devotion exceeded the bounds of marital love as they knew it writing in 1889 of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning that “those two poets, man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another at their work; *we are closer married*” (*W&D* 16). What seems radical about the two is that they imagined themselves as better than a heterosexual couple. It seems as though the Fields draw on a kind of Platonic view of soul mates, in that they imagine that they are a single person made up of two. In Plato’s *Symposium* he suggests that human beings were split in two by the gods. This may be the reason that the Michael Fields feel they are better suited than EBB and RB; by Platonic logic they two are more suited to one another. Holly Laird suggests that:

In this context, their marriage may seem less “open” or “defiant” than safe, keeping them from external notice, from intrusions and complicating interactions with others, and even from the ambiguities of their relations to each other. To raise their relationship as an ideal, or model, of lesbian relationship is not to advocate asexual romance, but it is to advocate single, domestic partnership. Theirs was not a life of outward social activism; despite their college feminism, for the most part they enclosed their personally lived differences in a world of their own and in their masked poetry. (120-1)

Laird points out the negotiation between social radicalism and domestic norms. Michael Field, while they seem outwardly radically different from the Victorian norm, strive, in many ways, to uphold a kind of domestic norm.

As recorded in the journal, the two wait to give one another their rings, they take them to the mountain where they were united in the premonition of James' death. A little off from the spot where they spilled dirt to signify his burial, they exchanged the rings and bound themselves to one another. Edith records the marriage ceremony in *Works and Days*.¹² The ceremony seems as much to place James firmly in the grave as it does to remind them of their united love for one another in grief. The ceremony reenacts much of James' ceremonial burial in part because this is where the two last felt connected in a deep everlasting way. The wedding ceremony seems less about performing their marriage over the dead body of James-as-obstacle, but instead to return to the site of their unification of mind and spirit:

Grass-hoppers pelt about exorbitantly – and ascend the opposite fields and gain the opposite forest, going along it on little paths of the most delighting charm. We want to gain the Matterhorn Bridge and give each other our rings, but we say to Franz the Zermatt bridge and he marches us half-way to Staffel and then to the last bridge before the Zmutt glacier, spanning a profound cleft. We had to return all along the opposite side through meadows and by stony tracks, cruel, cruel. When at last we are at the Matterhorn Bridge we dismiss Franz and go to our mead by the torrent where we read the Burial –service for him, but not to that spot. We sit down, our feet buried in sweet willow-herb and there plight the troth of our fresh life together—a life that springs from the deep tragedy we shared from its brim to its hollow—we who love him, whom he loved with such peculiar passion—loving me that I loved Michael as he would have loved her. We cry out to our doom, that it may make Raoul all that tragedy should make him—that an autumn force may descend on the End of the

¹² Donoghue records this timeline differently in her biography of the poets. She suggests that the Fields married themselves after James' funeral, which will not occur until October (95).

Trilogy—and even on the waves of the torrent new inspiration may come to us.¹³

Then I pluck the willow herb in a bunch, we wash our rings in the Zmutt and suddenly Michael, filling her hand, drinks to him. That I cannot do—I feel it is the lover's right. We walk home in a unity of spirit. (96v-97)

The unity of spirit that the two women feel is amplified by their shared grief and their shared reverence for the dead. Even in their own marriage ceremony they cannot but feel connected to their writing and work, calling out to Raoul, a character from their play *Anna Ruina*. Their marriage is not, as it appears in the journals, a self-consciously radical ceremony. The two instead perform a ritual which binds them as much together as it binds them to their art and writing.¹⁴ Life and “inspiration” converge in the very union of their minds and hearts. In the front of this journal are dried, pressed willow herb collected at the site of their exchange and captioned with “Gathered by the Zmutt when we exchanged our rings” (1897; 3v).

A New Religion: From Whym Chow to Catholicism

Though Edith and Katharine marry, they find no sign of James while in Switzerland and return to England only to be recalled again in October. The body of James Cooper had been recovered by a mountain climber named Edward Whymper whom they had met while in Switzerland that summer. Pasted into their journal is clipping from newspapers declaring the “Zermatt Mystery” solved and “The Recovery of the Body of Mr. JR Cooper” (131v). James

¹³ Raoul is a character in *Anna Ruina*, one of the Michael Field's plays. He too dies a tragic death and Donoghue writes that “this haunting story was to seem prophetic to the Michaels” (94).

¹⁴ Laird goes onto argue:

But they sought, above all, an identity as “Poet.” Though not directed toward reform of particular social institutions (as was the verse of Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Augusta Webster), verse was nonetheless their outward field of social action, and the (wo)man of letters their public hero. If there is an identity theme to be traced in their writing, that theme most persistently and explicitly is the name of poet and tragedian, their quest the aesthete's self-conscious quest for literary fame.(20-1)

had indeed been found, but three hours from Zermatt—not at all where the Michael Fields had imagined his demise.

Edith and Katharine make another grueling journey to Switzerland to identify James and properly bury him. The trip is exhausting and the trial of death strains them again. Edith is newly distraught: “The mystery is as deep as ever—it will be hard to keep the mind from haunting, haunting...but the mystery has no future in it, no anxiety, and in the name of life we must strive to cease asking, when it may not be given us, seeking, where we may not find” (138v). After a funeral in a small church at Zermatt, they leave directions on how to maintain James’ grave site and then return to England. *Works and Days* records that the journey was hard and frustrating; at one point the two write that they became furious because photos of the corpse had been released to the public. They were grief-stricken and embarrassed. However, at the turn of the New Year they will have their Whym Chow.

The two women had a history of domesticated pets. In a letter from John Ruskin to Katharine Bradley in 1877, he admonished her for “losing” God:

Your letter telling me you have lost your God and found a Skye Terrier is a great grief and amazement to me. I thought so much better of you. What do you mean? That you are resolved to receive only good at God’s hands, and not evil? Send me word clearly what has happened to you—then perhaps I will let you talk of your dogs and books.

Ever faithfully yours,

J.R. (*W&D* 155)

Ruskin’s seems almost comical—“you have lost your God and found a Skye Terrier”—but his outrage was echoed by other friends of Michael Field were also bewildered by the place of these

creatures in the hearts and home of the women. Even in 1877 Ruskin suggested that Bradley's artistic work was somehow linked to her domesticated pets by agreeing to let her "talk of [her] dogs and books" if she would explain to him her blasphemy. Years after the Skye Terrier, Bradley and Cooper together acquired a basset hound called Musico, which came to the women after they traveled to Zermatt only to return without recovering James Cooper's body. In the journals, Edith records that the dog and her new wedding ring from Katharine are her dearest joys:

When we come in from our walk a letter from Amy tells that the Basset is coming!
That beloved One of mine has asked Dan to get my chose kind of dog to be at home
to cheer the return. What a divine forethought of beauty, of tenderness. My
"Musico" and my diamond are inseparable joys—belonging to this one day forever.
(1897; 97-97v)

The dog and her wedding ring are symbols of a happy domestic life. Jennifer Mason's book *Civilized Creatures* argues that domesticated pets were, to those in the nineteenth century, an indicator of "good moral character and, in particular, a person's ability to care well for others" (14).¹⁵ Suggesting this was a firmly middle class endeavor, she goes on to argue that domesticated pets, like dogs, showed a "commitment to the affective priorities of home life rather than the economic principalities of the market" and as such can be useful for showing connection between human beings as triangulated through the animal (14-15). The Bassett is a gift from Cooper's younger sister and comforts the two upon their arrival in England from their trials in Switzerland. Less than one year later, Whym Chow quickly superseded the hound in the hearts of Edith and Katharine.

¹⁵ Mason's argument is almost entirely about America in the 19th century, but her claims ring true for the Fields as well.

On Palm Sunday of 1898, Edith records a kind of still life in words including herself, the décor of her favored writing room, and the chow, “I am alone in the study with the golden Chow at soft oriental stretched on the couch opposite [...], devoted eyes on me. ...I adore Whym Chow” (14). She continues, describing how the Chow functions as a part of her domestic landscape, both as a living being and also as an art object in his many photographs and prints.

—I admire and love my noble Basset hound Musico (both registered in the Kennel Gazette) but Musico is sensitive without fellow-feeling, cumbersome, pining, (he has the spot dog’s little unhappy whistle) and in spite of his superb plasticity, he is unexpressive to emotions. Whym Chow is yellow fire throughout there is some white clay in Musico’s soul—and his ears will split. Robinson of Redhill has done some wonderful heads of Whym—one great Vignette hangs opposite our bed. We have the furry sweet in seven different pictures. At the same time my love has given me pictures of herself—one with Whym is perfect in solemn protectiveness to the little creature and beyond him to all her Beloved few... to Henry, to the thought of the dead, left to the living in trust.¹⁶ It stands under Whympers’ great photograph of the way up the Vale to Zermatt—it has the same gravity of tone and light on the brow like snow—celestialness that shines over the unseen Weishorn. This comes where Zermatt Valley and the pictures of the Chow hang round that grave face with its lofty tenderness, a little remote, cheers up our loves as they now are—at every moment our dogs claiming the care of our hands the watchfulness the admiration of our eyes, the service of our feet—and always behind us thought of that Valley of the Shadow of Death, those clinging forests and magnificence of air above them in the spaces

¹⁶ See the photo in Donoghue’s *We Are Michael Field*, p.141.

between the mountains and round their forms. Two other pictures of my Love in her black satin evening dress have quality. One is a noble head out of characteristic pose but Byronic in effect; the other a three-quarter face of sweet composure and full of sorrow's charm that Keats knew about. (1898; 14v-15)

Chow is a fixture in their landscape—his image in the house hold proliferates and even the photograph of his namesake, Edward Whymper, suddenly becomes yet another iteration of Chow. His form as captured in photographs reminds them of their love as well as their love as turned into art objects. Even while alive the house was a shrine to him and to their love and art through him. Again, Mason suggests that animals provided useful conduits for human emotion. Mason argues that pictures of owners and their pets, such as the one described by Edith, were very common in the nineteenth-century. The picture in which Katharine stands in an affectionate stance with Whym Chow can be read as a substitute for some other beloved. In this case it seems like Chow, in the portrait, stands in for Edith so that the picture is really evocative of the loving embrace of Edith and Katharine through the photographed Chow and Katharine. Chow stands in for Edith in the picture where she could not be photographed.¹⁷ However, a one-for-one substitution is not quite so easy when reading Michael Field and it seems equally possible that Katharine stands in for Edith with Chow, completing the possible triangulation.

Like the search for James, the eventual illness and death of Whym Chow frayed the writers' nerves and yet brought them together in a grief which they felt no one else could understand. Whym Chow was at once Edith and Katharine's pet, muse, child and spiritual guide. Shortly after his death Edith writes in their journal:

¹⁷ Mason describes a drawing of a child, a mother and a dog in which the mother holds an infant and the daughter pictured holds a dog. She argues that as the 19th century progresses "good parenting and good pet keeping became, in some contexts, nearly synonymous" (16). The little dog then stands in for the projected motherhood of the little girl. She is a good pet owner and one day will be a good mother.

I feel no-one can even be expected to understand our earthly loss—no one knows how lonely we are without human successors & in the world rejected from among our contemporaries as if accursed. We had but one devoted lover, spirit to spirit our Whym Chow; between us & him was “the first secret of the world” as Oscar says of love. (1906; 55)

Quoting from Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*, Edith imagines the two “without human successors.” Indeed Michael Field had no children to carry on the family, but the entry is complicated. Edith mourns not just the end of their family line but the end of a literary line as well. She imagines that no one of their contemporaries values their work; instead they are “rejected...as if accursed.” Whym Chow suddenly becomes not just a child substitute, but also the bearer of their artistic legacy. Indeed others read the Michael Fields books as crafted with care as children of the couple. In her 1921 biography, Mary Sturgeon writes:

Thus we may find, in [Michael Field’s] correspondence with Mr. Elkin Mathews [the publisher] about *Sight and Song* in 1892, one proof out of many which the poets’ career affords of their concern for the physical beauty of their books. They desired their children to be lovely in body as well as in spirit; and great was their care for format, decoration, binding, paper, and type: for colour, texture, quality, arrangement of letterpress, appearance of title-page, design of cover. In every detail there was rigorous discrimination: precise directions were given, often in an imperious tone; experiments were recommended; journeys of inspection were undertaken; certain things were chosen and certain others emphatically banned. (45-6)¹⁸

¹⁸I think that this suggests that books part of Michael Field’s domestic sphere and that they, therefore, created their books with the same intent and patient desire that they used to create their domicile.

Returning to the journal entry, Edith's allusion to Wilde's letter is also strange. Wilde wrote *De Profundis* as a letter to Lord Alfred Douglass. Unable to send the letter from prison, Wilde took it with him when he left and published a portion of it through Robbie Ross in 1905. Edith's use of Wilde's idea of the "first secret" seems particularly queer, given its author's history, yet she deploys the language of secret love not for Katharine—as Wilde does for Douglass—but to describe their relationship with Chow. The entry continues in Edith's handwriting:

I write this in the past only because I am writing of the life of sense—the life that love satisfies without making those dominant terrible demands of the life led by the spirit beyond the world of sense. There Whym Chow is a first secret—there he is our blessing, our Genius...but here, from the midst of influenza, not to have the comfort of him in the same state of being as one another, the comfort of his eyes, his sweetness [...] Instead, I look down over his grave where the sun is among the rose-sprays, lies in the head of Dionysus. So sad, so beneficent. (55v)

Little Whymmie, as they called him, held the poets together, triangulated their aging relationship and made it new again. Again turning to literary metaphor, Edith understands Whym Chow's absence through Wilde's words. At the time of the journal entry, Edith was ill with the flu and she misses the dog's comforting body. Moreover, this seems to be an extended lament about the future and what will survive their deaths.

What does survive is their writing. Almost immediately after the little dog's death, the two women began to write poems about him. They even tuck a poem into his casket. In Edith's writing, the furry corpse and extended burial are described at length:

Under his dark little chin a nest of wine-coloured Christmas roses, a few snow drops among them, the Bacchic ivy in strands around him. I gave him the best lock of my hair from its roots & one of my precious blue shells & his mistress dropped between his paws her fire-opal (he the fire, one true opal—both born in October) & we gave him her sonnet to him & words from her to him & the inscription

Whym Chow

Flame of Love

Born October 29th, 1897

At Rest January 28th, 1906

This is the poem with which I open, “The Longer Allegiance.” Included in *Wild Honey*, published only a few short months later, this sonnet was a way of sending Whym Chow with a piece of their art; more specifically with a piece of art inspired by the Chow himself. Their aestheticism is at work even in the preparation of the body, carefully winding it with ivy and roses, astute to color and form. The two bury him like a dear family member, including precious trinkets and locks of their hair.

At the close of the ceremony, which included Biblical passages, a poem by John Gray and William Morris, the two pour sacramental wine over the body:

Long I stroked the dearness I should never stroke again, bent the softest ears, caress the ruff—oh fondly, despairingly. & I cut a tuft or two to keep with me as pledge that my blessedness had been more than a dream—then Michael prayed in most wondrous words that my strained memory could not hold—but they were perfect in the beauty of their breath—they had the power of carrying oblation. (23v)

When Edith finally tears herself away from the little graveside, the “full-furred head, the soft furrowed ears,” she goes into the house to put the “tufts of hair into disinfectant” hoping to keep the reminder of their little pet forever.

While Whym Chow himself was worshipped by the two women and often referred to as a little god, Whym Chow’s death marks the kind of moment in the Michael Field’s lives that Catholicism enters. United in their love for Whym Chow, his death inspires in Edith a spiritual conversion which would divide the women’s relationship until their death. After the funeral, but before Edith quotes from Wilde’s text, Katharine’s handwriting breaks into *Works and Days*. The entry, entitled “Ash Wednesday” is cryptic in its topic. It reads:

Sex love revives, ideal Love sustains the world

Henry, alas, regards Life as incurable

Of our future I feel I must trust heaven to provide—He must mark it as he marks the dark seed in the earth [...] (1906; 42v)

Under the direction of the priest John Gray, Edith converts and her relationship with Katharine changes dramatically.

Exploding Forms: *Whym Chow* as a Poetic Project

The cryptic entry comes after a number of poems, all written in Katharine’s hand, that will find their way into the later volume *Whym Chow, Flame of Love*. As recorded in the journals the writing pair began the work for *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* in 1906 immediately after the death of Whym Chow, but the volume as a whole was not printed until 1914. *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* is composed of 30 poems, most of which are recorded in *Works and Days* shortly after the dog’s death. The poems meld pagan images and Greek myths with the language

of Biblical sacrifice and the Holy Trinity. In poem XXV (“I want you, little Love, not from the skies”) the images and metaphors recall those in the sonnet “The Longer Allegiance.”

I want you with the gold-set, fearful stress
With which you lived to your one blessedness.
A herald sure to your Beloved, her sign,
Her symbol, as the lion we see
Beside St. Jerome, or the wheel divine
Set by Egyptian Catharine goldenly...
Ever thy feet in fourfold trip with those
They move for; or thy body in repose.
Cast with a smack against the floor of pride
As a Knight clanged down by his lady’s side. (l.31-40)

Here the speaker longs for Chow as the Beloved’s “her sign/ Her symbol.” The poem, while it praises the little dog, longs for his presences in conjunction with the lost lover’s body. The final stanza calls for love and for the Chow, but only to reinforce that longing’s connection to the trinity of Katharine, Edith and Chow, who make up the “us” of the fantasy:

I want you in your thousand ways of love—
The rapture of your welcome, far above
What choral stars as the world rose to them
Gave in their dance of fire and light—
A welcome many moments could not stem,
That fell exhausted with Time’s cruel fight,
Fell down and slept. O little Chow, to see

These loved and perfect sights avouching thee,
Not far away, as visions may appear,
O apple of our eyes, but with us here! (l.51-60)

The poem melds grief for Chow's short time in earth with a similar sentiment for Edith. Again, though the poems were written before Edith's death, I argue that Katharine's publication of the poems after Edith's death resignifies them. At their publication they are both a memorial to Chow and to Edith, and the loss of Michael Field. In the penultimate stanza, the poetic voice calls out to Chow as though he is an Eastern god:

I want you in your great magnificence
Of Eastern calm, holding your rage in fence
Of roses and of jasmine and of grapes:
Or when in sun and wind you ran,
Flashing a joy to me such as escapes
From spirits of untameable, far span,
Who sometimes mingle in a poet's mirth,
Having such element of starry earth
In spell about them that their very eyes
Give and receive terrestrial sympathies. (l.41-50)

Mourning for Chow, in the poetic volume, is always mediated by mourning for Edith. In the journals Katharine suggests that the collection of poems is a labor of love for her departed intimates—Chow and Henry. The book is a reliquary for the lost bodies of the loved ones. In fact the volume is not printed until after Edith's death. Katharine oversees and collects the poems alone fashioning them into the volume. It becomes a reliquary for Katharine, a sacred

volume in which she houses Edith's memory. She writes in the journal, which she continued even after Edith's death, an entry about the volume of poems:

Jan 27th I have been preparing the Chow book—Hennie's from M.S.—not my beautiful parchment—for Pissairre. How we loved one another then—in 1906—the year before we entered the Catholic Church.¹⁹ Out with thy tablets, Truth!: we have never loved each other since, as then ... O little Hennie, how I have born the utmost of pain! The priests and the Church's set words, the rocking-infinity at Life and Death—might we not have rocked awhile on them together? How you loved me little Hennie in Chow! Break up the crusts! Show me how you love me now. We have loved so that all men have marveled; and yet – the Church severed us. “Whosoever loveth abideith in God.” (1914; 7, 7v)

Katharine, looking to mend what was severed, publishes love poems. Her entry suggests that the volume serves to bind the two back together, but to also rekindle an abiding faith in God through love.

If “The Longer Allegiance,” the sonnet to Chow published in *Wild Honey*, plays with pronouns in order to suggest the multiplicity of their referents, then the volume of *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* takes this play to a new level. The poems in the volume abandon any understanding of intimacy as dyadic in favor of a different kind of connection which spans the human/animal divide. Manipulating rhyme, line length, and poem length, these formal changes again underscore the subject as a reexamination of the construct of dyadic bonding as well as

¹⁹ The TS of *Poets and Painters* suggests that this is actually in reference to Ricketts not to Field. “Michael still lived, and one last characteristic quarrel with Painted was recorded in the journal” then there is a hand written footnote in *Poets and Painters* that reads: “This refers to Edith. It is noteworthy that in a letter to Shannon of October 1924 Ricketts mentions looking through this diaries and says that 1906 was a peak [?] year from them too.” (192) I am torn here—the TS of *PP* wants to make this not about Henry, but it seems like it is about Edith and Katharine's relationship, not Michael Field's relationship to the Painters.

ideas of individuality, authorship and subjectivity.²⁰ Joseph Phelan argues about the amatory tradition in the nineteenth century that, “The rediscovery of the Petrarchan sonnet was part of a broader rediscovery of alternative values and beliefs embedded within the literary tradition of Europe, and it provided a forum in which the subversive potential of these values could be explored in relative safety” (133). Moving easily between pronouns which suggest one, two and three interlocutors, poem III in *Flame of Love* calls out to the deceased Whym Chow, “Be our daemon, be/ Guardian-angel near/ To the cruel sphere/ Of our destiny” (l.15-18). This is a moment in which Edith and Katharine are exploring alternate, but also deeply embedded, beliefs about intimacy. Here, the first person plural is used and the triangulation of the dog, Edith and Katharine is clear. In other poems, however, like the first of the series, the first person overrides the collective voices of the women. The opening line of the volume as a whole reads: “I call along the Halls of Suffering” (l.1). In verse V, which is entitled “Trinity” the women seem to write in a kind of chorus, suggestive of two voices in a kind of unitary refrain:

I did not love him for myself alone:
I loved him that he loved my dearest love
Oh God, no blasphemy
It is to feel we loved in trinity...
So I possess this creature of Love’s flame,
So loving what I love he lives from me;
Not white, a thing of fire,
Of seraph-plumèd limbs and one desire,

²⁰ In fact they return to a more Petrarchan form of amatory poetics in that they place an emphasis on the fracturing of the whole. In Petrarch’s sonnets, the beloved shatters the lover into pieces again and again and here the Michael Fields imagine a kind of reversal of shattering—a reunion of broken parts—the coming back together of Chow, Katharine and Edith.

That is my heart's own, and shall ever be:

An animal—with aim

Thy Dove avers the same....

O symbol of our perfect union, strange

Unconscious Bearer of Love's interchange. (V;1-4, 10-18)

The verse has expanded from a sonnet to an eighteen-line lyric composed of two 9-line stanzas. More than losing the sonnet form, the poem also suggests a re-imagination of the women's love for one another. "So I possess this creature of Love's flame" seems like it refers to Whym Chow—as the title of the volume suggests—but the 'I' in the line, as well as the possessives, conceal any actual possession or individual. Indeed after Edith's death, Katharine did refer to her as her own "flame of love." In the journals, just after Edith's death, Katharine writes "the Church gave so many terms —But now, now surely she will love me again as in 'the Living Flame of Love.' How I have been wronged these 3 years, slighted and wronged" (1906; 8). Here Christ and Edith love in simultaneity. By 1914, Chow and Edith are inseparable as flames of love. The "One desire" and the "symbol" or "our perfect union strange" is either the union of the women themselves, or of their union with the dog—the verse makes it impossible to tell. In his essay "*To the Other: The Animal and Desire in Michael Field's Whym Chow*" David Banash suggests that "here the lovers reinvent and enact their passion through the mediating body of their beloved dog. In proximity to the animal Other, the Fields find a space of possibilities to transform themselves" (196). *Whym Chow* is an attempt to articulate something about their passion for one another, but Banash's suggestion that one can locate the "other" can be problematic in this set of poems. Instead *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* is a poetic project of transformation—of formal transformations and queer transformations which attempt to

reimagine a kind of connectedness and inter-subjectivity that transcends a typical model of dyadic bonding, or even triadic bonding, of self and other.²¹ This is especially problematic given that Katharine imagines the book's publication as a kind of tether to her beloved Edith across the spiritual divide. Despite Michael Field's desperate attempts to solidify their domestic space and marriage, *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* struggles with the domestic and the easy understanding of marriage or intimacy. The sliding referents within the poems are evocative of the tensions between Victorian norms of marriage and something which resists easy classification, something more queer.

The only poem which approaches the traditional sonnet comes almost half-way through the sequence. Verse XIII is entitled "My Cup" and though its 14 lines suggest a sonnet, the poem looks more like the imagist poems of the modernist poet H.D. than "The Longer Allegiance."

Chow , thou hast drunk the bitter cup—
Love unto death,
That makes love free and lifts it up
To heaven and its own breath:
So God gave death
To His Beloved, as we
Gave it to thee.

²¹*Whym Chow* is not original to Michael Field's poetry in its desire to voice a kind of different understanding of gender and interrelation. The volume *Long Ago* also works through this problem of intimacy and understanding, of empathetic appeal and integrated understanding and existence. Reading Michael Field's Sapphic fragments *Long Ago*, Yopi Prins looks specifically at their poem on Tiresias and writes to encapsulate the ever slipping understanding of sex and gender, self and other: "two women (Bradley and Cooper) writing as a man (Michael Field) writing as a woman (Sappho) who writes about a man (Tiresias) who was once a woman" (*Victorian Sappho* 92). In his book *Tiresian Poetics*, Ed Madden follows up Prins reading of this poem in order to suggest that the poet explores the ideas about shifting gender and sex.

Oh, 'twas a sacramental Cup—

Death given for Love!

We bade thy little spirit sup

With First and Last above,

When of our love

We made thee free

Eternally. (XIII; 1.1-14)

The turn—at the repetition of the title cup, “Oh, 'twas a sacramental Cup” moves the poem from the death of the dog to everlasting life. Figured through language of the Christian trinity as well as more pagan metaphors of triads and circles, and, even Socrates’ cup of hemlock, the poem collapses relationships of those involved.

In poem II, entitled “Intriot,” and included in the 1906 volume of *Works and Days*, the poetic voice summons images which recall the mountains of Zermatt. The rising waves and the “snow pushed towards land” both suggest the place on the Riffel Alp, by the banks of the river and in sight of the glacier, where the two women performed their marriage ceremony as well as their first burial of James Cooper. The tone of the poem closely reflects that of the journals from those days in the summer of 1897. There is fear and a pressing need for action of some sort:

O terror laid on all

The pulsing air, O heart

That riseth into waves that cannot fall!

One comes, not to depart!

What is it makes a tunnel of my hall?

Why can no echoes start?

Who cometh like the snow pushed toward a land?

Who cometh like the snow pushed toward a land?

What can the strange power be?

Not the whole mountain-frame of earth, nor band

Of the cold-swaying sea,

Nor yet the ages under Time's Command,

Gray in weird strength as he—

Not sky beyond the range of any star. (l. 1-14)

While the poem seems to suggest a sonnet here—fourteen lines—the verse as a whole resists breaking it into neat 14-line sections. It accomplishes that by repeating the last line from each stanza as the opening line of the next. I read this repetition of one line into the next stanza as mirroring the poem's call for death to spill over into life. The rhyme scheme reinforces the need for a connection between stanzas—it rhymes *abababc* and then the next stanza picks up with the final rhyme to create *cdcdcdde*. The rhymes come back again just like the poetic voice calls to the dead to come back again:

Not sky beyond the range of any star—

Nor all these fearful things

In unison like to this Presence are.

Oh, but the bosom clings

To breath, the eyes to light, while from afar,

As come almighty Kings,

Our dead comes back again, the dead, our dead.

The dead comes back again, the dead, our dead,

Brought through the passage in!

O Wonderment, extremity of dread!

No child, nay, none of kin,

No sovereign and no warrior: but instead

Of these, the awe they win,

O Chow, my little Love, thou art come home.

O Chow, my little Love, thou art come home.

No creature in more state

Dead to the haunts of life hath ever come.

And little Love, the great,

And mighty Power, nay, mightier than the dome

Beyond all stars, or than Time's hoariest date,

Or sea or the world's rock hath brought thee home (l.15-35)

The poem ends on "home," a place shattered by death. Possibly the volume itself is a kind of homecoming—a place where Michael Field and Whym Chow can still exist together.

Crossing the Divide of Death: Katharine's Quest for Edith's Soul

Along with the journals and letters of Michael Field, which are held in the British Library's archives, there is also a manuscript intended for, but never published and entitled *Poets*

and Painters.²² In an appendix to the volume chronicling the years 1906-1914, there is included “A Note on Michael Field” written by Charles Ricketts to Mary Sturgeon to aid her as she composed their biography. Ricketts account of Michael Field recalls their conversion to Catholicism. He writes:

Henry’s sister [Amy] had after her marriage become a Catholic, her life and death doubtless sowed the seeds of conversion. Henry’s conversion was worked out secretly, without the knowledge of her aunt who helplessly exclaimed when told “but this is terrible, it means that I too shall have to become a Catholic.” I was informed of their conversion about a year later by letter from Scotland and I admit that it enriched their daily lives and proved a source of infinite consolation when Henry became smitten with cancer.

With their conversion certain traces of bitterness and disappointment in Michael over the silence with which their work was received disappeared. With age she had grown less quick tempered, but less open to impression and to general interest. To the last Henry kept well in touch with the literature of the moment, though a constant study of religious literature reduced its quantity and perhaps modified its character. While Ricketts locates their conversion to Catholicism in their love for Edith’s sister Amy, the journal of 1906 seems much more interested in Whym Chow’s position in their conversion than Amy’s. Ricketts records, however, what the journals seem to confirm—that Edith’s conversion was secreted from Katharine and that Katharine felt it deeply divided their union. The 1914

²² The British Library catalogue description reads:

Journal entries by and correspondence between Ricketts and Shannon and 'Michael Field', illustrating their long friendship; 1892-1914...This material is drawn almost entirely from the Ricketts and Shannon Papers (Add. 58085-58118) and 'Works and Days' of 'Michael Field' (Add. 46776-46804). The compilation was intended to form a companion volume to *Works and Days*, ed. T. and D. C. Sturge Moore (1933), but was never published.

journal (kept singly by Katharine as Edith had died in 1913) continued in the exact format as the 26 preceding it. Katharine, herself now riddled with cancer, writes only 37 pages before she too dies, but those 37 pages are filled with continued devotion to Edith and to Whym Chow. “Henry! To walk for thee, to defend thee, my one Love! To write with thee” (1914; 3).

Katharine, knowing her death was to come soon, decided to publish the poems the two had written to their beloved Chow. Still using Michael Field as the pen name for the collection, she revisits the places they loved their Chow together before his death, before their conversion: “How God is blessing me to come again to our Rottingdean—to be greeted—to bid farewell. Our dear, dear Rottingdean—Chow’s Rottingdean!” she writes and then:

where Hennie and I left Chow’s little body buried in the Paragon Garden and we came in despair to Rottingdean and went sobbing all about Chow’s haunts—on to today—where I am alone save for the gentle tendence of Little Blue. My Hennie in the dark with God—I myself perhaps so near Death. (1914; 13)

The “Little Blue” to which she refers is her full-time nurse who brought much comfort in these last few months. Fearful of Henry being “in the dark” Michael strove to understand where her lover was in the afterlife so new to her in conversion. *Whym Chow, Flame of Love*, is not just a monument or reliquary for Edith, but also a volume in which Katharine can imagine her soul at rest, mingled with that of their dog.

Katharine pesters John Gray about the status of Edith’s soul and records a part of their conversation: “I open with my grief at the Church’s action—first speaking of the Loved as among the Angels, then after a few weeks in Purgatory. I tell him how this has checked me—and use the simile of Henry landing in Australia and enjoying the kangaroos...and Henry still tossing on an unknown sea. Michael, he says, you must accept this Paradox.” (1914; 29).

Katharine, desperate to imagine the landscape in which her beloved now resides, tries to get an answer from the church. The entry expresses that she is unable to make peace until she knows firmly that Edith is settled. She wants to know, like in “Introit,” whether the soul of her lover is yet at home. “Or sea or the world’s rock hath brought thee home” (II; 1.35) was the line she wrote for Whym Chow in the volume of poems, and now she wonders if Edith too has been brought home.

When the final version of *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* comes, Katharine records:

August 25th

Incredible!

I begin again, writing in a Park Farm parlour and my beloved Father Vincent is Prior of Hawkesyard, and the Pope is dead and Europe seething in blood. On August 5th England declared war. That night I returned from Liphook there’s a little book Chow bound that fills in some details between now and the operative [...] It is my duty now to write in the big year book of the big events (34)

The “little book Chow bound” is the limited printing of *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* covered in a suede reminiscent of the pup’s fur. The book could not have come at a better time. Within a month and a day Katharine would be dead. In the last few months of her life, WWI had broken out and Katharine, bewildered by the ordeal and its interruption to her art, records little about it other than it is a horror.

“Outside of our art we are not living at all”

Writing about one’s pet is not a new subject for Victorian poets. Indeed as Virginia Woolf made famous in her novel *Flush* (1933), Elizabeth Barrett Browning too wrote about her

dog. A cocker spaniel named Flush, EBB, like Michael Field, composed sonnets to him. In the most famous one, entitled “Flush or Faunus,” she envisions a dog also as a muse and as a present absence in her writing:

You see this dog; it was but yesterday
I mused forgetful of his presence here,
Till thought on thought drew downward tear on tear:
When from the pillow where wet-cheeked I lay
A head as hairy as Faunus thrust its way
Right sudden against my face, two golden-clear
Great eyes astonished mine, a drooping ear
Did flap me on either cheek to dry the spray!
I started first as some Arcadian
Amazed by god in ghostly twilight grove:
But as the bearded vision closelier ran
My tears off, I knew Flush, and rose above
Surprise and sadness, – thanking the true PAN
Who by low creatures leads to heights of love. (1850)(l.1 -14)

EBB’s Flush is, like Whym Chow, deeply embedded in the scene of the domestic. The dog interrupts her weeping on her pillow and brightens her mood. Flush teaches EBB to love the poem argues that through “low creatures” only can we be lead to “heights of love.” What changes in *Whym Chow, Flame of Love*, however, is that for EBB there is an easy delineation between canine and human. The dog has a position as a low creature that, nevertheless, helps his

mistress to great things, but the dog is interchangeable only with creatures in Greek myth. For Michael Field the line between human and animal, between poets and muse is much more blurry.

The Michael Fields, in their very existence, were an extraordinary case of negotiated identity and intimacy. At one point in *Works and Days*, Katharine Bradley exclaimed: “With horror I recognize that outside of our art we are not living at all” (1892)(71). While Katharine’s horror itself is multivalent—how does she recognize it? What’s horrific?— I suggest that for these poems in particular, Michael Field uses the text as a place to explore poetic convention as well as press against the boundaries of what counts as intimacy and marriage and individual identity and familial relationships. In Walter Besant’s 1892 article “On Literary Collaboration,” he observes of *fin de siècle* collaborations reach their limit “when there is need of profound meditation, of solemn self-interrogation, or of lofty imagination” (203).²³ For Michael Field, however, the opposite seems true. At a moment of “profound meditation” and “self-interrogation” the women’s form shatters limits and their revising and coauthoring negotiates what counts as the self. For Michael Field, *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* imagines the existence of “I” even while it destroys the fantasy of individual identity or poetic voice.

²³ As cited in Yopis Prins’s chapter “Sappho Doubled: Michael Field” (75).

CONCLUSION

Re-contextualizing Tennyson's Metaphors of Marriage

Turning to perhaps the most famous of all Victorian poems, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* holds an integral place in the history of poetic production during the nineteenth century. Even while it is not a sequence of sonnets or even a poem overtly about marriage, *In Memoriam* can be read in the context of my arguments about queerness, marriage, and sequencing. Drawing deeply on Shakespeare's *Sonnets* Tennyson repeatedly turns to the metaphors of marriage/courtship and familial bonding in order to analogize his relationship with his friend Arthur Henry Hallam.¹ Hallam's sudden death at the age of 22 haunted Lord Tennyson, and over the course of 17 years he composed the poem's 131 sections, each of which mourns the loss of this boyhood confidant. In the poem, Tennyson casts his relationship with Hallam in a number of allegories: mother/son, gentleman/servant girl, sailor/wife, husband/widow, widower/bride, scorned lover/adulteress. These ways of envisioning the relationship between the two men underscores the illegibility of the speaker's relationship to Hallam. Tennyson must turn to culturally legible intimate relationships in order to best describe his bond with his dead friend. *In Memoriam* encompasses the entirety of relational metaphors presented in the poems of chapters 1-5. This single poem, therefore, becomes a convenient poem on which to revisit my

¹ Joseph Phelan writes, "Perhaps the most significant of these borderline cases is Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), which is clearly not a sonnet sequence, but is clearly based on one—Shakespeare's—and in its turn becomes a major influence on the amatory sonnet sequences of the last quarter of the century" (6).

claims about the interrogation of marriage through poetic form and my suggestion that encoded in marriage is a normative politics of sexuality.²

Tennyson exposes a kind of dissatisfaction with culturally available understandings of intimacy that are not marital. In order to describe the intimacy of their bond, Tennyson must turn to more culturally sanctioned versions of intimate bonds—familial, marital and domestic—rather than those of homosociality or friendship. Tennyson’s poem, while known as a eulogy, performs similar work as the amatory sequences of the previous chapters. Pulled from its context, the famous line, “‘Tis better to have loved and lost/ Than never to have loved at all” (27; l.15-6) has become a cultural cliché as a supposed salve for broken hearts. The first stanza of section sixty imagines Tennyson’s grief as analogous to the grief of a young woman of low class. He is “like” that lovelorn girl who has fallen for a man above her in class rank:

He past; a soul of nobler tone:

My spirit loved and loves him yet,

Like some poor girl whose heart is set

On one whose rank exceeds her own. (60; l.1-4)

Tennyson figures his loss and his experience of grief through what he projects as an unbending class and gendered structure—as unbending as the space between life and death. In the rest of the stanza, the poor girl recognizes her “narrow days” which will be spent in her village and in a house too much like that in which she was born:

He mixing with his proper sphere,

She finds the baseness of her lot,

Half jealous of she know not what,

² Tennyson won the poet laureate position thanks to this poem.

And envying all that meet him there.

The little village looks forlorn;

She sighs amid her narrow days,

Moving about the household ways,

In that dark house where she was born.

The foolish neighbors come and go,

And tease her till the day draws by:

At night she weeps, 'How vain am I!

How should he love a thing so low?' (60; 1.5-15)

The girl is reminded of the “baseness” of her identity in comparison to the nobleman’s and she mourns—as does Tennyson—the unattainable lover. Lest she forget her sorrows, the neighbors in her village will remind her; however, Tennyson sympathizes with the girl calling the neighbors “foolish” and the village “little” and “forlorn.” Because of Tennyson’s sympathetic response, we as readers are also encouraged to sympathize with the girl’s pain as it is inflicted via an inflexible social structure.

The simile not only disrupts gender and class boundaries, but Tennyson’s sympathetic affiliation is particularly positioned within the narrative of the young girl’s life. The stanza is about the foreclosure of unsanctioned desire; moreover it specifically forecloses a possibility of marriage. Tennyson’s simile of obstructed courtship between a young girl and a nobleman implicitly negotiates the formulation of English bourgeois culture and heteronormative narratives. In doing so, he incidentally exposes the marriage plot as a construct and socially

created fiction, and raises questions about what happens when the marriage narrative is interrupted. For Tennyson, any actual marriage to Hallam has been disbarred by normative heterosexual, cultural values and, ultimately, death. Nevertheless, the poem is obsessed with what happens when a marriage *cannot*; Tennyson's multiplicity of anecdotes about broken marriages reflects the trauma of marriage institutions. Scholars have read the poem in terms of its homoeroticism.³ Even Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, in their *Sexual Inversion* (1897), turned to Tennyson's poem as one full of "sexual emotion" (24). The sexual tension of the poem is already fore-grounded and *In Memoriam* is often referenced as a revision of Shakespeare's sonnets to the young man; however, despite its relationship to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Tennyson's poem is never read in terms of its engagement with the amatory tradition.⁴

Not only does Tennyson imagine himself as a lovelorn girl, he also imagines his grief through the metaphor of a jilted or widowed lover. In section eight, he is like the lover whose maid has gone away. He haunts "every pleasant spot/ In which we two were wont to meet" (l.9-10). In section ten he is like a sailor at sea longing for his wife; in thirteen he is a widow, and in eighty-five, the "widow'd" (l.113).⁵ Interrupted marriages expose the anxiety of an existence unmoored by the normative timeline of birth, marriage, reproduction and death—Halberstam's definition of "queer time" (2). Time is unable to be marked off in the normative manner and Hallam's death has thrown the poet into a kind of chronological crisis. Even the poem's structure supports this. Composed as separate poems over twelve years, Tennyson saw the poem

³ See Christopher Craft, Jeff Nunokawa and Alan Sinfield for queer readings of this poem.

⁴ Ellis and Symonds write "It is probable, however, that here, as well as in the case of Shakespeare, and in that of Tennyson's love for his friend Arthur Hallam, although such strong friendships may involve an element of sexual emotion, we have no true and definite homosexual impulse; homosexuality is merely simulated by the ardent and hyperesthetic emotions of the poet" (24).

⁵ In 87, the speaker goes back to college and figures himself as a schoolboy who longs for his mate who has gone away. But even this homosocial scene sounds like a courtship scenario. He remembers how they used to lie on the grass together, shoot archery and talk about music, art and philosophy.

as a series of elegiac fragments, not as a whole piece. In his father's memoir, Tennyson's son recounts his father's description of the poem⁶:

The sections were written at many different places, and as the phases of our intercourse came to my memory and suggested them, I did not write them with any view of weaving them into a whole, or for publication, until I found that I had written so many. (H. Tennyson 304)

Composed in different places and at different times, *In Memoriam* formally and imaginatively works through anxieties about temporality. Tennyson attempts to address anxieties provoked by the disruption of heteronormative temporality and especially marriage. Not surprisingly, the poem returns to marriage in its epilogue.

Located after the 131st section of the poem, the Epilogue is perhaps the most disregarded by critics because it is read as “less poetic.” This final section of *In Memoriam* returns to the subject of marriage. Tennyson himself pointed out that the poem “begins with a funeral and ends with a marriage—begins in death and ends with promise of a life.” In between is an extended negotiation of cultural and heteronormative imperative.⁷ Even if Tennyson envisions his epilogue as a “promise of life” he locates his bride and groom as standing on graves of the dead:

Now waiting to be made a wife,
Her feet, my darling, on the dead
Their pensive tablets round her head,
And the most living words of life

⁶ Tennyson names his son Hallam, after A. H. Hallam.

⁷The Norton edition of *In Memoriam* cites that the epilogue is often overlooked, and it quotes the text from Tennyson's letter to his younger sister (ft 86).

Breathed in her ear. The ring is on,
The `wilt thou' answer'd, and again
The `wilt thou' ask'd, till out of twain
Her sweet "I will" has made you one.

Now sign your names, which shall be read,
Mute symbols of a joyful morn,
By village eyes as yet unborn;
The names are sign'd... (l. 49-60)

Technically, this last section is about the marriage of Tennyson's sister, Cecilia, to Edmund Lushington and the heads of the dead on which they stand are probably those dead buried in the church in which the marriage ceremony is performed. However, it seems impossible to overlook a grave in an elegiac poem. The grave symbolizes Tennyson's dead friend, Hallam. Even in the moment of celebration, Tennyson returns to the graveside to mourn.

While the marriage of Cecilia and Edmund is sanctioned it only reminds the poet of his impossible marital union. The signing of the names of the newlyweds is lasting documentation, text which proves the existence of a union in marriage. In a way, the poem then seems to be Tennyson's version of the marriage log—a written and "mute symbol" which will be read by "village eyes as yet unborn." In this way, the poem can stand in for the legal documentation that his relationship to Hallam will never have. While perhaps the epilogue seeks a reassertion of heteronormative time through marriage, Tennyson's vision of marriage and formal legal documentation challenges the normative. He gives the poem a similar credibility and function as the marriage license; it is of parallel use for the documentation of a union. Tennyson crafts his

own justification of his relationship to Hallam through the poem itself. *In Memoriam* strives to make legible the relationship he had with his dead friend. While the poem is full of homoerotic language, my queer reading does not require it to be read in terms of homoeroticism. Instead, I expose the return to marriage, or failed marriages, as the poem's way of working through the failure of sanctioned intimacy.

Judith Butler argues, "Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of *disidentification* is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation" (*Bodies That Matter* 4) (emphasis mine). In other words, widespread and individual protest of identity—"democratic contestation"—is possibly most useful when it is saying it is *not* part of an identity category. If this is the case, then the continual *disarticulation* of Hallam and Tennyson's relationship may be one way in which the poem contests cultural understandings of the relationship. By re-performing the love between the two men as wife/husband, lover/beloved, widow/lost husband, and etc., Tennyson successfully undoes their relationship as simply friendship and also refuses to categorize it as something else. Instead the disidentification of the love becomes a way for Tennyson to contest existing means of identification.

"A New Map of the Same Terrain": Marriage and Poetic Form

In the last two sentences of *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus suggests that the observations in her book are

too diverse to wrap up in a neat statement about sexuality today, but they bring home what may ultimately be the most surprising commonality this book has found between Victorian society and our own: in the past as in the present, marriage and

family, gender and sexuality, are far more intricate, mobile, and malleable than we imagine them to be. We cannot and should not tidy up that complexity, but we can keep developing theories, writing histories, and reading stories that acknowledge its existence. (262)

This project grows out of the kind of work Marcus suggests is necessary—work of delving into the deeply complex issues of sexuality and marriage in Victorian culture.

My eagerness to explore debates surrounding the institution of marriage the nineteenth-century is fueled by current disputes over marital law as it relates to same-sex couples. The definition of marriage is a hotly contested one, used by political figures to argue for sustaining morality and ethics of the US as well as other countries. In a 2004 speech calling for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, then-President George W. Bush argued:

The union of a man and a woman is the most enduring human institution, honored and encouraged in all cultures and by every religious faith...Marriage cannot be severed from its cultural, religious and natural roots without weakening the good influence of society.⁸

Marriage, according to Bush, is “natural” and “good” and to change its definition would be to begin to destroy society as we know it. Using similar rhetoric, Focus on the Family’s James Dobson wrote in his 2005 book *Marriage Under Fire*:

To put it succinctly, the institution of marriage represents the very foundation of human social order. Everything of value sits on that base. Institutions, governments, religious fervor and the welfare of children are all dependent on its stability. (as cited in Shorto)(8)

⁸ “Bush calls for ban on same-sex marriages.” *CNN* 25 February 2004: n. pag. Web. 01 December 2010.

Here, not only is marriage naturalized, but it is foundational. Dobson's not-so-implicit claim is that any change in the institution of marriage might compromise the entire structure of life as we know it.

While the religious right mobilizes language which place marriage at the "base" of all value, left-leaning lobbyist groups also argue the centrality of the institution. The Human Rights Campaign, one of the largest LGBT-rights activist groups, holds marriage up as a basic human right suggesting, "At its core, the push for marriage equality is simply about making the day-to-day lives of same-sex couples and their families manageable and secure."⁹ On both sides of the argument—both for and against same-sex marriage—it is the institution of marriage that creates security, manageability and "day-to-day" existence possible.¹⁰

Marriage becomes, for better or worse, the legal ground on which these battles of sanctioning and legitimating are fought. While I am not suggesting that there is an easy link or allegorical parallel between the subject of the sonnet sequences I consider in this project and contemporary gay-rights movements, a goal of this project is to expose the institution of marriage as highly contentious and central to ideological underpinnings of daily life—both in the nineteenth century, and today. Marriage functions as the institutionalization of sexual desire and is, therefore, a way we legitimize, recognize and restrict sexuality and intimacy. Recognition, however, is necessarily exclusionary. While a subject (e.g. women) or a couple (same-sex partners) might become legible under a law, that legibility comes with prohibition against some other subject or intimate relationship, making marriage inextricably bound with issues of

⁹ This can be found on the organization's webpage.

¹⁰ The definition of marriage is a highly political debate and in many ways these debates come down to legibility and to the desire to be able to be read and recognized, socially and legally, as intimate; as formally joined under the law. Even while amendments to state constitutions which out-law same-sex marriage appear on election-day ballots (like Tennessee's 2006 initiative), LGBT-rights activists are still torn over the quest.

intelligibility and recognizability. As discussed in the introduction, marriage is often exposed as a means of property exchange or of religious significance. The aim of my work has been to draw its relationship to sexuality, desire and intimacy. Only through what might be described as a deep and pervasive heterosexism have marriage and sexuality been separated, making it hard to read sexuality back into descriptions of questionings of the institution itself.

Leaping again through space and time, I suggest the juxtaposition of Tennyson's famous elegy with contemporary poet Alice Bloch's meditation on marriage. Entitled "Six Years" the poem explores a frustration similar to what I argue is present in Tennyson's: that language somehow fails in its description of intimate relationships.

A friend calls us
an old married couple

I flinch
you don't mind
On the way home you ask
why I got upset
We are something
like what she said
you say I say
No

We aren't married.
No one has blessed
this union no one
gave us kitchen gadgets
We bought our own blender
We built our own common life
in the space between the laws

Six years
What drew us together
a cartographer a magnetic force
our bodies our speech
the wind a hunger
...
We walk easily
around our house
into each other's language
There is nothing
we cannot say together

Solid ground
under our feet
we knew the landscape
We have no choice
of destination only the route
is a mystery every day
a new map of the same terrain (1987)¹¹

In the “space between the laws” the two women of the poem make their way through a “terrain” that has been charted and mapped by someone else. It is not a different place altogether—in fact the poem emphasizes the need for a “new map” of the “same,” existing terrain. The poem suggests, like Tennyson’s that intimacy alters the poet and that, while the language of “marriage” ultimately fails in its description, it is the metaphor of marriage that cannot be escaped. Bloch’s poem is not formally bound by the rules of the sonnet or even a rhyme scheme as Tennyson’s poem is, but her formal innovations, of short and often fractured lines, underscores the work of

¹¹ As printed in *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (377-379).

the poem itself. The poem, even while it is not an easily recognizable traditional form, is still highlighted as a poem, suggesting yet again that the poetic form seems the place through which that mismatch of language and legibility can be explored.

Indeed in a culture where poetry is relegated to more and more marginalized quarters, why is it that friends, loved ones and even strained acquaintances ask me to help them find love poems for their weddings? Why have these lines by Tennyson and EBB stayed strong in our cultural imagination? I want to suggest two possible answers. First, that, perhaps, marriage and poetry are antiquated. Like Meredith's turn to the sonnet sequence, turning to a more antiquated form of amatory poetics seems to be the most apt way to capture or describe an antiquated institution. Secondly, and maybe less cynical, is that verse, unlike prose, captures something of the ineffable in its representation of intimacy. While a poem can describe a marriage, it also suggests the undoing of that marital bond by performing its own artifice through verification.

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