



2012

## Desire and Agency in the Modern Women's Sonnet

Catherine Anne Ramsden  
*Loyola University Chicago*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_diss](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ramsden, Catherine Anne, "Desire and Agency in the Modern Women's Sonnet" (2012). *Dissertations*. 541.

[https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_diss/541](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/541)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).  
Copyright © 2012 Catherine Anne Ramsden

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

DESIRE AND AGENCY IN THE MODERN WOMEN'S SONNET

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

CATHERINE A. RAMSDEN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2012

Copyright by Catherine A. Ramsden, 2012  
All rights reserved.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help of a great many people. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Dr. David Chinitz. Without his unflagging dedication to the success of this project; his insights and intellectual contributions that helped to hone the shape of my thesis; and his encouragement and perspective when I needed both, this dissertation almost certainly would not have been completed. In working with Dr. Chinitz, I've also had the privilege of seeing a “way of being” in the academic world that I find admirable, and which at times has served as a welcome reminder of the values that inform my dedication to higher education.

I would also like to thank Dr. J. Brooks Bouson and Dr. Thomas Kaminski, who read my thesis and did me the honor of applying their intellectual rigor toward the betterment of my work. I feel especially fortunate to have taken a graduate course from Dr. Bouson, in which she introduced me to the theoretical constructs that would eventually form the backbone of my dissertation, though I did not know it at the time.

I am thankful for the collegiality of the many faculty members at Loyola (primarily but not solely in the Department of English). Their generosity and accessibility allowed for a wealth of intellectual encounters—in and out of the classroom—that enriched both my graduate experience and my personal life. It is impossible to name you all. If you are reading this, please know that my memory, at least in this regard, is longer than an Acknowledgements page.

Lastly, my family and friends. They are the stars that order my universe, and I am thankful for them *every* day. Not just here. Not only now.

To John

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER ONE: TROUBLED COUPLINGS: GENRE, GENDER, DESIRE, AGENCY, AND THEIR FOURTEEN-LINE FIELD OF PLAY	1
CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN IN THE THROES OF OLD CONSTRUCTS: NARRATIVE EXPECTATIONS AND THE MARRIAGE PLOT	25
CHAPTER THREE: RE-WRITING AND RESISTING: FORMAL AND THEMATIC BARRIERS TO FEMALE AGENCY	82
Form Interrogates Function: Metapoetic Sonnets	82
Owning Desire: Possession and its Consequences	97
Aging and Agency: Questioning Power Sources	112
CHAPTER FOUR: ELIZABETH BISHOP'S SONNETS: THE ABANDONMENT OF FORM AND CULTURE	123
CHAPTER FIVE: POETIC SHAPES, CULTURAL SPACES: FORM, VOICE, AND AGENCY IN JULIA ALVAREZ' SONNET SEQUENCE, "33"	166
BIBLIOGRAPHY	192
VITA	206

## CHAPTER ONE

### TROUBLED COUPLINGS: GENRE, GENDER, DESIRE, AGENCY, AND THEIR FOURTEEN-LINE FIELD OF PLAY

So many poets have written sonnets, and over so many centuries, that a documentation of the genre's evolution is a complete project in itself. Accordingly, there exist many helpful studies of the sonnet's development, both of its literary and formal history, and of its particular use by poets who make extensive use of the sonnet. From the earliest incarnations of the sonnet form, the ethos of romantic love was central to its use and purpose, thus creating and perpetuating the dominant cultural perception of the sonnet as an ideal poetic vehicle for the exploration of love—a perception that lingers even today. Anthony Hecht observes that the sonnet “form is still firmly associated with love... [and] identified with the amorous and the erotic,” though certainly the sonnet has been employed for a multitude of other reasons and subject matter (141). Whether it is the lyric intimacy of the form itself, fortuitous timing (the sonnet emerged and flourished in conjunction with popular tales of courtly love), or the sheer volume of sonnets about love that is responsible for this association of form and subject cannot be easily determined; what is important is the historical popularity and persistence of love themes in the sonnet.



Moreover, practically from the moment of its invention, the sonnet was both widely practiced and accorded a great deal of poetic authority.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is likely threefold: first, the earliest sonnet writers were powerful intellectuals and courtiers who were educated in formal rhetoric at a time when mastery of language was tied to the possession and acquisition of power. Rhetorical prowess was manifested through the practice of *eloquentia*, “the ‘speaking out of the self’ in texts that were designed to persuade, control, stabilise power and enhance authority” (Spiller 14). The combination of the sonnet’s noble birth and its requirement of advanced rhetorical skill inspired many imitations throughout the court (Levin *xl*).

Second, the sonnet form was riddled with compositional and rhetorical challenges, and in a culture where poems were frequently exchanged and circulated, the mastery associated with the sonnet form accrued to its author as well. Finally, sonnets were not composed in formal Latin, but in a vernacular Italian dialect, and were likely influenced by the musicality and eloquence of the earlier Provençal troubadour poetry (Spiller 15). The linguistic accessibility of the sonnet, as well as its widespread use at court, ensured its migration from Sicily northward to Florence, where it would later be made famous by Dante and Petrarch. The combination of its widespread popularity, poetic status, and thematic idealization of a particular conception of love and femininity made the sonnet a significant bearer of cultural messages about women and agency, and

---

<sup>1</sup> The association of the sonnet with poetic mastery continued throughout the English Renaissance, seventeenth century and Romantic periods. Courtier poets frequently used their sonnets to compete for patronage, while Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s anthology *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796) has been identified by Daniel Robinson as an “act of canonization” that supports the argument for the inherent legitimacy of a genre. The anthology has as its Preface a sonnet by Anna Seward that introduces the phrase “sonnet-claim,” a term which refers to the relation between sonnet writing and its claim to literary preeminence” (Robinson 99). The presumption that legitimacy or mastery inheres in the genre itself meant that the writer of sonnets (whether male or female, suggests Seward) was heir to its literary authority.

the women poets who are the subjects of this dissertation have in common a particular poetic response to these messages. But before I examine the formal and thematic choices of these women sonneteers, it will be useful to trace the historical origins of the sonnet and the instantiation of romantic love as a central and lasting sonnet subject.

The oldest of all prescribed poetic forms in the Western world, the sonnet emerged circa 1230 AD, in the Sicilian court of Frederick II.<sup>2</sup> Its creator was one Giacomo da Lentino, the senior poet in the Sicilian school of court poetry, a notary of the court, and a celebrated scholar. He is widely believed to have invented the sonnet out of a peasant folk song known as the *strambotto*, an eight-line stanza, or octave, with the rhyme scheme *abab abab*. In the poetic form, the octave performed the function of an opening statement, which could take on the attitude of an argument, declaration, or plea. To this octave, da Lentino added a six-line stanza, or sestet, which would complete the poem.<sup>3</sup> The sestet introduces three new rhymes of variable scheme, although the most common of these is *cde cde*. The deliberate imbalance of stanzaic lines, eight and six, combined with the switch to completely different rhymes in the sestet, creates an abrupt disconnect in both form and meaning, forcing the sonnet to change direction as it moves from octave to sestet. A decided turn in the substance of the sonnet thus occurs, either explicitly in the eighth or ninth line or implicitly, in the gap between the octave and the sestet. This rhetorical turn, or *volta*, initiates a “change in tone, mood, voice, tempo or

---

<sup>2</sup> Frederick II, the Emperor of southern Italy and Sicily, was known for his literary and intellectual prowess. Paul Oppenheimer suggests that the sonnet could not have been conceived outside of such a court atmosphere that fostered literary and cultural advancement (300).

<sup>3</sup> Scholars have speculated as to the significance of da Lentino’s choice of six lines to form the second part of his poem. Paul Oppenheimer explores theories of harmonic proportion in numerical relationships, while Michael R. G. Spiller postulates a connection between the sestet of the sonnet and the “*sirma*” of the Provençal *canso*.

perspective” and “introduces into the poem a possibility for transformation” (Levin xlix). The volta, as the third formal requirement of the sonnet, is crucial: it provides the directional arc that connects disparate formal and thematic components, while sustaining the poetic asymmetry that prohibits easy resolution or one-dimensional subject matter.<sup>4</sup> Thus da Lentino created a complex poetic structure which lent itself to an intense and personal dialectic, ideally suited to introspection and meditation (Oppenheimer 301).

The common subject of this “first generation” of sonnets is the kind of love referred to in medieval texts as “*fine amor*” or “*fin’ amor*,” from which we derive the term “courtly love.”<sup>5</sup> The poets of Frederick II’s court, who were familiar with troubadour poetry, generally avoided political and religious themes: of da Lentino’s twenty-five extant sonnets, all but one are *fin’ amors*. Highly stylized tales of erotic desire and mostly -- but not exclusively -- unrequited love between members of the nobility, *fin’ amors* were first composed circa 1100 by the Provençal troubadour poets: by the end of the twelfth century, *fin’ amors* were the subject of Northern French romances, including the influential *Le Roman de la Rose*, which appeared in the mid-thirteenth century. Wherever their locale of origin, *fin’ amors* have in common that they are the product of courtier poets and noble society. The audience for *fin’ amors*, however,

---

<sup>4</sup> Spiller locates this asymmetry in the relationship between sonnet form and function: “To announce a theme, to change it, and to close it: these features are essentially part of the structure of a sonnet and, though they can be rearranged, they cannot be eluded. So a tripartite structure of discourse – statement, development and conclusion – ... begins to appear on top of the binary structure of octave and sestet” (17).

<sup>5</sup> The term was later translated as *amour courtois* or “courtly love,” and while the two terms are certainly part of the same discourse, they are not completely synonymous. *Courtois*, from which we get the word “courtesy,” is concerned with the rules and decorum that legitimize amorous conduct between nobles who were likely married to others. The Latin derivation of *fin* progresses in meaning from “complete” to “consummate” to “perfect.” Likewise in the Old French, *fine* alludes to the purification of metals; thus *fin’ amor* indicates a pure and perfect (in its completeness) love, defined only by its essence. For a further discussion of the historical linguistics of *fin’ amor*, see Burnley.

was not limited to the elite class from which they emerged. That *fin' amors* achieved fame and wide dissemination among a largely illiterate mass culture may be attributed to a confluence of factors. First, they were composed in the vernacular, the “plain tongue” of Occitan, and not in the scholarly Latin of royal courts and the Catholic Church. Their subject matter, for the most part, was likewise accessible: powerful emotions, tales of great battles, and the notion, attractive to the peasantry, that nobility was not limited to birthright but could be attained by the ordinary man through humility and chivalric deeds—such riveting topics were both entertaining and easy to recall. *Fin' amors* frequently featured “lyric insertions,” stanzaic melodies that evoked elements of folk poesy (Paden 36). Finally, the performance element of *fin' amors* meant that literacy was not a requirement of familiarity. The troubadours’ regular travel among royal courts, as well as their participation in the Crusades, created manifold opportunities for *fin' amors* to enter the general population.

The *fin' amor* derives its narrative power partly through its invocation of Neoplatonic philosophy; in particular the definition (by Aristotle and later Aquinas) of natural love as belonging to an order of being that is spontaneous and involuntary.<sup>6</sup> It is not governed by the rational, or highest order, but by the senses. The *eros*/passion/desire featured in *fin' amors* is so powerful that it upends the ontological order, causing reason to fall by the wayside and rendering those it possesses powerless to do anything but seek their soul’s fulfillment in it. In the medieval period, the surrender to desire, the

---

<sup>6</sup> While these medieval lyrics do borrow the authority of Neoplatonic philosophy, there is necessarily some casuistry involved in the notion that love can conquer all: were *fin' amors* to adhere completely to Neoplatonic tenets, all desire would be subordinated to reason, a condition Dorothy Parker might describe as “not much fun.”

compulsion to chase after the beloved, was not merely “a poetic conceit but a physiological fact; that is, an effluence passed from the eyes of the lady through those of the lover into his heart” (Morgan 50). Regardless of the moral lessons that are the true (if subtle) point of *fin’ amors*, the culturally retained message is the apparent legitimization and valorization of a love that, in its natural state, is literally a law unto itself, defined not by the personalities of the lovers, but by “the very quality and intensity of the love itself” (Burnley 148). It is this notion of desiring love that defined the content of the first sonnets, a concept that would find its way into the sonnets of most other successive masters in the genre up until the late Renaissance.

With the death of Frederick II in 1250, the center of Italian culture and influence moved northward, and so did the sonnet. Court poet Guittone d’Arezzo is credited with bringing the Sicilian sonnet to the Tuscan school. His poetic output was large; between 1250 and 1294, the year of his death, he wrote almost as many sonnets as Petrarch.<sup>7</sup> While Guittone started out writing conventional love sonnets, he also wrote moral sonnets that lectured to an implied audience of his fellow citizens. It is Guittone who modified the alternating rhyme scheme of Lentino’s octave to *abba abba*, also known as *rima baciata*, or “kissing rhyme.” In this form the sonnet would gain the attention of later Tuscan poets Dante and Petrarch, who in turn made it famous. Dante and his fellow Florentine poets, the *stilnovisti*, wrote in sonnets more than any other form. Fortunately for us, the *stilnovisti* also defined their poetics; they professed themselves writers in the *dolce stil novo* or “sweet new style” that was, according to Michael Spiller, marked by a

---

<sup>7</sup> Guittone wrote 246 sonnets; Petrarch 317. Spiller considers Guittone the “first master of the sonnet,” for both his volume and his inventiveness (20).

“distinctive philosophy of love” (28). Spiller translates and cites Mario Marti’s study of the *stilnovisti*:

The Lady [of the *stilnovist* sonnet] is attenuated, and disappears into the mist of a symbol, into the undefined sweetness of a yearning towards the ideal; and wholly in the light of her eyes, in the sweetness of her smile, in the fair graces of her hair, her coming is like the gleams of sun upon a fresh dawning; her presence begets a springtime of goodness. One might say that in her shimmering, airy lightness, almost she does not possess physical attributes; and these few (eyes, smile, gold of hair, her bearing) are spiritualised and reduced, till they become mere signs of a state of mind intoxicated by the ecstasy of contemplation. She does not, I say again, make up the Other in a dialogue of love: she is the figure into which flows and is reflected the interior life of the poet—almost the symbol of self-contemplation.<sup>8</sup>

To the notion of supreme love extolled in *fin’ amors*, the *stilnovisti* added a refined description of the ideal feminine, making this ideal the putative subject of their sonnets.

The depiction of the lady or *donna* as a living woman who was the locus of poetic address in the early sonnets became, in the hands of the *stilnovisti*, a

symbol of an almost religious ideal of human perfection, a kind of messenger of grace and wisdom sent from God . . . the *stilnovist* sonnet is not, then, a communication from lover to lady, though it may well address her directly; it is a record of a single moment whose value is in its singularity, and whose impact is entirely upon the speaker—the Lady is unchanged and unchangeable. (Spiller 30)

Thus, both the early and *stilnovist* sonnets were central in both establishing the romantic paradigm—an archetype that, as E. Jane Burns puts it, “advances an ideology of femininity that disempowers women in love while claiming to empower them” (24).

Moreover, in the structural components of romantic ideology can be located parallels in religious dogma, in particular the pure and utter devotion to God that is a shared tenet of

---

<sup>8</sup> While the citation for Marti’s study is provided, his work is unavailable in English. I therefore use Spiller’s translation.

Western religions. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev and Ruhama Goussinsky observe that romantic ideology shares certain functions of religion. Both constructs

dictate basic beliefs, demand a high moral standard, and bestow this high moral standard upon their objects. Like faith, love is regarded as an expression of profound, unique and morally pure attitudes . . . [R]omantic ideology is basically characterized by its comprehensive and uncompromising nature. Not unlike the function of religion, love is considered to give meaning to life, to overcome all obstacles, and to provide a share in eternity. (35)

The incorporation of religious and philosophical ideals contributed to the power and longevity of the sonnet; Levin notes that sonneteers have always conflated the “language of religious devotion and courtly romance” (lvii). Likewise, Burnley observes that the “figurative exchange of the vocabularies of religious and secular love is a pervasive feature of medieval literature” (136).

Traditional components of the sonnet that derive from the courtly love ethos include the praise of the beloved’s physical charms, the worship of youth and beauty, the lament for unrequited love, and the constancy or commitment of the lover to continue loving his beloved, even in the face of rejection. To these tropes the *Stilnovisti* added the idealization and abstraction of the sonnet Lady, an aesthetic that posits romantic love as a means by which the male poet-lover could achieve erotic and spiritual transcendence, and the intense introspection of the spiritually desolate poet-lover. The most famous poet in the *dolce stil novo*, Dante Alighieri, was most concerned with the manifestation of erotic desire in service of the divine. In his *Vita Nuova*, Dante theorizes an *intelletto d’amore*, a rare and noble comprehension of a refined form of love. Donald Heiney observes that the meaning of *intelletto d’amore* is applied to the male and female differently: for women it is “passive, signifying a receptivity for love,” while for men it is “an active amorous

volition” (176, 178). Other prominent *stilnovisti*, Cavalcanti and Pistoia for example, wrote of erotic enchantment and amorous sensibility that was not a metaphor for religious experience, but definitive of the emotional and psychological intensity of experience in love. Yet the poets of the *stilnovist* tradition were unified in their approach to erotic love as an ennobling ideal to be attained; as distinct from its profane counterpart of lust; and as a state in which only the male poet-lover possesses the volition to desire.

If the Sicilians and the *stilnovisti* created a sonnet imbued with romantic ideology, it was Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) who brought to the sonnet the complex subjectivity that would make it the most influential mode of Renaissance love poetry. As a literary mode, Petrarchism is defined by its use of a particular set of poetic conventions, tropes and rhetorical strategies, as well as a set of ideological assumptions about subjectivity and desire. Some of these devices—for example, the description of the Lady, the posture of the unrequited poet-speaker, and the notion of transcendent love—Petrarch retains from the earlier sonnet tradition. His innovation, however, lies in his recognition of the sonnet form as ideally suited to the exploration and creation of the self through language: through him the sonnet reaches its fulfillment as a mode of interiority, a dialectic in which the subject is both speaker and audience.<sup>9</sup> Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* (also known as the *Rime sparse*) is, quite simply, the definitive or seminal sonnet sequence of

---

<sup>9</sup> While not completely a misnomer, “medieval literary subjectivity” is generally considered to construct its understanding of human beings through Christian religious doctrine; medieval narrators lack reflective power, interiority or dimensionality. Scholars are unequally divided in their treatments of Petrarch’s subjectivity: a few define him as belonging to the late medieval age in which he lived and wrote; most others claim him to be the first modern man of the Renaissance. The predominant critical argument is that the complex subjectivity of Petrarch’s sonnet speaker both precipitated and influenced the Renaissance love lyric. Thomas Roche, however, claims that the mind of the poetic speaker of the *Canzoniere* is rooted in medieval Christian thought; thus Petrarch “views his love for Laura as sin” (3). His argument deemphasizes the significance and complexity of self-exploration in the *Canzoniere*, reducing it to a Christian morality tale.



the modern age. The story of Petrarch's eternal love for Laura is legendary; even in twentieth-century popular culture, allusion to these two signifies a love for the ages—whether or not the actual details of the story are known. In contrast to Dante's dependence on the religious and moral values of his era, which necessitated the location of his love for Beatrice in the divine realm, Petrarch's exploration of the conflicts, ambiguities and vacillations of a self in love are distinctly human in their sensuality and use of the natural world—a poetic choice that was “historically ground-breaking” (Bermann 13).

In Petrarch's *Canzoniere* we see the emergence and development of humanist thought—the “self in conflict with the self”—that would establish the continued literary relevance of his sonnets from the late medieval period through the seventeenth century. However, the Petrarchan mode was tied to a framework of erotic desire that required an insubstantial figuration of the feminine, and this element, along with the notion of complex subjectivity, informed the sonnets of the European and English Renaissance. The first poet to translate Petrarch into English was Geoffrey Chaucer; “three stanzas of *Troilus and Criseide*” comprise one of Petrarch's sonnets (Dasenbrock 122). Thomas Wyatt, perhaps the most significant translator of Petrarch's lyrics, added the rhyming couplet that would help shape the English sonnet,<sup>10</sup> while his fellow courtier, the Earl of Surrey, introduced the structural option of three quatrains of alternating rhyme that preceded the couplet. Wyatt and Surrey encountered the sonnet while traveling in Italy,

---

<sup>10</sup> Comparisons of Petrarch's original Italian rhyme scheme with both Wyatt's translations and his original sonnets suggest that Wyatt was “impressed by the epigrammatic neatness” of the rhymed couplet, and “as a means of enforcing the wit and elegance of his own sonnets transferred the concluding couplet to his versions of Petrarch” (Spiller 85).

and introduced it to the court of Henry VIII.<sup>11</sup> From there it would pass to Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare, and countless others, retaining or invoking the tropes and images of Petrarchan desire.

Certainly there are sonnets that have non- or even anti-Petrarchan themes. Sonneteers from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries have employed the sonnet in order to critique, philosophize, mock, and question the ideologies that were its original and historic focus. Even before the *stilnovisti* raised courtly love tropes to an eloquent art, Cecco Angiolieri parodied the sonnets of Guittone d'Arezzo and his peers. John Updike, in the twentieth century, wrote the best parody of the amatory sonnet that I have encountered; it is as amusing as it is derisive.<sup>12</sup> In sixteenth-century England, when the sonnet was at its peak of popularity, more than 200,000 sonnets were written. Many of these did not merit publication in volumes of literature, but served as “compliment” sonnets, which were and are critically unregarded.<sup>13</sup> Of what are considered Renaissance literary sonnets, just over one third are love sonnets, and the remainder comprise occasional and moral sonnets. The nineteenth century sonnet revival was marked by themes such as the idealization of nature, a longing for the past or childhood, and political or social commentary and invective. And lastly, there is a category of sonnets

---

<sup>11</sup> Writing in 1589, George Puttenham chronicles Wyatt's and Surrey's discovery of the sonnet: having “tasted the sweet and stately measures and stile of Italian poesie as novices newly crept out of the schooles of Dante, Arioste and Petrarch, they greatly polished our rude and homely maner of vulgar Poesie, from that it had bene before....” (qtd in Spiller 80).

<sup>12</sup> Updike's postmodern parody, “Love Sonnet,” is a searing, yet humorous riposte to the amatory sonnet tradition. While technically the sonnet has fourteen lines, only the first contains actual text: “In Love's rubber armor I come to you.” The subsequent thirteen lines contain only letters indicating the rhyme scheme and punctuation—which create additional irony.

<sup>13</sup> Spiller cites sonnet bibliographer Hughes Vaganay, whose statistics on the sonnet reveal that “the sonnet of compliment at the beginning or end of a volume of theology or law . . . accounts for a significant proportion of that massive 200,000” (83).

whose “theme” is the nature of the sonnet itself. Sonneteers since the Renaissance have written metapoetic or self-reflexive sonnets, the purpose of which is to comment on the sonnet form by calling attention to their own use of formal and thematic properties within the context of the sonnet tradition. As a sub-group within the genre, sonnets that enact, alter or reject their own poetics are especially interesting, since they must distill theoretical commentary within an artistic mode. Metapoetic sonnets simultaneously perform and critique themselves in a feat of poetic agility.

But it is difficult, if not impossible, to write a sonnet that can exist outside of the sonnet tradition; every sonnet is in one sense an allusion to all sonnets before it. The strict formal conventions that comprise the traditional “well-wrought urn” make the sonnet a recognizable object, to which adhere traditional expectations and ideological assumptions.<sup>14</sup> Even as sonneteers deviate from formal sonnet requirements and conventional themes, they invoke the tradition they may intend to explode. Twentieth-century poet William Carlos Williams couldn’t stand writing in sonnets; he observed that

The poem... is an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes. Therefore, being an object, it should be so treated and controlled—but not as in the past. For past objects have about the past necessities—like the sonnet—which have conditioned them and from which, as a form itself, they cannot be freed. (264)<sup>15</sup>

Mary B. Moore calls on genre theory in her discussion of the Petrarchan sonnet, asserting that “allusions to a genre’s mode or conventions evoke ideological as well as literary

---

<sup>14</sup> For more on this, see Susan Stewart’s 2002 book, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*.

<sup>15</sup> Williams also notes that Ezra Pound wrote – and promptly destroyed – a short collection of sonnets. High-modernist poetics, which generally privileged experimental, impersonal poetry while avoiding formal verse structures and amatory themes, contributed to the critical designation of sonnets in the early twentieth century as “sentimental,” a charge which worked to reduce the literary significance of poetry by Dorothy Parker and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

values derived from the mode's original historical context. Literary modes and conventions thus transmit ideologies, and the imitators of literary forms implicitly evoke, accept, confront, or revise ideology" (9). Likewise, Nancy K. Vickers documents the lasting authority, both scholarly and popular, that Petrarch's description of Laura had in establishing the cultural norm of feminine beauty as a fetishized, fragmented body: "Petrarch's particularizing mode of figuring that body, the product of a male-viewer/female-object exchange . . . reveals a textual strategy subtending his entire volume: it goes to the heart of his lyric program and understandably becomes the lyric stance of generations of imitators" (106). In this regard the sonnet functions as a dominant discourse, a text that makes normative the expectations of the prevailing cultural group.<sup>16</sup> Thus the Petrarchan sonnet instantiated a discourse of desire that simultaneously introduced the introspective lyric self into the literary evolution of the Renaissance, and played a central role in helping a gendered ideology to become a commonplace of the modern sonnet.

Since women poets have a long, if less well-known history with the sonnet, it may be helpful to provide a brief overview of those early female sonneteers who most notably engaged sonnet form and convention. Gaspara Stampa (in Italy, 1554) and Louise Labe (in France, 1555) each published a Petrarchan sequence that featured a female speaker

---

<sup>16</sup> The term "dominant discourse" originates with Michel Foucault, and is used widely in post-structural literary theory. Feminist theory, while not always entirely in agreement with Foucault, utilizes the relationship between discourse and power to explore the relationship between language and agency, particularly the ways that "gender hierarchy has been sustained through a discursive construction of 'woman' as 'other' and by an insistence on the 'naturalness' of her subordinate and excluded status" (Soper 34). In the sonnet, this might be exemplified through the way the voice and gaze of the male poet constructs the female in terms of the Object, and how the repetition of such a configuration in the sonnet makes this conception of woman normative. Finally, discourses are not comprised merely of speech or writing acts, but encompass social behaviors, and are contextualized by political and economic climates. The gradual sociopolitical advances of women made it possible for female sonneteers in twentieth-century American culture to interrogate more directly the dominant discourses of the amatory sonnet.

claiming poetic authority—not to refute Petrarchism, but to enact a female version of the desiring lover. The first writer of a sonnet sequence in English is Anne Lock, whose “A Meditation” (1560) is written from the point of view of “a penitent sinner” (Spiller 92). As well, a good many women’s sonnets on religious and domestic themes were published during Renaissance and seventeenth-century England; similar themes appeared in American women’s sonnets of the Puritan era. Thus sonneteering was clearly not a late-discovered literary mode for women. However, female poets have found the use of the amatory sonnet problematic, due in part to social strictures and prohibitions that discouraged women’s literary production. Renaissance scholar Ann-Rosalind Jones documents the establishment of prohibitions against women’s writing from the early modern period, prohibitions that would become increasingly entrenched through the nineteenth century, and which centered around the notion of a dichotomy between public and private:

[The] assumption that learning and chastity are mutually exclusive points to the concern—the obsession, in fact—that underlies the great majority of Renaissance pronouncements on women’s speech and fame: female sexual purity. The link between loose language and loose living arises from a basic association of women’s bodies with their speech: a woman’s accessibility to the social world beyond the household through speech was seen as intimately connected to the scandalous openness of her body . . . . To be seen and to be engaged in conversation were equally potentially transgressive. (76)

The equation of women’s speech with promiscuity helped to reinforce the “injunction to silence and invisibility” (Jones 79). By the same token, the woman who conformed to these social sanctions was deemed virtuous, “distinguished by what she did *not* do” (Jones 79, emphasis mine). In this way patriarchal, Protestant culture produced a rigidly configured ideal woman, one whose desirability depended directly upon her lack of

agency or self-assertion. To write in the erotic tradition of the love sonnet was considered especially transgressive of mainstream cultural norms for female behavior; Labe and Stampa both were labeled prostitutes by contemporaries and critics, while Lady Mary Wroth was accused of slander when she published *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* in 1620.<sup>17</sup> Notable seventeenth century poets like Aphra Behn achieved their success by avoiding sonnets, choosing instead forms and topics that “seemed safely unambitious,” eschewing “the voices of bard, theologian, scholar, or courtly lover of a distant ideal” (Mermin 341). With the mid-century decline in popularity of the sonnet and the onset of the Enlightenment period, women would pen no more than a handful of sonnets until the late eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

The publication of Charlotte Turner Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1784 restored the sonnet to literary significance.<sup>19</sup> This sequence of ninety-two sonnets was enthusiastically received—it went through ten editions in her lifetime—though Smith’s poetic success depended greatly on her ability to skillfully finesse the patronage system that permeated the male-dominated world of literary publishing. In the *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith claims a level of poetic authority that was the prerogative of male poets, while balancing her

---

<sup>17</sup> Josephine Roberts’ study of Lady Mary Wroth recounts that Wroth’s contemporary, Lord Edward Denny, believed one of the plot lines of *Pamphilia* was a fictionalized version of his life, and his subsequent accusations aroused public anger toward Wroth. Although Denny’s accusations were never proven, Wroth withdrew her work from print, and did not publish further during her lifetime. Mary Moore notes that the public response Denny was able to effect “suggests a fairly effective system of social sanctions that informally prohibited women’s amatory work in print” (130).

<sup>18</sup> The eighteenth century saw a general decline in sonnet production; the Enlightenment climate that valorized the rational and impersonal in literary thought was not naturally suited to the lyric.

<sup>19</sup> Until recently, the significance of Smith’s work has gone unregarded by literary critics, and Wordsworth has been credited with the birth of the Romantic sonnet. Today, Smith’s sonnets are recognized as exerting the greatest influence on the Romantic sonnet revival (Curran 73).

claims inside the sonnet text with several peripheral strategies designed to minimize or justify her literary boldness to the public.

While Smith's sequence is not strictly amatory, in the sense that the poet-speaker expresses the desire for a beloved, she invokes Petrarchan subjectivity both through the use of a quotation from the *Rime Sparse* as an epigraph, and through the inclusion of her own translations of Petrarch's sonnets throughout the first edition of the *Elegiac Sonnets*. Smith also makes melancholy the central poetic device of the sequence: the speaker's access to melancholy provides her the male attributes of rationality, sensibility and poetic insight or genius associated with melancholic poets.<sup>20</sup> Smith likewise violates what was considered "appropriate" subject matter for women, by locating her female speaker, not in the domesticated and feminized garden, but in the untamed natural world, through which she moves in solitude.<sup>21</sup>

Even as her sonnets asserted a bold claim to literary preeminence, Smith surrounded their publication with strategic maneuvers designed to justify her encroachment into the male literary domain. She dedicated her first volume to the well-respected poet William Hayley, an act that implied his approval of her poetic efforts. She also aligned herself with the influential publisher Thomas Cadell, who supported successive editions of the *Elegiac Sonnets*. But perhaps most influential in persuading the public that her sonnet writing was not unseemly were Smith's prefaces to the sonnets,

---

<sup>20</sup> For example, in one of the sonnets, Smith speaks in the voice of Goethe's *Werther*. The renaissance identification of melancholy with both rationality and genius began to shift at the end of the eighteenth century, and in the early nineteenth century, the characteristic of melancholy would become increasingly feminized. For more on the shift in the gender of melancholy, see Dolan and Schiesari.

<sup>21</sup> For more on Smith's literary occupation of the "prospect"—a physical and poetic space that is predominantly male-gendered—see Jacqueline Labbe.

which she adapted or amended with each successive publication. In the preface to the first and second editions, Smith offers a reason for her choice of the sonnet when she asserts that it “is no improper vehicle for a single sentiment” (3). Her single sentiment, as we have seen, is melancholy, and Smith further makes use of the prefaces to tie the source of her poetic melancholy to the events of her life, thus claiming the authority to speak as “one who knows” while dispelling any notions of poetic artifice. Finally, Smith employs an “established convention of denying a desire to publish writings which were written exclusively for the pleasure of friends,” a disclaimer which offers Smith both “the appearance of becoming modesty” and the “necessary justification for her prominent position in the literary marketplace” (Zimmerman 61). Smith voices her awareness that, for a woman in society, “the post of honor is a private station,” and hints at her “endless sea of troubles” to her readership (6). The strategic appeals to sympathy and sincerity accomplished through the prefaces both create a sympathetic portrait of Smith to her readership and allow her to use her own suffering to legitimize her use of poetic melancholy, the device by which she accesses universal themes. Charlotte Smith’s eighteenth century success in navigating female subjectivity in the literary sonnet would pave the way for nineteenth century women poets to use the sonnet to once again explore amatory themes.

The nineteenth century witnessed substantial progress in women’s literary production, but that progress was not without its challenges. The public/private dichotomy established in Renaissance writings and furthered by eighteenth century conduct literature became the ideology of “separate spheres,” a set of gender-based social and cultural expectations for middle class behavior. This gender ideology was firmly at



the center of Victorian culture, and it bore strong similarity to the idealized poetic constructions of the feminine featured in Petrarch. The male sphere—which included writing and, especially, publishing—was “public and active,” while the appropriate sphere of existence for “gentle” women was confined to the “private, home-based, and passive” (Pettit 105).<sup>22</sup> The restrictions on women’s social roles extended to their poetic themes as well: religion, children, domesticity and morals were considered suitable “female” topics. While many women writers negotiated – often through pseudonyms, self-deprecating prefaces, carefully chosen “appropriate” subjects, or other devices—the cultural prohibition on women’s publishing, their public self-assertion—was not without social risk. Women writers who operated in the “male sphere” were often deemed, somewhat paradoxically, both promiscuous and unfeminine, and therefore not socially desirable. This labeling had the added consequence of reducing the literary woman’s access to marriage, since the ideal wife was one who helped manage her husband’s social status by conforming to the domestic sphere (Langland 291). Thus to gain happiness in love (of which a successful marriage was proof), a woman would have to sublimate her selfhood; a woman who wanted to define her own concept of femininity risked social marginalization.

Victorian poet Christina Rossetti took such a risk, publishing *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets* (1881), the first women’s sonnet sequence in English to undertake an

---

<sup>22</sup> There is a long tradition of scholarly analysis of gender-defined spheres of existence by critics such as Elaine Showalter, Nina Auerbach, Nancy Vickers, Ellen Moers, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. I cite Rhonda Pettit here in light of her application of this concept to nineteenth- and twentieth-century women’s poetry.

examination of the cultural incompatibility between romantic desire and female agency.<sup>23</sup> It is this sequence that lays the groundwork for future sonnet sequences whose lyric personae find themselves troubled by the individual and social constraints of the romantic ethos. *Monna Innominata* is noteworthy in that it does not gloss over the difficulties for a woman who chooses to opt out of romantic love relationships in a patriarchal society, but relates the courtly love tradition from the perspective of a woman who struggles to define herself outside of the cultural constructs that expect respectable women to marry.

The sequence is structured to follow the romantic narrative that was the backbone of popular Victorian fiction; over the course of fourteen sonnets, the lyric speaker attempts to negotiate a balance between romantic love and spiritual freedom. While Rossetti invokes Petrarchan sonnet conventions and the courtly love tradition, her primary artistic and thematic purpose in *Monna Innominata* is not to endorse but to explode romantic ideals. The similarities to Petrarchan conventions of romantic love implied on the surface give way to the more spiritual “apotheosis of Rossetti's great theme of renunciation and endurance” (Rosenblum 148). As Antony Harrison asserts,

---

<sup>23</sup> The most celebrated female sonneteer of the Victorian period, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, enchanted the reading public with her wifely devotion in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*; however, her sequence primarily invokes and affirms the Petrarchan paradigm. While her speaker is a woman poet-lover praising a male object, Barrett Browning does not critique the poetic construct that traditionally renders women voiceless. Rather, she “balances” her act of assertion as speaking subject with content that undercuts her own agency: she at times occupies the object position, finds herself unworthy of her lover’s desire, and devalues her subjectivity through, according to Feit-Diehl, “overly self-deprecating” description of herself (584). Barrett Browning even gives her speaker’s male lover the power, through his kiss and his gaze, to both restore her beauty and confer greater poetical ability upon her; the speaker “finds her lover more passionate and alive than she is herself” (Mermin 362). In exalting her lover and proclaiming her happiness, Barrett Browning’s sequence does not participate in the project of exploring the incompatibility of desire and agency for women. Christina Rossetti herself alludes to this in the preface to *Monna Innominata*, suggesting that, had Barrett Browning, 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” (294).

Rossetti manipulates the Petrarchan paradigm such that it “fails to yield satisfaction, exposing the social, moral and spiritual inadequacies of the tradition itself” (155). As she negates Petrarchan values, Rossetti employs poetic devices that entice the reader into looking beyond romantic conventions for a more satisfactory system of values, which ultimately are located in the spiritual world. By the end of the sequence, Rossetti’s speaker is able to “visit the present from a perspective beyond desire...a strategy [which] rightly practiced becomes a means of autonomy” (Hassett 508). Such autonomy is troubled, however, by the speaker’s inability to accept completely her renunciation of romantic love. Although Rossetti successfully replaces the impermanence of love in the troubadour lyric with the immortality of divine love, it is important to note that the speaker is not fully comfortable or complacent in her decision: she is still a physical being trapped in a sensate body that must, while she lives, know the “longing of a heart pent up forlorn” (sonnet 14, l 10). As *Monna Innominata* thus demonstrates, romantic love is a myth that cannot provide permanent happiness, but the woman who renounces it resigns herself to some degree of ostracism from society, since there was little mainstream support for such a choice in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth-century constructs that limited female agency did not disappear at the turn of the century, but persisted well into the early part of twentieth-century America. Even as women’s social and political causes made their way to the forefront of history, middle-class insistence on traditional gender roles put women poets in what Suzanne Juhasz has identified as a “double bind”: the contradictory demands of lyric self assertion on the one hand with socially prescribed reticence on the other. The depiction of the double bind in twentieth-century women’s poetry suggests that a woman in modern

society who embraced the concept of New Womanhood was in fact not as free to pursue social autonomy as was implied by that concept. Of twentieth-century women's poetry, Juhasz writes:

The woman who wants to be a poet needs to exhibit certain aspects of herself that her society will label masculine, [qualities such as] ego strength, independence, need for achievement . . . [S]he is in a double-bind situation, because she is set up to lose, whatever she might do . . . If she is 'woman,' she must fail as 'poet'; 'poet,' she must fail as 'woman.' Yet she is not two people. She is a woman poet whose art is a response to, results from, her life. (2,3)

Thus, even in the nineteen twenties, the assertion of a female self in a male-defined middle-class culture was both fraught with anxiety and loaded with consequences. Women poets still had to contend to some degree with a discourse that pitted their desirability against their agency. In a culture where emergent feminism mixed uneasily with bourgeois values, twentieth-century women poets who wanted to move beyond old norms needed to devise a set of strategies through which to negotiate the double bind, claiming subjectivity while conforming in other ways to mainstream requirements of femininity.

Twentieth-century women poets who engaged the sonnet in order to confront amatory themes encountered an additional barrier—that posed by the sonnet itself. In keeping with its medieval ethos of courtly love, the Petrarchan tradition creates an archetype of the Feminine by which women are denied agency. The sonnet's amatory purpose, as we have seen, is to profess the desire of the male speaker-lover, while the putative locus of poetic address, the idealized beloved, “resides” in the heavenly distance, above mortal women, without power to participate in the actions, speech or emotions of the male speaker. Impassive *objects d'art*, the most famous women of sonnets—Beatrice,

Laura, Stella—become cultural icons, models of idealized femininity predicated on their physical beauty and removal from the world, the sphere in which agency is possible. The resultant positioning of women as poetic icons necessarily objectified them and established a basis for relationship that was inherently hierarchical. As four centuries of poetic prestige cemented the reputation of the sonnet, the vision of the Ideal Woman as beautiful but “dumb” likewise became entrenched and automatic, but in a way that made gender inequality aesthetically appealing—to both men and women. It is precisely this “vision” of womanhood that inheres in the amatory sonnet genre. Why, then, would women poets – who defied social mores to become writers in the first place—elect to write in a tradition so opposed to their values and experience? And why attempt to negotiate female subjectivity in a mode that has traditionally objectified women?

This dissertation investigates the ways in which four twentieth-century women poets employ the sonnet specifically to address the double bind that the sonnet itself confers and reinforces: that of desire and agency. Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dorothy Parker, Elizabeth Bishop, and Julia Alvarez use the sonnet form both to critique and to reenvision female experience, particularly in regard to the cultural value of love. In addition to an analysis of poetics, this dissertation also engages a cultural/feminist critique based on an enduring theme in women’s writing: the power of patriarchal constructs to prevent women’s individuation within mainstream society. One might expect women writers who grapple with the problems of literary and cultural subjectivity to avoid a poetic structure—the sonnet—that works against a conception of women as empowered, independent beings. Instead, these four poets seize upon the sonnet as the best means of addressing the fallacies and inequities inherent in the ideology of romantic

love. The women sonneteers of this study have in common their use of the sonnet both to establish the existence and to depict the consequences of the double bind between desire and agency. All conclude that the solutions to this dilemma are problematic and qualified. Whatever choice a woman makes will entail living with irreconcilable tensions that result from her awareness of what has been lost in the choice itself.

It is also important to note that the four women sonneteers in this study employ speaking personae who are “cursed” with self-awareness, in particular the awareness that the attainment of both love (*eros*) and agency is impossible within their societies. The speakers seem to know, even as they succumb to the experience of erotic desire, that it will end in failure, a failure predicated on their recognition of themselves as autonomous beings. Implicit in their speakers’ experience is the poets’ understanding that self-aware women cannot successfully accommodate the conventions of romantic love, as these conventions limit female agency. The construct of a self-aware speaker allows the authors to make erotic love, a supposedly private experience, the site of public debate. The lyric speakers reference the romantic love myth and its components, they ironize or problematize their participation in the myth, and they use their ironic, or hyper-subjective, stance as a position from which to critique a society in which valorized mainstream cultural narratives limit the range of women’s experience.

The sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dorothy Parker, Elizabeth Bishop, and Julia Alvarez comprise a poetic continuum of conscientious objection to the objectification of women. Each poet locates her female speakers in sites of conflict between women’s psychological and spiritual needs on the one hand, and the cultural beliefs and structures that limit those needs on the other. The themes of these women’s

sonnets resonate with unresolved tension, the result of living within a set of cultural values to which they will not be reconciled. Finally, it is no coincidence that the women sonneteers I am writing about have viewed themselves as occupying liminal positions within their respective social spheres. Their “removal” from mainstream society is both culturally and voluntarily imposed: all of these women held values of love that defied those accepted in contemporary culture. And as will be shown in the sonnets of Julia Alvarez, the adoption of an amatory form to dispel widely accepted values is problematic: it simultaneously asserts and ironizes female poetic agency and authority. I find it significant, moreover, that women sonneteers have remained invested in a common thematic project for nearly five hundred years. The conclusion of this study will examine the viability of the sonnet as an amatory mode for women poets in the twenty-first century.

## CHAPTER TWO

### NEW WOMEN IN THE THROES OF OLD CONSTRUCTS: NARRATIVE EXPECTATIONS AND THE MARRIAGE PLOT

If Christina Rossetti's sonnet sequence *Monna Innominata* brought into focus the irreconcilability of female desire and agency, the poetic voices of a new generation, continent, and culture grappled even more directly with this cultural double-bind. The sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Dorothy Parker further confirm the validity of this form as ideally suited to women's poetic examination of the conflicts inherent in the romantic love plot. Chapters Two and Three investigate Parker and Millay as Modernist women who are invested in critiquing two primary, received cultural ideologies that restrict female agency: the nineteenth-century marriage plot, and the Petrarchan model of romantic desire. Their choice of the sonnet is both ironic and fitting: the form itself preserves and valorizes the kind of passionate love which both poets privileged, in both their lives and their art. At the same time, however, Parker's and Millay's poetic speakers resist notions of womanhood that inhere in the traditional amatory sonnet. And while Millay and Parker both question and rewrite traditional sonnet conventions, their poetic explorations ultimately reveal the cultural and formal limitations of love for modern women living primarily within a socially prescribed world. As I will somewhat regretfully suggest at the end of Chapter Three, Parker's and Millay's attempts to employ the sonnet as a vehicle for self-assertion paradoxically foreshadow its dismantling by Elizabeth Bishop, and its eventual abandonment by Julia Alvarez, since the form will



have proven itself ill-suited to negotiate postmodern solutions to the very conflicts it helped to define.

Emerging as a *fin de siècle* phenomenon, the cultural figure of the New Woman represented the defiance of traditional Victorian expectations for female characterization and experience. From the popular image of the corset-free “Gibson Girl,” to the organization of suffragist and feminist groups, the New Woman embodied a spirit of rebellion that manifested itself through political, social, sexual and literary venues. Middle-class, well-educated, and free to pursue a career independent of—or in conjunction with—marriage, new women were invested in normalizing the ideal of female agency by both openly pursuing economic and political equality, and investigating the meaning of self-development and personal autonomy. After women won the right to vote in 1920, however, the concept of new womanhood became less associated with political activism, and more infused with a notion of modernity that was primarily social and sexual, and signified by the increased presence of women in the public arena.<sup>24,25</sup> As high profile writers living in New York, Parker and Millay were two of the most famous such presences.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Estelle Freedman chronicles the decline in attention to the feminist movement after 1920, noting a key change in the cultural depiction of women, from the New Woman to the Flapper, who was “more concerned with clothing and sex than with politics” (379).

<sup>25</sup> Marianne DeKoven argues that one of the main reasons for this shift was the literary and cultural juggernaut of high modernism, which opposed itself to the idea of the “empowered feminine” (175). Likewise, Suzanne Clark, in her extensive study of the connection between the sentimentalization of women’s poetry and modernism, observes of the 1920’s cultural milieu that it was “the era when poetry—serious poetry—divorced itself from character to become impersonal, when all serious writing was also seriously objectified, alienated, aloof in its literariness from context. Millay, more than any other poet, male or female, represented the opposite extreme” (94).

<sup>26</sup> Although they had many of the same friends, they did not socialize. One of the few times they were known to be in the same place was at the wedding of Franklin Pierce Adams, a friend of Parker’s from the earliest days of the Round Table, and who had met his wife through Millay. Both also traveled to Boston to

Dorothy Parker and Edna Millay have a surprising number of biographical details in common. Born exactly one and a half years apart (Millay on February 22, 1892, and Parker on August 22, 1893), both Millay and Parker were well-educated – although Parker’s formal education was curtailed by her father’s death during her high school years, she made up for this by reading widely in classical literature. Both women played piano, but where Parker was competent, Millay was exceptionally talented. Neither was domestically inclined, and to say that either was in the least responsible about money would be a gross overstatement. Both, according to their biographers, were fundamentally lonely, had a “deep need to be loved,” and took very hard even the slightest criticism of their writing (Epstein 23).<sup>27</sup> Both women would have multiple love affairs; both would suffer an abortion, and both were known for their excessive drinking. However, the partying that seemed attractively notorious in their youth evolved, in their later lives, into the kind of protracted alcoholism that impaired their ability to function and eroded their legendary beauty. When they died, Millay in 1950 and Parker in 1967, the cause of death for each would be reported as “heart attack,” though that determination in either case could not be substantiated.<sup>28</sup>

---

protest the guilty verdict of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a cause to which Parker devoted a good deal more of her time and energy than did Millay.

<sup>27</sup> Meade observes the same of Parker, beginning with her attachment to Edwin Parker while they were engaged. Meade describes Parker’s questioning of Eddie’s affection as “relentless: Did he love her? Did he understand how truly she loved him? How sadly she would miss him? His responses seldom satisfied her” (41).

<sup>28</sup> While they note the presence of a wine bottle on the stair step, early Millay biographers Gould and Gurko both assume that Millay must have suffered a sudden chest pain that caused her to fall from the top of the stairs and break her neck. Recent biographer Daniel Mark Epstein, however, believes that Millay’s fall was the direct result of excessive drinking, and cites a witness who stated that the body smelled heavily of alcohol. Of Parker’s death, states Marion Meade, executrix Lillian Hellman, who by then had little contact with Parker, “answered the medical examiner’s questions and called the newspapers” to report that the cause of death had been a heart attack (412).

As young women, both Parker and Millay sought out a literary life in Manhattan, supporting themselves as single women at a time when it was both difficult and unconventional to do so. Though it took Parker a bit longer than Millay, both became well-known cultural and literary figures at roughly the same time. Parker, who got her first job in late 1914 at the age of twenty-one, moved into a boarding house on the upper west side (103<sup>rd</sup> street) and struggled for two years with the boredom of being a caption-writer for *Vogue*. The twenty-five year old Millay moved to Greenwich Village in November of 1917, and quickly became the darling of bohemia, auditioning for plays and trying out lovers. She made very little money at first, and that mostly from submissions to magazines.

In fact, both women were significant contributors to the same two literary magazines, though in “opposite” time frames. From the time of her arrival in Greenwich Village in November of 1917, until 1920, Millay wrote mostly for *Ainslee’s Magazine*, which paid her well both for her poems, and for the fiction and essays she wrote using the pen name Nancy Boyd. *Vanity Fair*, which had more literary prestige than *Ainslee’s*, gave Parker the position of drama editor in 1917, where she wrote devastating and accurate reviews—until a disparaging comment about Billie Burke (wife of powerful Broadway magnate Florenz Ziegfeld) caused Ziegfeld to complain to *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield. Although she had become immensely popular with the *Vanity Fair* readership, Crowninshield dismissed Parker in January of 1920, after which she was quickly offered the position of drama critic at *Ainslee’s*, and also made lucrative submissions to *Life*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. Meanwhile Millay, whose contributions to *Vanity Fair* increased throughout 1920, was awarded the

position of war correspondent by Crowninshield in January of 1921.<sup>29</sup> It was during this period of the early 1920's that Parker and Millay established the reputations that would follow them throughout their lives; Parker as the peerless wit and first lady of the Algonquin Round Table, and Millay as the high priestess of Eros, and of the poetry that glorified it.

Despite their many similarities, it is the differences between Parker and Millay that are most significant, since they point to explanations for some interesting disparities in their poetic personae. Millay, much more of an optimist than Parker, had a strong sense of self-confidence and independence; even as a child, she took charge of her world with the kind of energy that, at the time, would have been typically defined as masculine. As early as 1906, when Millay was fourteen, she announced her intention to become a published writer, and began submitting her verses to a children's literary magazine (Epstein 12). Not only were her submissions accepted, but she won awards for many of them. Her literary confidence extended itself to her love life over which, with few exceptions, Millay exerted complete control. And she took herself seriously as a poet; so much so, that her columns and short stories were written under the pen name of Nancy Boyd, so that her real name would "signify a poet and nothing else in the minds of her readers" (Gould 100). Parker, on the other hand, displayed a pessimistic outlook on most matters, and this pessimism pervaded the observations for which she became most famous. Thus, witty cynicism became "the" expected characteristic of Parker's public persona. Biographer Marion Meade documents the inferiority Parker felt next to Millay:

---

<sup>29</sup> By several accounts, Crowninshield gave Millay this position so that she could get out of Greenwich Village and go abroad. She had become overworked and tired, both of Village life and of the men with whom she'd been juggling her love affairs.

she felt competitive with Millay, and hated critics' calling her an imitator of Millay's light verse . . . .<sup>30</sup>

She had chafed under the charge that she was a second-rate Edna St. Vincent Millay, an accusation that she was all too ready to accept as true. She bitterly described herself later as a person who had slogged along in Millay's footsteps 'unhappily in my own horrible sneakers.' (150, 302)

Regarding her efforts as a writer, Parker often gave the impression that writing, for her, was not a serious vocation.<sup>31</sup> In this regard she was overly self-deprecating; in truth, Parker was a much better writer than she ever gave herself credit for.

But unlike Millay, Parker began writing, not out of inspiration or the personal need to write, but to support herself: throughout her life, her comments on writing would be tinged with her awareness of the mercenary aspect of her career. Well-aware that it was her satiric wisecracks about contemporary American life that paid the bills, Parker avoided using her art to explore her own interests and experience; not until 1923 would she begin to "acknowledge the timeless subject of female rage" (Meade 109). She procrastinated on nearly every assignment she was given by both magazines and book publishers, and was known to make up one ludicrous excuse after another for missing her deadlines. Having no qualms about her own brilliance, Millay was prolific: she embraced solitude as the nature of her art, and was seldom known to suffer "writer's block," a mental affliction that drove Parker to panic on multiple occasions. One of the areas of life in which the differences between optimist and pessimist had the most effect on the two poets' literary pursuits was marriage.

---

<sup>30</sup> Edmund Wilson's 1944 review in the *New Yorker* of Parker's *Collected Poetry* writes of Parker's poems: "At their best, they are witty light verse, but when they try to be something more serious, they tend to become a kind of dilution of A.E. Housman and Edna Millay" (76).

<sup>31</sup> In discussing the influence of Victorian sentimentality on Parker, Rhonda Pettit asserts that Parker's attitude toward her work derives from the nineteenth-century perception of women poets as "elegant hobbyists" (88).

Despite political and literary movements that problematized marriage, the cultural imperative to marry remained solidly in place as a benchmark for women's "social and personal legitimacy" (Piñes 15). In a middle-class society that stipulated to male prerogative in the choice of whom to marry, both Parker and Millay attempted—with qualified success—to avoid conforming to the tropes of the nineteenth-century marriage plot. Millay, before and after her marriage, espoused the principles of the Free Love doctrine, which supported an individual's right to enter into love relationships with partners of either sex, and without the legal obligations of marriage and family.<sup>32</sup> Her Sapphic relationships in college attest to an early privileging of unfettered sexual expression. During her years in Greenwich Village, the cultural hub of modern bohemianism, her words as well as her behavior reinforced her conception of herself as sexually adventurous and independent. When Floyd Dell proposed marriage to Millay, she refused, on both artistic and domestic grounds.<sup>33</sup> Monogamy, for Millay, would have been a concession of her independence; a sign that a man could own or control an aspect of her autonomy. This attitude, however, is complicated by Millay's later "desperate" attempts to manipulate a lover into marrying her: she had, to some degree, internalized

---

<sup>32</sup> An anarchistic and feminist movement, the Free Love doctrine became established in America circa 1851. Significant early proponents included Robert Owen, Josiah Warren (who coined the term "individual sovereignty"), and Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Nichols, who published journals and established a "Free Love School." In 1872 Victoria Woodhull ran for president on the Free Love platform. One of the most notable representatives of Free Love in the early twentieth century was anarchist Emma Goldman who, along with prominent members of the Socialist party, introduced Free Love to the bohemian community of Greenwich Village. Millay, as well as her lover Floyd Dell, became notably associated with Free Love. (Unfortunately, when the phrase "Free Love" was adopted by the hippies and flower children of the 1960's and '70's, it did not retain its original feminist and political intentions, but became merely a euphemism for promiscuous sex). For a more detailed account of the history of Free Love in the United States, see Candace Falk's *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman*.

<sup>33</sup> Early biographer Marion Gurko quotes Millay's refusal to Dell as follows: "I'm not the right girl to cook your meals and wash and iron your shirts, as a good wife should. It just wouldn't work out" (92).

the cultural pressure to attain married status and expected that she would marry before the age of thirty (Milford 245).<sup>34</sup> When she did marry, in 1923, having already had a number of affairs ranging from the brief and intense to the extended and episodic, she married Eugen Boissevain, a Dutch entrepreneur and proponent of free love, who believed it was important to ensure the thirty-one year old Millay's continued freedom to experience romantic ecstasy.<sup>35</sup> However, Millay's fierce independence seems limited to her romantic relationships and her artistic decisions; she was quite dependent on others to take care of the mundane details of daily existence. Publishers and agents often took care of her bills, as Millay was prone to making impractical and extravagant monetary decisions. And throughout her relationship and marriage to Boissevain, she relied on him to prepare her meals and maintain their home, answer her correspondence, make excuses to the organizers of readings she couldn't bring herself to attend and, finally, to secure morphine prescriptions from her doctors when they had become reluctant to foster her addiction. While their letters to each other are marked by great affection, and the couple by all accounts never quarreled, they maintained separate bedrooms. By his own admission, Boissevain was more of a caretaker than a lover: his primary goal was, as he stated, to keep Millay from experiencing the "mundane moments" that impeded her writing (Epstein 190). It is no great stretch to speculate that Millay's marriage to

---

<sup>34</sup> Millay reportedly wanted her lover George Slocombe (during their affair in 1921) to leave his wife and marry her. When that affair did not work out, she pursued marriage with longtime lover Arthur Ficke. When Ficke confessed his intention to marry someone else, Millay (in 1922) proposed to marry his friend Witter Bynner (who was gay), so that they could all participate in an open marriage (Epstein 161).

<sup>35</sup> Twice, in 1929 and again in 1930, Boissevain wrote personally to George Dillon, entreating him to visit Millay in their home as her lover (Epstein, 209,217). The final episode in Millay's extended and tempestuous affair with Dillon was conducted in 1932, when the two spent two months together in Paris. Just before Dillon's train arrived, Boissevain left Paris and returned to America, so that Millay could more easily pursue her affair with Dillon.

Boissevain was more companionate than romantic, arising out of her inability to negotiate the practicalities of life as independently as she conducted her many love affairs.

More invested in conventions of respectability, Parker never demonstrated any interest in lesbian relationships, nor was she inclined to juggle simultaneous love affairs. Like Millay, however, Parker also practiced Free Love: between the time of her separation from Eddie Parker in 1923 until their divorce in 1928, Parker had numerous extramarital affairs, usually with unmarried men. A key difference in the way Parker and Millay enacted free love was in the way they viewed commitment in relationships. Millay maintained a level of emotional detachment from her lovers, but at least three times Parker dedicated herself emotionally to the men with whom she had love affairs, and hoped desperately that those affairs might lead to marriage. The perceived failure of her affairs with Charles MacArthur and John McClain would result in suicide attempts—which also failed.

If one were to go by the middle class equation of marriage with success, Dorothy Parker did achieve success; in fact, she achieved it three times. This assessment is a bit tongue-in-cheek: her first marriage to Eddie Parker was an unmitigated disaster and, of her two marriages to Alan Campbell, only the first contained any sustained compatibility. She became infatuated with Edwin Pond Parker II in 1916, during her struggle with the Vogue job. He came from “old money” Connecticut, and was starting a lucrative job in Wall Street with Paine Webber. Dating Eddie offered Parker a social status and financial security that she seemed to need:



In 1916 her desire for independence evaporated, along with her fantasy of becoming Edith Sitwell, and she longed to be a wife like all the other women she knew . . . .

All she wanted was to be alone with Eddie, as if he and he only was the remedy for her maladies. She began to see marriage breaking on her horizon like a rainbow that promised sunlight and safety . . . .

Edwin Pond Parker II resembled a package encased in shiny wrappings. At twenty-three, dazzled and in love, she did not pause to wonder very much about its contents. (Meade 40)

By the time of her second marriage to Campbell, she would long have internalized the essence of marriage as “tedium,” but of Eddie Parker she expected the kind of wedded bliss depicted in popular novels (Meade 377). Eddie didn’t allow her to sustain this notion for any length of time. Shortly after they were married (Parker ruefully noted that she had been a bride “for about five minutes”) Eddie decided to serve the military forces by joining the ambulance corps (Meade 42). With the exception of a few brief visits during his training, Parker would not be reunited with her husband until August of 1919, which was probably a good thing, since Eddie left for war a serious alcoholic and returned a morphine addict. He is credited with the encouragement of Parker’s early drinking habits: before she met Eddie, the taste of alcohol made her sick to her stomach. Parker’s marital struggles with her first husband, which included spousal abuse, would not end until 1922, when Eddie left New York to return to Connecticut, but for whatever reason, Parker did not obtain a divorce for six more years.

Parker married Alan Campbell twice: first in 1934, and again in 1950. How long each of these marriages lasted depends rather on how one defines the end of a marriage. Parker and Campbell were exceedingly happy—a singular experience for Parker—in their first marriage. She was 40; he was 29, but the age difference—the source of much speculation among critics, and sometimes friends—never seemed to bother either of

them. As she did in her marriage to Eddie, Parker seemed again to enter matrimony with the notion that it automatically implied “happily ever after.” To Alexander Woollcott, Parker wrote that she was “in a sort of coma of happiness . . . [marriage is] lovelier than I ever knew anything could be” (Meade 239). Marion Meade notes that Parker was also attracted to the cultural “status” that being a wife conferred on her. Happily ever after lasted until about 1940, when Parker’s failed pregnancies and hysterectomy left her with a disappointment and anger that she took out on her husband (Meade 293-299). Out of self-righteous political sympathy, she manipulated Alan into enlisting in the army in 1941; his enlistment began a separation that lasted until their divorce in 1947. Their second marriage ended legally with Alan’s death in June of 1963, but it might be more accurate to say that the union lasted less than one year, since that is how long they managed to live together during the second attempt.

But during the first seven years of their first marriage, it is remarkable to note the several ways in which Parker’s relationship with Campbell resembles that of Millay and Boissevain. Like Boissevain, Campbell took on all of the domestic responsibilities: he “took it for granted that a writer of her stature should be ignorant of cooking, shopping, keeping her bank account in order, indeed coping with any mundane matter (Meade 230).” He also acted as Parker’s amanuensis, signing the personal letters he wrote for her as “Alandotty” (Meade 306). Parker and Campbell were also very successful collaborators; most of their money was earned through their jobs as screenwriters for the major Hollywood studios. But where Millay and Boissevain maintained their brand of marriage for twenty-five years, Parker and Campbell really only managed to live together for seven years in a way that suited them both.

While Dorothy Parker and Edna St. Vincent Millay are certainly considered to have helped define the notion of the “New Woman,” it seems clear that both women struggled, personally and poetically, with the inherent cultural norms surrounding marriage and romantic love. Even though both women married, they retained an uneasy relationship with the idea of traditional marriage and its expectations of monogamy, permanence, and gender conformity. Since, as writers, both women were already in defiance of cultural assumptions concerning the proper sphere for female experience, it stands to reason that their written works would explore sites of contradiction and conflict between female autonomy and the literary depictions of romantic love that helped to reinforce middle-class values. This chapter, and the one that follows it, will examine the ways in which the sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Dorothy Parker address the problem of desire and agency for modern, heterosexual women: the interrogation of the marriage plot, the use of metapoesis, the reversal of the traditional subject position, and the treatment of aging.

As discussed in Chapter One, it was the medieval ethos of courtly love that solidified gendered patterns of romantic desire in the Western world. But the courtly love ethos originally defined itself in *opposition* to marriage.<sup>36</sup> Because desire is predicated on the assumption that the desired object is unobtainable (while the marriage contract establishes quite the opposite), the medieval idealization of desire “foregrounded the theme of adultery already implicit in the convention of vassal-poet worshipping his lord’s lady,” and thus posed a major threat to the social order which the marriage rite helped to

---

<sup>36</sup> In *The Art of Courtly Love*, Andreas Cappellanus asserts that “love [amor] can have no place between husband and wife . . . for what is love but the desire to receive passionately a furtive and hidden embrace?” (23).

sustain (Boone 35). The solution to this problem was to instantiate the cultural valorization of desire in order to insure socioeconomic stability, and this accomplishment is reflected in the *literary* paradigm of mutuality in love and marriage: what Joseph Boone calls “the romantic wedlock ideal” (65). Between the late sixteenth century and the mid-eighteenth century, this ideal evolved from a philosophical and religious concept to “an accepted popular belief” (Boone 32).<sup>37</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, a wealth of popular and canonical novels employed the marriage plot—a storyline that culminates in a wedding celebration for the literary heroine—as their central vehicle, one which worked to establish both the literary and social “conceptualization of romantic love *in* marriage not only as an achievable goal, but as a practical and an imaginative necessity for the fully experienced life” (Boone 6).<sup>38</sup>

Boone’s study of narrative strategies that work to establish the ideal of romantic wedlock is indeed comprehensive. He traces the evolution of several paradigmatic versions of courtship plots that serve to reinforce the gendered hierarchy of conventional marriage, as well as the late nineteenth-century narrative innovations that counter or rewrite the status quo. The primary courtship paradigm that Boone explores is the narrative strategy of “final happiness,” a plotline which became so pervasive in popular fiction that it not only reflected the value of romantic wedlock, but helped to entrench and *perpetuate*

---

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Boone’s study of the literary and cultural progression of romantic love, from being diametrically opposed to marriage to inextricably linked with it, is interesting on its face. For a thorough historical account of the evolution of this narrative paradigm, see *Tradition, Counter-Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction*.

<sup>38</sup> Around and after the mid-century mark, counter-traditional fictions emerge and begin to question the validity of conventional marriage plots. Novels like *Wuthering Heights* (1847) complicate the wedlock ideal; in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), that ideal is rendered completely untenable.

that value in mainstream culture.<sup>39</sup> While originally developed as a fictive plot, many of the assumptions that inform this courtship narrative also make their way into poetry: four of the poets in this study use sonnets and sonnet sequences to interrogate the effects of the courtship paradigm on female agency.

If, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis asserts, “one of the great moments of ideological negotiation in any work occurs in the choice of a resolution for the various services it provides,” then it is helpful to review the way final moments, or narrative outcomes, in popular fiction contribute to received cultural expectations about marriage, particularly for women (DuPlessis 3).<sup>40</sup> Most popular novels of the nineteenth century culminate in a wedding, a ceremony that symbolizes to the community, as it confers upon a young heterosexual couple, the promise of “happily ever after.” The repeated use of a wedding as narrative closure likewise instills in readers the idea that the experience of female desire necessarily culminates in marriage; thus, two powerful myths, desire and happiness, are combined in order to idealize an historically practical social institution. The final destination for women, in both literature and culture, becomes marriage, that institution beyond the celebration of which, there is nothing.

Both culturally approved and widely disseminated, the “successful” marriage plot reduces female agency by relocating a woman’s individual status in her role as a wife—a role that is gendered passive, and subordinate to male authority within the sex-gender system. As Boone’s study shows, however, there exist counter-traditional narratives,

---

<sup>39</sup> The expectation of the wedding as the culmination of a woman’s personal achievement and happiness remains a popular value even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as evidenced by the success of the wedding industry (and sales of Harlequin & Silhouette novels, the typical format of which requires final happiness).

<sup>40</sup> One of the purposes of this thesis is to demonstrate the way poetic structures, like their narrative counterparts, may function as “working apparatuses of ideology” (DuPlessis 3).

through which feminist novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries question the received assumption that marriage is the be-all, end-all of a woman's existence. The primary literary strategy, explored by both DuPlessis and Boone, that *counters* the hegemonic paradigm of final happiness is that of "writing beyond the ending" (DuPlessis 5), a narrative tactic which extends the fictive plot beyond the climactic wedding scene. Usually such ensuing chapters reveal marital stasis: the inevitable decline of romantic passion that was idealized through wedlock. How female protagonists respond to issues like marital stasis or ennui, and the loss of identity and agency in marriage, becomes the focus of feminist literary investigation. As a narrative strategy, writing beyond or outside scripted plots "signals a dissent from social norms . . . .[and] distance[s] the reader from codes of expected narrative and from patterns of response that had seemed to command universal or natural status" (DuPlessis 20).

The fictive tradition of invoking narrative strategies that question dominant cultural paradigms is also evident in specific sonnets and sonnet sequences by women. We have already seen how historical sonnet conventions reinforced cultural expectations for romantic love relationships. And although such sonnets revolve around the experience of desire, and not marriage, it is significant that modernist women sonnet writers create points of intersection between the two. When a form like the amatory sonnet, which perpetuates cultural assumptions about romantic desire, takes as its subject the historically non-romantic cultural practice of marriage, the opportunity to critique both literary and cultural ideology is created. Like their fictive counterparts, modernist women's sonnets and sonnet sequences can also "write beyond the ending," invoking the

marriage plot in order to question received assumptions about the role of marriage in female desire and happiness.

In taking on the subject of marriage in modern America, Parker and Millay were up against a literary history of fiction and poetry that defined marriage as the completion of a woman's experience. Traditional nineteenth-century narrative structures, and the marriage plot in particular, acted as powerful culture-bearers, not only depicting social norms, but reinforcing them as well. At the same time, departures from standard plotlines or deviation from socially acceptable narrative outcomes marked points of critical investigation into cultural norms. A sequence of sonnets, because it progresses through time, can function as a narrative; it can parallel a fictive plotline from exposition to dénouement. The Victorian sequence *Monna Innominata* follows the standard love plot, but withholds the expected narrative resolution, in order to create tension between female spirituality and marriage. The American modernist movement, with its insistence on the abandonment of Victorian values and literary structures, made room for more direct critique of traditional social roles and modes of desire. Although critics do not typically consider Dorothy Parker and Edna St. Vincent Millay to be part of the female modernist coterie (which includes, for example, H.D., Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein), I maintain that through their use of the sonnet they do nonetheless take part in a modernist project: the invocation and critique of received cultural expectations for women's experience that attach to specific literary forms.

The ability in 1920's New York to live, work, and *publish* as a single woman provided a vantage point from which to openly critique the cultural norm of traditional marriage as potentially subsuming female identity and autonomy. For most women in

modern America (i.e., those who lived in middle-class society and not in bohemian Greenwich Village), marriage was the institution that both provided access to and legitimized female desire; women who had love affairs before or outside of marriage sacrificed social respectability. Both Millay and Parker wrote sonnets that attempt to valorize female speakers who defy marital constraints in order to maintain their independence, even at the expense of desire and social position.

Dorothy Parker's mastery of sophisticated light verse and ironic short fiction certainly argues for her inclusion among those writers who participated in the project of modernist detachment. These two genres, for which she is most recognized, reinforced her public and literary reputation as a liberated, socially formidable woman. With the publication of her first volume of poetry, *Enough Rope*, in 1926, however, Parker takes up the amatory sonnet, a form whose prescribed structure and themes rendered it so outmoded as to be irrelevant to most modernists.<sup>41</sup> In total, Parker wrote only sixteen sonnets, thirteen of which appear in one of three primary collections published between 1926 and 1931.<sup>42</sup> In contrast with Parker's well-known literary "voice," marked by dry wit and emotional detachment, her sonnets reveal a more fragile lyric persona, inwardly devastated by the ravages of romantic love while trying—and mostly failing—to appear jauntily unfazed through each disastrous affair. While this persona is not the only one in

---

<sup>41</sup> Critiquing the modernist capabilities of women poets on the basis of their use of the sonnet form constitutes something of a double standard. W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell and e.e. cummings wrote sonnets, yet their status as modernists remains unquestioned. Attempts, beginning in the nineteenth century, to re-gender the sonnet as feminine in the wake of women poets' increased success with the form strike me as disingenuous and ultimately unsuccessful. For an extended discussion of the strategies used by male authors and critics to diminish female literary achievement, see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*.

<sup>42</sup> *Enough Rope* (1926) contains six sonnets; *Sunset Gun* (1928) contains four; *Death and Taxes* (1931) contains three. The remaining three sonnets, all written prior to April of 1923, were published singly in newspapers and periodicals, but did not appear in collected form until 1996, when Stuart Silverstein published *Not Much Fun: The Lost Poems of Dorothy Parker*.



Parker's volume, it certainly dominates the amatory poems. The sonnets, seemingly out of place in a modernist oeuvre, are hardly a romantic indulgence on Parker's part; rather, they constitute a sharply modernist assessment and feminist critique of the way women's advancement is limited by a pervasive cultural value. The sonnet form is useful to Parker precisely because it is the literary *sine qua non* of romantic love; encoded within its poetic conventions is the conventional ideology that makes gender hierarchy a requirement of erotic desire. Furthermore, Parker employs the sonnet genre, not to perpetuate, but to dismantle patriarchal values. In fact, all six sonnets in *Enough Rope* expose, at times poignantly, at others with undisguised anger, the vagaries, betrayals, and disillusionments that lie behind the romantic love myth. By creating poetic aberrations in conventional sonnet structure, speaker, and theme, Parker, as we will see, reveals the flaws in the romantic ideal, and demonstrates the consequences of women's participation and belief in the myth of final happiness.

Unlike Dorothy Parker, whose sonnets may be her best-kept secret, Edna St. Vincent Millay garnered most of her critical and popular attention as a sonneteer. Millay's sonnets explore multiple constructions of love—as a cultural structure that defines men and women unequally, as an expression of desire, and as a vehicle for female agency. And while it is the subject of erotic love and female desire that dominates Millay's one hundred eighty-one collected sonnets, and in particular the famed, fifty-one sonnet sequence *Fatal Interview*, a less critically popular sequence of seventeen sonnets, entitled "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" (published in *The Harp Weaver and Other Poems*, 1923), investigates the ways in which traditional tropes of desire and its culturally accepted outcomes fail women who would attempt to negotiate the quest for agency

within the limits of middle class society. The sequence dispassionately recounts the experience of a woman who had left her marriage, but returns in the face of her husband's terminal illness. Her internal confrontation with the strictures of her marriage, and her outward refusal to fulfill the community's expectation that she conform to the role of nurturer made this sequence a real challenge for the 1920's reader and reviewer.

Notable for its departures from typical lyric sonnet sequences, "Ungrafted Tree," until relatively recently, has suffered from both lack of critical attention, and criticism that dismissed its literary merit based on the absence of erotic transcendence. Although *Fatal Interview*, Millay's most famous erotic sequence, had not yet been written, in critical and popular reception there was already the expectation that Millay's sonnets would evoke sexuality, revere the erotic. In his lengthy, 1927 review of *The Harp Weaver*, John Hyde Preston extols those poems that express a "sensuous paganism" (146). Preston praises Millay's sonnets for their "inner kernel of thought and strength of human love," with the notable exception of the "Ungrafted Tree" sequence, stating that "these are, to my mind, sadly disappointing" (151). This type of review, which privileges the expectation of eros in sonnets, reinforces the notion of the strength and pervasiveness of the romantic ideal in modern American culture. Robert Wiltenburg identifies the purpose of the sequence as the depiction of "high domestic tragedy" of a bleak marriage (290). Noting that "Ungrafted Tree" is "unlike most of Millay's other sonnets," Walter Minot focuses on a strictly biographical reading, in which he correlates the death of the husband to Edna Millay's subconscious desire to murder her father for abandoning her (263). Finally, several feminist critics find in "Ungrafted Tree" themes that are significantly more liberating. Michailidou examines the sequence within the framework

of domestic confinement and release, while Fairley argues that the central journey of the wife is private and internal, moving from meditation to self-consciousness. My reading of “Ungrafted Tree” emphasizes the way this sonnet sequence enacts the narrative strategy of writing beyond the ending of the traditional courtship narrative, and thus constitutes a primary mode of resistance to the notion of marriage as an ideal structure within which women achieve personal satisfaction.

The central ambivalence that runs through all seventeen sonnets in “Ungrafted Tree” centers around the conflict of how to reconcile marital stasis and the sense of “duty” with a woman’s self-definition, and Millay will *not* be reconciled to the notion that the second of these must necessarily be subsumed by the first. In fact, the title of the sequence itself suggests that the female protagonist neither conforms nor belongs to the community in which she has resided. Her “graft,” or marriage, has not been successful; she has no attachment to her husband or to her (“his”) home.<sup>43</sup> The sequence begins with an abrupt rejection of the myth of final happiness: the opening lines reveal that the woman had left her marriage months ago, but returns in the face of her husband’s imminent death:

So she came back into his house again  
And watched beside his bed until he died,  
Loving him not at all.

This exposition, in its very harshness, forbids the kind of sympathy that is customarily sought by a lyric narrator. The reader is immediately confronted with what would have been a culturally unpopular image of marital detachment and stasis: the abruptness and

---

<sup>43</sup> In a more positive sense, the woman’s ungraftedness indicates that her identity has not been effectively subsumed by marriage and domesticity. Though problematized by the fact that cultivated trees depend on grafting for survival, the failure of the graft in this case also offers the metaphorical possibility for self-definition outside of cultural norms.

strength of the diction in line three forces the reader to face the absence of eros within the construct of married love. Four masculine pronouns to one feminine pronoun establish the husband's dominance—even in his weakened state—but the wife resists the subsumption of her will by maintaining a perceptual and emotional distance from her marriage, even though she has—physically—come “home.” Although she has returned to the house in which she lived, it is not hers, but “his”; the marriage bed as well has been stripped of any notion of communal space. Singular pronouns reinforce separate existences. The wife also resists being drawn back into her expected role as nurturer: from this first sonnet in the sequence until the last, her real-time interaction with her husband is reduced to two inactive verbs: watching, and waiting. Although she does what she has to do in order to keep the house running, she mentally removes herself from her husband. Nor does she feel any sympathy for his state – indeed, she feels precisely nothing. The wife's detachment, and the possible reason for it, is further explored as the sequence progresses. The disintegration and death of love in marriage is further reinforced by subsequent images of nature:

The winter rain	
Splashed in the painted butter-tub outside,	4
Where once her red geraniums had stood,	
Where still their rotted stalks were to be seen;	
The thin log snapped; and she went out for wood,	
Bareheaded, running the few steps between	8
The house and shed; there, from the sodden eaves	
Blown back and forth on ragged ends of twine,	
Saw the dejected creeping-Jinny vine,	
(And one, big-aproned, blithe, with stiff blue sleeves	12
Rolled to the shoulder that warm day in spring,	
Who planted seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming).	

The flowers and vines planted by the wife did not take root and blossom; likewise, the woman's former hopes and dreams for post-wedding happiness do not bear up under her real-life experience of marriage.

Marriage, as we immediately see, is an inhospitable climate for the protagonist. This point is not merely established in the first, expository sonnet, but entrenched: references to dampness and steady rain continue through the sixth sonnet in the sequence. The inclement weather is a metaphor for the stasis and dampening of the woman's emotional presence in her married life. Her external, married world has grown gray and rotten, like the sawdust on the floor or the dead stalks of her geraniums. The rain is so persistent as to numb the protagonist to the possibility of other kinds of weather: when she tries to envision a summer day, humming with life, the rain intrudes upon her imaginative abilities. Finally, the climate—literal and metaphorical—is set up in direct opposition to the woman's need for warmth and comfort. Although the woman goes to the woodshed for fuel in the first sonnet, she is unable to actually light a fire in her house until the end of the fourth sonnet. The wood-box is empty; she must brave the elements and insects; the wood is damp and will not burn; and her first attempt to breathe life into the newly-lit bark results only in "odorous smoke." The parenthetical sexual reference in sonnet *iv* to the protagonist's former—and also failed—attempt to arouse the fire of passion in her husband through a "similar task" reinforces the metaphor of weather-as-marital-barometer. Even once the protagonist gets the fire going, it does not provide the expected comfort. Images of the flames threaten more than comfort her; the flames are compared to a "pack of hounds." Moreover, the fire is not enough to stave off the darkness, the personification of which creates a final threatening image: "And the blue

night stood flattened against the window, staring through.” Thus, a four-sonnet long exposition in which the protagonist attempts but fails to create some domestic comfort is the first powerful indication that the hostile world that besieges the protagonist is a domestic one.

Sonnets five through eight in the sequence depict the intrusion of society and its expectations into the house the protagonist shared with her husband, and she perceives these intrusions as no less hostile than the weather. The habitual and social calls of the grocer and the neighborhood women, if acknowledged, would force the protagonist to conform to social pressures by resuming and performing customary gender roles. Though she cannot quite prevent the intrusions, the protagonist’s refusal to present herself as the devoted wife constitutes a subtle form of resistance to public pressure on private (marital) duty. In the fifth and sixth sonnets, for example, the protagonist avoids any interaction with the surrounding community: she hides in the passage at the top of the cellar stairs when the grocer’s delivery man arrives, hoping he will not discover her presence. This closet-like little area, “the cellar way,” seems rather a precarious “safe space” for the protagonist. As the delivery man in his “heavy oilskins” invades her kitchen, tracking “muddy rubber boots across the floor,” the protagonist is all too aware that from her position of limbo, she has nowhere to go but down. All of her senses respond to the dark, damp sourness of the basement, its “narrow wooden stairway still/Plunging into the earth.” The protagonist occupies an untenable position, caught, as it were, between marriage and death.<sup>44</sup> The grocer’s departure allows her to emerge from hiding, but her

---

<sup>44</sup> In *Becoming a Heroine*, Rachel Brownstein examines the cultural entrenchment of the marriage plot, with its binary construction of outcomes for the heroine, who “moves toward her inevitable end, death or marriage” (81). In her speaker’s refusal to conform to the common model of domestic bliss, Millay seems

reentry into the kitchen and her initial response to the delivered goods reveal how the habits of domesticity dull a woman's existence. The protagonist sees, in lines 4-12:

The many paper parcels in a stack	4
Upon the dresser; with accustomed care	
Removed the twine and put the wrappings by,	
Folded, and the bags flat, that with an air	
Of ease had been whipped open skillfully,	8
To the gape of children. Treacherously dear	
And simple was the dull, familiar task.	
And so it was she came at length to ask:	
How came the soda there? The sugar here?	12

It is interesting to note, throughout "Ungrafted Tree," the ways that *men's* worlds and work, even work that borders on the domestic, is so much more exciting than women's tasks. The grocer's whipping open his bags with a flourish constitutes a performance that holds children spellbound. In contrast, the woman's later "performance" with the same bag is one of emptying, closing and muting; she deals with the fragments—the twine, the wrappings and the bag—of a more exciting whole.

The last four lines in the above segment are a metaphor for the way the enculturated habits of domesticity, of "woman's work" can lull women until they are effectively sleepwalking through their existence. The phrase "at length" is particularly ambiguous, referring locally to the protagonist's act of folding and putting away bags, while pointing in a broader sense to a lifetime of numbing household tasks. Eventually, we see that the woman is so unaware of her actions that she isn't quite sure of the purpose behind them. She reacts with surprise and confusion at the appearance and location of sugar and soda in the pantry; this response is a metaphorical suggestion for the

---

here to both echo and skew that paradigm: the speaker is already married, and so should have achieved the "successful" outcome for a heroine; yet, she complicates the idea that marriage is a successful outcome by hiding from the usual patterns of domesticity. Caught in a small space between two symbolically uninhabitable areas (the hearth and the tomb) the speaker has "no way out."

protagonist's concern with her own location in life: "How did *I* end up here?" she essentially wonders.

Her reaction to the recognition that her life has been largely unexamined "breaks the spell." In the couplet of sonnet *vi*, we see the protagonist break out of her automatic state and enact a mode of resistance, though small:

Then the dream broke. Silent, she brought the mop,  
And forced the trade-slip on the nail that held his razor strop.

The protagonist, having questioned her place in a patriarchal world, performs a minor act of rebellion: she deliberately violates the accepted order of things by "forcing" the grocery receipt onto the nail designated for her husband's razor. As rebellion goes, this act can have little effect on the wife's external reality, but the miniature scope of her resistance—and her simple need to resist—inspires sympathy for the wife as she struggles with her own sense of displacement.

Sonnet *vii* comments on the failure of another, timeworn, mode of escaping the "ever-clamorous care" of marital drudgery: the pursuit of domestic perfection. In this sonnet, though the objects of domesticity are essentially "mean and ugly," the fervor of making them "fair" has the effect of "muting" the woman's mind to her misery:

One way there was of muting in the mind  
A little while the ever clamorous care;  
And there was rapture, of a decent kind,  
In making mean and ugly objects fair: 4

I suspect Millay of deliberate humor in line three, since the kind (if there can be said to be "kinds") of rapture Millay pursued in her real life, and which her lyric subjects commonly experience, cannot be effectively qualified by the word "decent." Nor is the housework-induced "rapture" in this sonnet effective. After seven lines of abrading and





In order to make sure the women are truly gone, the protagonist must force herself into the present moment; that “one instant” of consciousness leads to all sorts of cacophonous and painful violations of her inner world, the endurance of which is both excruciating and inescapable.

Mary B. Moore, in her study of women sonneteers and Petrarchism, identifies Millay's “Ungrafted Tree” as a “reversal” of Petrarchan ideology and the “rejection of romantic love;” however, her further claim that Petrarchan idealism is replaced by the domestic landscape as a source from which the protagonist creates positive subjectivity is not tenable. She writes:

Instead of a discourse of desire, *Tree* sees love as domestic care and vigilance . . . Particularity and substantiation serve the ends of female subjectivity because these qualities mirror the speaker's role as source of material nurturance and affirm her involvement with the things of this world while also demonstrating a way of being that transforms but does not idealize the domestic material world. Female domesticity becomes the site of female subjectivity and creativity. (222)

But as we have clearly seen in the first eight sonnets of this sequence, female domesticity, like quotidian marriage, has worked to *reduce* the protagonist's subjectivity, and her awareness of this condition prompts her withdrawal from all but the most essential of domestic activities, and from the “material world” as well. Moreover, in seeking to locate a redemptive source for the female protagonist in domestic metaphors and tropes, Moore's reading of the first sonnet in the sequence ignores the surrounding textual references that undercut the very metaphors she cites:

[The poem] enfigures a vision of rural America and feminine domesticity that affirms the value and beauty of materiality and especially of domestic objects: a “painted butter tub,” a “creeping-jinny vine” (223).

In actuality, the vine is described as “dejected;” the butter tub full of “rotted stalks” and “winter rain.” No matter that red geraniums *used to* occupy the tub, these lines emphasize the protagonist’s present-day perspective. And while Moore does note the imagery of “vegetative death” in the expository sonnet, she again insists on a redemptive reading that is not there:

At the same time [these images] point to a resurrection, to a “far blossoming.” The vegetative imagery, like the domestic objects, ground the speaker in her own memory of herself—a memory not of erotic desire and its fulfillment but of strength, independence, and work . . . .

In this sonnet sequence, the apron, that guise of female work, is a central image (see sonnet *xi*), and its treatment symbolizes the domestic power and even the subjectivity of women, as in Sonnet I’s couplet *big-aproned, blithe, with stiff blue sleeves / Rolled to the shoulder*. This image empowers the female figure, in its workmanlike rolled sleeves and in its musing, impelling her to a “far blossoming.” As the woman muses, she transcends her traditional role as *muse*, one who inspires . . . instead she engenders her own thoughts, her own musings. (224)

The logical flaws underlying these assertions are those of *time* and *tense*: all of the imagery in the lines to which Moore refers is located in the final three lines of the poem, which are contained within parentheses. The use of parenthesis calls into question the depiction of idealized domesticity by alerting the reader to the non-linear and extra-spatial construction of the sonnet. In the midst of viewing the current degradation of the things she’d planted outdoors, the woman turns her vision inward to recall the vision of her former self that had earnestly planted the now-barren landscape. The acts of “musing” and planting that Moore defines as indicative of future subjectivity turn out, in light of the sonnet’s beginning, to have already taken place, and are revealed as the present-day protagonist’s *memory* of an already-failed idealism. The woman who, in the last line of the poem, planted seeds and “*mused* [emphasis mine] ahead to their far blossoming,” is the woman who did not achieve the blossoming of her dreams, but abandoned her

marriage instead. The circular structure of time in this poem denies the possibility of transcendence and empowerment; rather, it establishes the *a priori* failure of romantic and domestic idealism as one of the defining premises of the sequence.

It is enough, I think, to argue that this sequence undercuts Petrarchan idealism without also forcing it to employ the Petrarchan mode in praise of a substitute ideal; in fact, it is essential that we, like Millay's protagonist, remain forced to occupy a perspective that does not offer the comfort of ideal rescue, through either love or domestic work. "Ungrafted Tree" is certainly invested in dispelling romantic illusions but, as the sequence progresses, it becomes next to impossible to look to the domestic landscape as a metaphor for female strength or identity. Instead, as we will see, the protagonist further defines herself in opposition to this oppressive sphere of existence.

Despite the ambivalent clues at the outset of the sequence that suggest the protagonist's early expectations of happy domesticity in marriage, the first eight sonnets as a group have such an alienating effect on the reader as to encourage negative judgments of the protagonist and her response to her situation. It is easy to assume, for example, that this loveless marriage is somehow the woman's fault: the values of middle-class women—as exemplified by the group of jelly deliverers—are defined strictly as nurturing approaches to marriage and domesticity. The many anomalies in the wife's behavior—her attempt to leave her husband, her subsequent lack of interest in his illness and death, and her refusal to connect with those who belong to the community in which her marriage presumably was formalized—are sufficient cause for the kind of speculation that calls into question the wife's identity as a woman. Insofar as her experience runs counter to hegemonic expectations for marital bliss, the protagonist's departure from the

community's codes of behavior characterizes her as heartless—ungrateful for both her husband and her home. In female communities where conformity validates identity, the judgment made about women who depart from the standards for womanly conduct is that there must be “something wrong” with them; consequently, they are either viewed with suspicion or ostracized from the community.

If the protagonist were simply a cold fish, not cut out for married life, or had refused to participate in the marriage enterprise, there would be no point to this sequence. But such is not the case: there is evidence that the protagonist had believed in and worked toward the ideals of romantic wedlock and female domesticity: she cultivated a garden, planted flowers, kept a clean and well-organized house, tried to find value in the “domestic goddess” paradigm, and was sexually assertive in the course of fulfilling her husband's needs. However, it is easy to overlook these details, insinuated as they are into a preponderance of evidence that documents the effects of marital stasis.

It is an unusual and risky tactic for Millay to spend eight consecutive sonnets—the first half of the sequence—refusing her contemporary reader an empathetic point of entry into her protagonist's experience. In the absence of any inclination toward self-recognition, the reader—as Millay's reviewers made clear—remains comfortably outside the protagonist's world, and thus tends to view the protagonist as “other;” her unhappy marriage, by extension, is viewed as a cultural anomaly. Just in time to forestall reader rejection of “Ungrafted Tree,” Millay changes direction. Two sonnets inserted at the midpoint of this sequence reveal that this empty marriage, and its spiritually drained protagonist, started out on the same fairytale path of scripted romance that society valorizes. Sonnets *ix* and *x* interrupt the unsympathetic narrative of marital stasis:

together they form a non-linear “flashback” that locates the origin of the protagonist’s marriage soundly within the conventional narrative of romantic desire. Such a flashback is crucial to the sequence for two reasons: it prevents the reader from dismissing the woman’s marriage as aberrant or atypical and, subsequently, it forces the reader to confront the myth of final happiness and its destructive effect on female selfhood.

Sonnet *ix* reveals how easily young girls learn to filter the emergent psychological quest for selfhood (what Boone, et. al., would identify as female *bildung*) through the courtship narrative, which replaces the pursuit of an individuated self with a “longing for the dissolution of identity as the only means of overcoming otherness and achieving ultimate union” (Boone 39). Lines 3 and 4 establish the fundamental “need” of the protagonist, as she describes an ordinary boy

Who had come into her life when anybody  
Would have been welcome, so in need was she.

It is significant that Millay does not define this initial need as romantic. Rather, the young girl has a vague, undefined, yet desperate awareness of being “so in need,” and in lieu of the opportunity for *bildung*, this need remains undefined and thus is easily—and mistakenly—projected onto another:

They had become acquainted in this way:  
He flashed a mirror in her eyes at school;  
By which he was distinguished; from that day  
They went about together, as a rule. 8  
She told, in secret and with whispering,  
How he had flashed a mirror in her eyes;  
And as she told, it struck her with surprise  
That this was not so wonderful a thing. 12  
But what’s the odds?—It’s pretty nice to know  
You’ve got a friend to keep you company everywhere you go.

The instigatory act of flashing the mirror in the girl's eyes is open to several readings, all of which invoke tropes of desire.<sup>46</sup> The girl's openness to, or need of, *something* that will mark her life as extraordinary transforms the boy's provocation into the exposition of a romantic plot wherein the opposition of "masculine" and "feminine" energies forms the basis of attraction. In keeping with the successful romantic wedlock outcome, the relationship moves from polarity to mutuality, and the girl is quickly—within two lines—subsumed under the "rule" of courtship. The narrative is reinforced and glamorized through the girl's excited—and secretive—re-telling of the episode to her friends; repetition of the narrative constitutes a kind of ritualization that, ultimately, makes the story itself more powerful than the girl's momentary opportunity to question either the magic of the story, or her participation in it. The closure of this sonnet emulates the manner in which traditional narrative fiction works to encode both the "fictionalization of the married state as the individual's one true source of earthly happiness," and the "illusion of order and resolution that... glosses over the contradictions, the inequities concealed in the institution of marriage itself" (Boone 9).<sup>47</sup> By the final lines of the first "flashback" sonnet, the girl's need has been defined for her through narrative convention, and thus she is awarded the security of her place in society as part of a "happy couple."

---

<sup>46</sup> Freud might read the mirror light as an act of symbolic penetration; in Jungian terms, the reflection is a metaphor for anima projection, which is the first stage of romantic infatuation. Both of these interpretations support one archetypal courtship pattern identified by Boone: the frustration of unfulfilled desire frequently manifests itself through discordant elements or "oppositional forces" which are then "displaced onto sacred or profane elements . . . . While this intermingling of divine and human loves derives from the deeply rooted human feeling that earthly love is in some way also a transcendent experience, it nonetheless posits male and female elements as poles in an opposition weighted in favor of the superior "masculine" forces of light, heaven, spirit" (40).

<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, it is not necessary for a romantic text to refer to a literal marriage in order to qualify as a "wedlock form": narratives that contain elements of the courtship plot "almost uniformly uphold the concept of romantic wedlock as their symbolic center and ideal end" (Boone 9). The implied youth of the boy and girl described in sonnets *ix* and *x* make literal reference to marriage unrealistic; nonetheless their embarkation upon a romantic wedlock plot is clear.

It takes more than one sonnet to complete the progress of the romantic love plot. Whereas sonnet *ix* reveals how young people fall automatically into culturally approved but superficial patterns for relationship, sonnet *x* demonstrates the role that ritualized desire plays in the progress toward romantic wedlock. The central action of this sonnet establishes mystery, or “the unknown,” as a key component of desire, and demonstrates the way people seek out contexts for self-mystification in order to create that desire. Since at the root of all desire is the assumption that one is not in possession of the desired object, Millay, in sonnet *x*, must destabilize the familiarity of the boy and girl previously established in sonnet *ix*. The setting of the poem, a moonlight swim, helps make possible the girl’s willing self-delusion. She need swim only “a little” to “[lose] sight of shore;” her literal groundlessness is a symbolic loss of perspective. Moreover, the juxtaposition of night and noon parallels a shift in the way the girl views the boy:

who was at noon	4
Simple enough, not different from the rest,	
Wore now an air of pleasant mystery as he went	
Which seemed to her an honest enough test	
Whether she loved him, and she was content.	8

Interestingly, the verb usage in lines four through six shifts as well, indicating that the core nature of the boy has not changed: he *is* ordinary, but *wears*—as a temporary condition—the air of mystery which the girl ascribes to him. The night setting also contains a romantically hyperbolized “million crickets’ choir,” whose singing is “so loud, so loud” that it simultaneously fills the girl’s head with romance and drowns out any opportunity for the voice of reason to be heard. The couplet of this sonnet offers the girl a setting in which to see her situation more clearly, but she instead chooses the deliberate obfuscation of darkness:



Stark on the open field the moonlight fell,  
But the oak tree's shadow was deep and black and secret as a well.

The late night, the lake, the crickets, the shadows of the oak tree—all of these components combine to effect a “staging” for desire, a staging which supplants the ordinariness of human relationship with an artificially induced longing that in turn becomes equated with love. Thus the flashback sonnets demonstrate the public (sonnet *ix*) and private (sonnet *x*) ways that constructions of desire are validated and reinforced.

Strategically, Millay constructs these flashback sonnets to include the protagonist's present-day assessment of her youthful romanticism, juxtaposing the power of the scripted courtship narrative with an implied recognition of how inauthentic such experience is. Although the sonnets are primarily told as a recounting by a third person narrator, there is a single moment of omniscience in each sonnet where the voice of the present-day wife interprets, in hindsight, the workings of her youthful mind. In each of these two moments, we see how the girl's immaturity contributes to her automatic embracing of the romantic love plot. The reference in sonnet *ix* to the protagonist's overwhelming but unspecified need at the time she met the boy (*ll.* 3-4) demonstrates the consequences of her inability to discern the needs of her evolving self. Her failure, or perhaps her lack of opportunity, to examine this need renders the girl indiscriminate and naive. She knew nothing at all about the boy before he blinded her with the mirror, nor did she make a conscious choice to “go about” with him, but passively followed the “rule.” Likewise, in sonnet *x*, the young girl's superficial thinking is revealed, when the air of “pleasant mystery” surrounding the boy is the girl's only criterion for love. The mature protagonist states that, at the time, this mystery “seemed an honest enough test/Whether she loved him,” but the protagonist is also hinting at the opposite. To

“seem” is not to “be,” and the qualifier, “honest *enough*” calls into question the honesty of the test, while implying that the girl is not being honest with herself.

A second strategy Millay uses in both sonnets is the insertion of a single question that could “turn” the direction of the sonnet away from romantic resolution, but which instead is quickly followed by a *literal* rebuttal that redirects the action along the prescribed plot. In the midst of her dramatic retelling of the mirror story to her friends, the girl experiences a moment of sudden awareness that would normally lead to further questioning, but the next line cuts off that opportunity:

And as she told, it struck her with surprise  
That this was not so wonderful a thing. 12  
But what’s the odds? —

That question, “what’s the odds?” is essentially a *non sequitur*; it has no actual meaning in the context of the girl’s momentary awareness. Rather, it acts like a “throwaway line” or cliché that conveniently forestalls the need for further thinking and abruptly shifts the focus of the sonnet back toward the goal of romantic happiness. The same pattern of a question followed by a “but” occurs in the final lines of sonnet *x*. This time, the girl actually asks herself a question, but poses it in such a way that question would seem to answer itself—another logical fallacy:

And if the man were not her spirit’s mate,  
Why was her body sluggish with desire? 12

In this case, it is as if the girl is “drugged” by romance: she is compelled to seek out the “deep and black and secret” shadow of the oak tree—the mysterious and obscure context in which desire operates—rather than examine her motives in the stark light of the open field. Thoroughly seduced by desire, her ability to question the assumption that physical



The woman's response to this supposed "gift" (l. 12) is violence; her tearing at the remainder of the apron symbolizes her determination to resist re-submergence into the gendered model of marriage.<sup>49</sup> Spring in this sonnet is not perceived as a time of renewal, but as a dreadful reminder of the woman's entrapment in a cycle of domestic drudgery.

Jane Stanbrough, in her essay on Millay's poetry, calls Millay's sonnet sequences "extended narratives of woman's psychological disintegration," yet uses only one sonnet of the seventeen in "Ungrafted Tree" to support this claim (227). While Stanbrough rightly notes that sonnet *xi* conveys a sense of "suffocation," the remainder of her reading ignores deliberate ambiguities and ambivalences that would render sonnet *xi* a metaphor more for woman's resistance than for her vulnerability.

Much critical speculation has been made of the figure of the apron in sonnet *xi* which, for Stanbrough, constitutes "one of Millay's most brilliant images of woman's spiritual suffocation"; she reads the apron as a sympathetic symbol for the protagonist's "relinquished self" (227). However, this reading of the apron is undercut, both by the adjectives that refer to the apron, and by the unambiguous actions of the protagonist in line thirteen. The apron, a metaphor for domestic drudgery, lies in a state of disuse, dead like the "brown grass." If anything, it is the ideal of domesticity symbolized by the apron that is suffocated under winter snow. The apron is "forgotten" and "quaint"—so unfamiliar to the protagonist as to seem "novel as a gift," but her response to such a gift is violent. Stanbrough reads the protagonist's intention as "try[ing] to resurrect [the apron]," but the four verbs in line thirteen ("struck," "pulled," "pried," "tore") imply that

---

<sup>49</sup> Sandra Gilbert, unlike Moore and Stanbrough, does not read the apron sympathetically, but as a figure of female immobilization: "emblem of an inescapable marriage, an inexorably recurring female role" (qtd. in Thesing 177).

her earlier reluctance to recover the apron concludes in her attempt to *destroy* it, along with any conception of herself as a domestic servant.

Of Millay's sonnets, Stanbrough concludes generally that "reality is oppression and victimization...[and] brutalization and victimization characterize woman's existence" (226). While some of Millay's sonnets certainly depict oppression and victimization, the insistence on an overall interpretation of woman-as-victim is problematic, firstly because this claim is supported through only partial references—to three sonnets in *Fatal Interview*, and to one full and one partial sonnet in "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree." These two sequences, asserts Stanbrough, depict

through metaphors of love and marriage the fatality of woman's vulnerability to social conditioning. *Fatal Interview* is an extended metaphorical illustration of the consequences to women of their limited range of experience and their susceptibility to emotional exploitation.  
(225)

These conclusions are simultaneously too broadly applied and too narrowly focused: Stanbrough reads the woman of Millay's sonnets only as surrendering to or being defeated by oppressive gender norms.<sup>50</sup> Millay's central project in "Ungrafted Tree" is not to depict the psychological disintegration of a female victim, but to demonstrate the "inflexibility of the social rules and institutions that prevented women from fully

---

<sup>50</sup> It is a mistake to link these two very disparate sequences together in the service of a single broad assertion about "love and marriage." *Fatal Interview* contains 52 sonnets that deal with varied and conflicting aspects of erotic love; "Ungrafted Tree" is about marital stasis. In the latter sequence, Millay realizes the failed intersection of love and marriage while implicating the cultural conjunction of the two as part of the source of the oppression and victimization Stanbrough emphasizes. Unfortunately, Stanbrough's actual reading of "Ungrafted Tree" makes no mention of the role marriage plays in delimiting a woman's power to imagine her own life, with the result that a reader unfamiliar with Millay's sonnets might fail to perceive the ambiguity that informs female *resistance* to oppressive cultural norms.

enjoying the favorable legislative developments for their sex” (Michailidou 70). In doing so, Millay reveals both the enormity of the struggle to resist the powerful cultural myths that shape women’s everyday experience, and the strategies women employ to that end.

The conflict between societal oppression and female self-assertion is the real battle going on throughout this sequence. While it seems clear that the social norms depicted or implied throughout “Ungrafted Tree” are spiritually suffocating to women, it is important to note both the strategies for and the limits of female self-assertion. On the surface, the protagonist’s self-assertion seems questionable, because it takes primarily the form of resistance (often passive), and this is not the kind of proactive term by which we expect autonomy to be defined. Likewise, the expository first sonnet reveals that the protagonist had actively abandoned her marriage but, in the face of her husband’s terminal illness, she is reluctantly compelled (by middle-class cultural expectations of wifely duty), to relinquish her freedom and return home to attend him on his deathbed. The grammar of the opening lines of sonnet *i*, “So she came back into his house again/ and watched beside his bed until he died,” suggests that the protagonist returns home only out of a sense of obligation; she is not motivated by any personal feeling or connection to the dying man. The word “husband” is not used at all in the first sonnet, which both adds to the feeling of detachment between the two characters and prevents the reader from categorizing their relationship in conventional marital terms. Despite the fact that the protagonist has the strength to defy an individual—her husband—by leaving her marriage, she is either not strong enough, or without a sufficient support system to defy the cultural pressure to conform to conventional “wifely duties.” This example

demonstrates the ways that certain embedded value systems are stronger than the individuals who would resist them.

However, the protagonist, once “home,” employs two notable strategies of resistance. The first of these can be described as a stubborn strength of will exerted against domestic expectations—an energy of refusal. While she may be physically present in her husband’s house, she is not there as a willing participant. She refuses to become actively involved in her marital duties: throughout the entire sequence she remains an emotionless observer of her husband’s death. She “gazes,” “watches,” and “regards,” but she will not engage. And, as we have seen in sonnets *v* and *vii* of the sequence, the protagonist’s purposeful detachment from her marriage extends to the community or culture that reinforces marriage as a value, since she also refuses to rejoin the social ranks of her community. Thus, the woman in “Ungrafted Tree” is not so much vulnerable to social conditioning as impervious to it, though her imperviousness comes at a cost. Her resistance to the cumulative images and tropes of domestic servitude results in emotional detachment, self-imposed isolation from community, and a lack of interest in the real world.<sup>51</sup>

Were the protagonist rendered an empty shell of a person as a result of her detachment and isolation, the notion of self-assertion would be more problematic than ambivalent, but such is not the case. In conjunction with her refusal to embrace cultural norms, the protagonist employs a second strategy which both supplants the detachment

---

<sup>51</sup> Of particular note is the speaker’s ability to *persist* in her resistance; her endurance itself requires a strength of will that eventually “pays off.” Throughout sixteen of the seventeen sonnets in the sequence, throughout her husband’s drawn-out illness, and in the face of public pressure to conform, the speaker stoically refuses to give over her spirit to domestic servitude until, in the *final* sonnet, death frees her from the role society had defined for her. Gilbert similarly notes the protagonist’s “determination to survive.” The woman’s endurance “transforms housewifery into heroinism” (qtd. in Thesing, 302).

that resulted from her cultural withdrawal, and reinforces her independence: she envisions a world full of promise, even as she reduces the significance of her external reality. Where the first strategy, refusal, is essentially “negative,” defined in opposition to a norm, this second strategy is *positive*, in that the protagonist actively creates imaginative space which functions to preserve her spirit and sense of self. Sonnets *xii* and *xiii* demonstrate the ways in which the protagonist invokes the power of positive visualization in the midst of her resistance to marital duty:

*xii*

Tenderly in those times, as though she fed  
 An ailing child – with sturdy propping up  
 Of its small, feverish body in the bed,  
 And steadying of its hands about the cup— 4  
 She gave her husband of her body’s strength,  
 Thinking of men, what helpless things they were,  
 Until he turned and fell asleep at length,  
 And steadily stirred the night and spoke to her. 8  
 Familiar, at such moments, like a friend,  
 Whistled far off the long, mysterious train,  
 And she could see in her mind’s vision plain  
 The magic World, where cities stood on end . . . 12  
 Remote from where she lay – and yet – between,  
 Save for something asleep beside her, only the window screen.

Millay’s compositionally perfect balance of Petrarchan and Shakespearean conventions in this sonnet is remarkable. While the final lines rhyme as a Shakespearean couplet, the thematic organization is more in line with the Petrarchan octave/sestet structure... except in this case the traditional apportionment is reversed. The problem of the husband’s protracted illness and physical diminishment is described in six lines; the final eight lines turn toward the woman’s liberation from her spiritual suffocation. This structural inversion represents a shift in the balance of power as psychologically conceived by the protagonist. In the concluding sestet, mystery, vision and magic are imaginatively







its institutions.<sup>52</sup> Wiltenburg suggests that the final lines emphasize the woman's loss of the man and the marriage "she never had; she is left only with her experience for her pains" (291). The suggestion that the sum total of the protagonist's experience is loss, however, ignores a key irony: the underlying sadness and emptiness that informs the sequence only appears to be caused by the protagonist's loss of husband and marriage: in reality she grieved not the marriage but the loss of self that resulted from it. Her emotional detachment from her married identity is finally matched by the real dissolution of her obligation to conform to cultural notions of self and gender; a dissolution that is only possible by her *husband's* death.<sup>53</sup> This is an ironic reversal of the conventional nineteenth-century plotline, wherein a female heroine who has "a jumbled, distorted, inappropriate relation to the "social script" or plot designed to contain her legally, economically and sexually" is punished by death (DuPlessis 15). In contrast, for the protagonist of "Ungrafted Tree," death legitimizes the end of the woman's marriage and becomes not the source of sadness but the promise of opportunity.<sup>54</sup> Thus the protagonist's perseverance in her strategies of resistance ultimately allows her to write beyond the ending to a new beginning: a narrative that is not preshaped or classified by tradition.

---

<sup>52</sup> DuPlessis notes that the marriage plot usually halts the quest narrative, through which female characters attain agency. Quest presupposes that "female characters are human subjects at loose in the world, ready for decision, growth, self-definition, community, insight" (14).

<sup>53</sup> As opposed to the traditional "marriage or death" literary paradigm, wherein the female heroine who fails to successfully to "negotiate with sexuality and kinship" does not survive (DuPlessis, 4). Millay's displacement of the typical punishment for marital failure onto the husband is a noteworthy revision of this plot.

<sup>54</sup> Sandra Gilbert goes so far as to read "exultation" into the speaker's response to her husband's death (qtd. in Thesing, 302).

As a sequence, “Ungrafted Tree” allows for a detailed exploration of the subtle complications entailed in a woman’s struggle for agency against and within the cultural constraints of domesticity and marriage. In a famous stand-alone sonnet, also published in *Harp Weaver*, Millay moves from passive resistance to outright defiance of the limited parameters for female identity that marriage encodes:

Oh, oh you will be sorry for that word!  
 Give back my book and take my kiss instead.  
 Was it my enemy or my friend I heard,  
 “What a big book for such a little head!” 4  
 Come I will show you now my newest hat,  
 And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink!  
 Oh, I shall love you still and all of that.  
 I never again shall tell you what I think. 8  
 I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly;  
 You will not catch me reading any more:  
 I shall be called a wife to pattern by;  
 And some day when you knock and push the door, 12  
 Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy,  
 I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.

It seems clear from the above sonnet that the depiction of woman-as-victim is not a project in which Millay invests. Just as in “Ungrafted Tree,” the presence of the husband signifies the attempt to confer narrow expectations upon female behavior, but in this sonnet the speaker instantly recognizes and rejects the intellectually empty configuration of her identity, noting the multiple mechanisms—conceptual, verbal, and physical—by which her husband reduces her agency. The speaker is clearly aware that her husband’s view of her is metonymic. He looks at her and sees merely parts in the “pattern” or mold out of which pops a ready-made wife: a head, a hat, and a *prinking* mouth—one more suited to decoration than to speaking. His words likewise reinforce the notion that women are not meant to think: “What a big book for such a little head!” Finally, we learn that, having noticed his wife reading, the husband has physically taken away the book—a

symbol of knowledge and learning—presumably so as to limit his wife’s ability to grow beyond her one-dimensional role of *object d’art*. Confronted with this treatment, the speaker’s response is immediate and unequivocal: she will pretend to be the perfect wife, all the while crafting a secret plan to leave her husband. The tone of her response, from the first line to the last, is defiant, as she moves from the threatening “you will be sorry” to the brazen, “you may whistle for me.”

Despite the speaker’s rejection of traditional marriage roles, there is a subtext of ambivalence in this sonnet, which suggests that Millay does not ignore the ways actual female rebellion (to such an extreme degree) might have been problematic in 1920’s middle-class society. While the speaker’s attitude toward her husband’s condescension is unabashedly resistant, there exist details in this sonnet that cause the reader to question whether and to what degree actual follow-through is possible; in other words, is her determination merely false bravado? Firstly, it must be noted that, in contrast to the spoken words of her husband’s pronouncement, the speaker refrains from declaring her independence aloud: her speech is not audible, but takes the form of an internal monologue. Moreover, the wife’s plan to display, until her departure, stereotypically insipid behaviors attributed to women undercuts the reality of her anger since, for all intents and purposes, she will comply with her husband’s expectations for her identity.<sup>55</sup> Inner conviction and outward expression do not match up; a fact which points out the complications inherent in women’s resistance to social norms of behavior.

---

<sup>55</sup> Millay’s conclusion in this sonnet parallels the fictive requirement for the subordination of female identity to hegemonic culture: “any plot of self-realization was at the service of the marriage plot” (DuPlessis 6).

Finally, it is possible that Millay's frequent use of "will" and "shall" throughout the poem indicates varying degrees of intentionality and volition with regard to the speaker's ultimate act of defiance: leaving her husband.<sup>56</sup> In linguistic theory it is generally argued that, in the first and second person, the use of "will" indicates not just strong intention, but immediate volition on the part of the user.<sup>57</sup> That is to say, where the speaker states "I will," or says to her husband "you will," it means that this declaration is both likely to happen, and to happen immediately, as the declarer is assumed to be in control over the situation in which "will" is used. On the other hand, the use of "shall" in the first person indicates foretelling, and refers to an event more future than immediate. Some linguists go so far as to claim that first-person use of "shall," instead of "will," actually weakens the user's ability to fulfill intention, thus lightening the effect of the declaration, but for now it is safe to argue that Millay's use of "shall" and "will" is both distinct and purposeful in its connotation of immediate and future time. Accordingly, the speaker has more power over behaviors that ultimately matter less, like showing off a new hat, or hiding her books; while her ability to leave her husband is grammatically weakened, both by the use of "shall" as connotative of the distant future, and by repetition of the words "some day," which adds to the nebulous quality of the speaker's ability to carry out her intention to leave her marriage.

---

<sup>56</sup> Critiquing the use of will/shall in almost any context is to invoke a history of debates that form a veritable linguistic morass on the subject. Almost any detailed theory on grammatical inflections of will/shall has an opposing theory, and the fact that this particular will/shall distinction is poetic, and thus subject to the possibility that its use is simply "mannered," makes conclusive explication impossible. However, because Millay's use of the locution is both unusually frequent and deliberate, it makes sense to apply a generally accepted linguistic premise to these auxiliaries.

<sup>57</sup> For more on the use of "will" and "shall," see Charles Fries, who is considered to have made one of the more influential arguments on modal verb usage.

Three of Dorothy Parker's sonnets also "write beyond the ending," invoking the myth of final happiness in order to critique popular assumptions about and expectations for women's experience. Compared to Millay, Parker is less direct in her references to marriage, possibly because she hasn't the luxury of a sequence within which to re-trace and question narrative experience. However, the sonnets I will examine here all refer to relationships informed by commitment and the expectation of permanence which, for Parker, likely meant marriage. In her sonnet, "How Bold It Is," Parker, more sharply than Millay, moves from the romantic myth to romantic stasis, cleverly juxtaposing the ideal and the real.

How bold it is, this fine young love we bear; A high white flame, to cut the ghostly night; A virgin armor, burnished hard and bright To turn the blows of age and death and care!	4
Too brave a thing it is, to see it break Beneath the unending taps of little things— Of sharpened words, and hurried answerings, And fretful illness, and recited ache,	8
And tiny jealousies, and whimpering woe, And household plannings, year on futile year, And patient, "Yes, my love," and "Yes, my dear," And "Why did you do thus, and why do so?"	12

Quick, let us part, that ever our love may be  
As now we know it, young and bold and free.

This sonnet highlights the inevitable descent of a relationship from the idealized courtly love posture into the mundane stasis of daily life. Here, despite the heroic focus indicated by the title, only the first quatrain pays tribute to "this fine young love" before it is eclipsed by an eight-line account of disenchanting domesticity. Like its idealized subject, this sonnet "turns" quickly; the *volta* occurs in line five, as the speaker begins her litany of the minutiae that "break" down the ideal. At the center of the poem is what is at the

heart of all long-term relationships: the “unending” problems and adversities that can drive those relationships apart. The “high, white flame” of line becomes by line six tamped “beneath...little things.” Crossness, impatience, whining, jealousy, boredom, disdain, complaints of the body, the repetitive motion of household chores, predictable behavior—these distinctly unglamorous qualities make short work of the chivalric fantasy.

Both the first quatrain and the heroic couplet remind the reader that *newness* is the *sine qua non* of romantic love. Its armor is “virgin,” “burnished” and “bright” and it burns with a pure, “white” flame. Eternal youth is another requirement of the romantic myth. Line one places the word “young” closest to the love it modifies; likewise, the last line repeats this adjective. The “alpha and omega” quality of this use of repetition makes the concept of romantic love appear to endure, to come full circle; true love can have no end.

But of course, in real life, not much can “end where [it] begun”: no Donne-like sonnet metaphysics mark Parker’s romantic chronology. In this sonnet it is not only the volume of negative details in the middle that undermine the ideal, but the word “quick,” slipped neatly into line thirteen, and easy to overlook, that underscores the ephemerality of high romance, and its utter inability to combat the “age and death and care” referred to in line four. “Quick, let us part,” enjoins the astute speaker who, having just described with painful accuracy the fate of all “bold” loves, would rather quit the “fine young love” than experience its decline. The irony here, of course, is the failure of one of Western culture’s foundational myths to bear up under the weight of day-to-day troubles. Paradoxically, the preservation of an ideal in the imagination precludes the possibility of



actual relationship: the only solution is to end romantic love before its inevitable descent into romantic or marital stasis.

Despite its detailed list of particular behaviors that characterize romantic stasis, “How Bold It Is,” in its use of satiric wit and general observations about the nature of romantic love, functions more as a theoretical critique of the myth of final happiness than a personal account of a woman’s disenchantment with the romantic ideal in marriage. Parker also wrote two sonnets that more closely parallel the personal modes of resistance found in Millay’s “Ungrafted Tree,” and “Oh, oh, you will be sorry.” The sonnets “Second Love” (*Sunset Gun*) and “Sonnet for the End of a Sequence” (*Death and Taxes*) focus on the particularity of the individual speakers’ experience, their disillusionment with the myth of final happiness, and their attempts to preserve their identity and agency.

*Second Love*

“So surely is she mine,” you say, and turn  
 Your quick and steady mind to harder things—  
 To bills and bonds and talk of what men earn—  
 And whistle up the stair, of evenings. 4  
 And do you see a dream behind my eyes,  
 Or ask a simple question twice of me—  
 “Thus women are,” you say; for men are wise  
 And tolerant, in their security. 8

How shall I count the midnights I have known  
 When calm you turn to me, nor feel me start,  
 To find my easy lips upon your own  
 And know my breast beneath your rhythmic heart. 12  
 Your god defer the day I tell you this:  
 My lad, my lad, it is not you I kiss!

This sonnet begins by refuting the myth of final happiness. Romantic conquest, notes Boone, puts an end to both desire and interest, as the only purpose for conquest is to “win” possession of one’s beloved. Once romantic wedlock is achieved (“So surely is

she mine”), the “husband’s” domestic security is a given, and he can effectively put all his attention and interest into his worldly pursuits without giving a second thought to his wife.<sup>58</sup> Like the husband in Millay’s sonnet, this man also uses verbal condescension to reinforce a shallow conception of women as uninteresting and unthinking. Indeed, the speaker is viewed by her husband as an empty vessel—both mentally and physically. The possibility that his wife may have her own thoughts never occurs to him; his assumption, as revealed in lines six and seven, is that women are stupid enough to need even simple questions repeated. Finally, we learn that man’s approach to sexuality repeatedly fails to take into account the idea that his wife is anything other than an extension of his needs. He initiates sex in the middle of the night, apparently startling his wife awake with his advances; his actions suggest he is either unaware of her emotional withdrawal or uncaring about her involvement in the matter.

This picture of marital stasis is made more sympathetic in light of the woman’s comprehension of her predicament. She sees all too clearly that her husband views her merely as an object he has secured for his use. She also knows that his perception or treatment of her is unlikely to change, since untold midnights have already established the gendered, hierarchical pattern of relationship that marks their marriage. Like the married protagonists in Millay’s *Ungrafted Tree* and “Oh, oh, you will be sorry,” the speaker of “Second Love” perceives herself to be in a predicament (marital stasis) wherein her modes of resistance, at least in the short term, are limited to *mental* escape. She maintains, like the wife in “Ungrafted Tree,” an imaginary refuge, a “dream behind

---

<sup>58</sup> As stated at the outset of these explications, it is most likely, given Parker’s experiences and life choices, that the type of relationship depicted in these three sonnets is a marriage. While the terms “husband” and “wife” are not explicitly used, the description of habituated domestic relationship strongly implies marital stasis.

[the] eyes,” and manages to endure her husband’s sexual objectification through romantic projection—imagining a lover other than her husband. Finally, like the wife in “Oh, oh, you will be sorry,” Parker’s speaker derives a certain strength from secrecy. She in her own way is “a wife to pattern by”; yielding to her husband’s expectations, but maintaining her emotional separateness from him in the process. Finally, in the disjunction between the speakers’ confident tone and the sad reality of her marital situation, we see what by now must seem the expected ambivalent, qualified form of resistance available to women of Parker’s and Millay’s social strata: the desire for agency in marriage is not enough to secure it.

The sonnet that most strenuously re-writes and resists the subsumption of women’s agency in marriage is Parker’s “Sonnet for the End of a Sequence.” The title of this sonnet helps us to locate it within the discussion of counter-traditional narrative strategies that critique the ideal of romantic wedlock.<sup>59</sup> This sonnet constitutes the “end of a sequence,” and thus its message attains the traditional power of narrative closure. But because the outcome of this particular sequence is revealed to be the direct opposite of a marriage, we are offered an alternate, or counter-traditional, definition of final happiness. Thus, whatever this poem’s thematic outcome, the title indicates that it is “the end of the story”: the conclusion of the female speaker’s extended foray into romantic love relationships, and the author’s “last word” on the subject.

---

<sup>59</sup> Mary Moore defines a Petrarchan sequence as consisting of “a number of sonnets whose focus is love, a focus conveyed through typical images, conventional topics, tropes, and rhetorical gestures.” Traditional lyric sonnet sequences or cycles are tied together by a theme only, such as Sidney’s sonnet cycle “Astrophel and Stella” Petrarch’s “Rime Sparse,” or EBB’s “Sonnets From the Portuguese.” However, the women sonneteers in this study use sonnet sequences to create elements of chronological narrative fiction in order to critique the romantic paradigm. Ordering sonnets within a sequence to form a narrative plot is less common, and possibly an innovation by female sonneteers such as Rossetti, Millay, and Alvarez.





love alluded to in line two can be seen as a legitimate act of inducement to the soul-builders; while the voice mocks the silliness of women who are compelled to make every scoundrel into a Galahad, they are nonetheless encouraged to do so by a literary paradigm that can make a Beatrice of a barmaid.

Moreover, the quoted assertion illustrates the degree to which the *acceptance* of a limited construction of the feminine actually has the power to limit feminine agency. The Petrarchan sonnet tradition requires the male portrayal of the female subject in terms of *lack* of agency: the women of sonnets cannot meet either the male gaze or their own reflection directly. Thus the idea of being cast as an ideal encourages women like the speaker to accept, and conform to a set of criteria that sacrifices autonomy for sexual desirability.

Thankfully, however pervasively the amatory sonnet tradition has depicted women as being without agency, Parker successfully breaks with that tradition, moving from description to assertion in order to offer a single hopeful outcome for women's poetic and actual experience. Out of the accumulated experience of Parker's sonnet speakers there emerges, in the third quatrain of "Sonnet For the End of a Sequence," a sort of apotheosis, a recognition that frees her from any further tie to the romantic myth. Just as the octave metrics mirror the confusion and inconsistency for women depicted in the "world made cunningly,"<sup>61</sup> the third quatrain restores clarity and affirmation to the speaker as it restores the meter:

---

<sup>61</sup> John Donne wrote this phrase to describe the sonnet (and by extension himself as the sonneteer). There is a double-standard where the male and female "positions" in the sonnet form are located. The traditional and male-authored sonnet is substantive: it renders the sonnet a complete world in itself, and the poet its creator god. Parker shows how the female position in the sonnet genre is regarded as nothing more than a bit of fluff.

For now I am my own again, my friend!  
 This scar but points the whiteness of my breast;  
 This frenzy, like its betters, spins an end,  
 And now I am my own. And that is best.

12

Lines nine through twelve all consist of iambic feet with masculine rhyme; the repeated ending on a strong downbeat echoes the strength of the speaker's self-assertion and her adamant conviction that it is better to own herself than participate in a fraudulent construction of love. Moreover, in contrast with the lines that alternate gendered endings, the third quatrain contains no irony; it is the sincere and emphatic statement of the speaker's new-found and hard-won values. These lines celebrate the speaker's ultimate emergence from the "frenzy" of romantic love into the freedom of self-possession: the phrase "now I am my own" is repeated (verbatim) twice. The speaker's self-possession is further emphasized by the exclamation point at the end of line nine. Additionally, there are *two* declarative statements contained in line twelve, the full stops of period punctuation attesting to the speaker's newfound strength and decisiveness.

Finally, the poetic conclusion—the couplet—reveals the hindsight of the speaker's prior romantic experience alluded to in the title, as well as the observation that the real character of her lover—despite his many vows of undying love—is neither noble or chivalric.

Therefore, I am immeasurably grateful  
 To you, for proving shallow, false and hateful.

The recognition that her lover has "prov[en] shallow, false and hateful," ultimately liberates the speaker from romantic ties. The couplet also departs from the conventional despair over love's betrayal; the speaker is "immeasurably grateful" for the clarity of vision that results from the betrayal of an ideal. Parker's combination of wordplay and

metrics here hints at the sly relationship between form and function: both lines of the couplet are “out of measure”; the speaker’s use of feminine line endings indicates a return to the ironic voice of the octave, and emphasizes her movement beyond the bounds of the courtly love myth. Thus, the structure of this sonnet implicitly critiques the myth on which the amatory sonnet genre is based. If the sonnet traditionally is rooted in the conventions of courtly love, then the poetic resolution of this “breakup” sonnet signifies the inevitable conclusion of romantic passion, and of the values that inform it.

The speaker in “Sonnet for the End of a Sequence” is the most self-possessed of any of the speakers who engage in the process of resistance to the myth of final happiness; however, in the speaker’s ultimate solution to the problem of loss of agency, there remains a hint of the same ambivalence we have seen elsewhere. Though the speaker’s closing pronouncement is emphatic—there is no ambivalence about either her decision or her ability to act on it—her choice to sever all ties with the romantic myth exacts a large sacrifice in exchange for selfhood. However triumphant the speaker’s final, self-aware declaration might seem, the apotheosis of the third quatrain contains an unspoken irony: both the speaker’s realization that it is best to own herself, and her resolve to have done with a world that precludes the possibility of agency, leaves her essentially alone, without a world in which to employ it.



CHAPTER THREE  
RE-WRITING AND RESISTING: FORMAL AND  
THEMATIC BARRIERS TO FEMALE AGENCY

Parker's and Millay's use of sonnets about marriage to disprove the myth of final happiness in romantic wedlock constitutes a significant and emphatic critique of the way that the courtly love ethos translates into restrictive cultural expectations for married women. But the *result* of idealized desire—marriage—is not the only subject their sonnets interrogate. A small number of sonnets by Parker and Millay call attention to the medieval practices of courtly love and the historically famous myths that both inform the romantic ideal, and work to establish the culturally valorized construction of the objectified and idealized feminine that informs the sonnet tradition. The sonnets I will discuss in this section employ metapoetic strategy to comment on the value of sonnet conventions as such.<sup>62</sup>

**Form Interrogates Function: Metapoetic Sonnets**

In order to undertake an examination of metapoetic sonnets, and the purposes to which metapoetic technique may be employed, it is necessary to assign some parameters to the ways in which this study will define metapoesis. Eva Müller-Zetlemann identifies the long tradition of metapoesis in literature, and also the corresponding inability on the part of literary criticism to establish unified contexts for the investigation of metapoetic

---

<sup>62</sup> At this point in the discussion I will use the phrases “call attention to” and “comment on” in lieu of more decisive terms such as “critique” and “reject” because there are sharp and interesting differences between Parker's use of metapoesis and that of Millay.

poetry within the lyric genre. Critical attempts to define metapoesis have been both too broad and too narrow; moreover, most critical attention to autoreflexive texts has been devoted to narrative and not lyric structures. To borrow Müller-Zetlemann's definition, "metalyric refers to poems that are self-referential to (lyric) literary texts, and in the wider sense also to art in general, which in an explicit discursive or implicit 'showing' fashion, draw particular attention to the *fictio* and/or *fictum* aspect of the fictionality of literary works" (142). Michael Finke's qualification of metapoesis as a particular type of literary reflexivity, one that "refer[s] to the code and to the process of the world-making," helps to clarify the latter part of Müller-Zetlemann's definition (12). Since Parker and Millay both allude to romantic myths that have achieved epic status as the particular subgroup of fiction that informs their sonnets, it is helpful to include the way myth as a genre participates in the encoding of ideology. DuPlessis argues for the ways that myth inculcates and even naturalizes the notion of the ideal and eternal feminine:

. . . myth is built on and claims the denial of history, transforming 'history into nature.' Myth best demonstrates its character by refusing to acknowledge that it ever had any truck with the nonuniversal or the nontranscendent. Of all our stories, myths are considered the most universal, describing deep structures of human need and evincing the most cunning knowledge of "mankind." Likewise, myths are held to offer exclusive narrative coverage, saying every vital thing that could be imagined about a character or an event, providing a repertoire of causes and effects, stimuli and responses, that are not only paradigmatic but timeless. (106)

For DuPlessis, women's lyrics and texts that invoke myth sometimes do so in a *mythopoetic* sense. Similar to the strategy of metapoesis, mythopoesis revises or reinvents dominant myths as "an attack on cultural hegemony . . . [and its] vision of gender" (107). Whether Parker and Millay accomplish this level of critique remains to be

seen; however, their use of myth as an ideological tool in the gendered construction of desire is certainly worth exploring.

Metapoesis in sonnets calls deliberate attention to the operating principles of the genre, with regard to both formal and thematic conventions. To the degree that metapoetic poetry operates simultaneously within and beyond itself, it can create space for both formal innovation and for changes in traditional assumptions about form and content. Contrarily, metapoesis may also reveal the ways in which form limits poetry's ability to redefine either poetic form or the values that inhere within it. When we put women sonnet writers' use of metapoetic technique into a feminist context, we see that metapoesis as a strategy can argue for cultural change. In writing "sonnets about sonnets," Parker and Millay take advantage of the opportunity to point the reader toward the larger historical context of their metapoetic poems, and to indicate the possible reasons for their engagement of the sonnet tradition.

Sonnet metapoetics commonly focuses on those sonnets that engage the limits and formal requirements of sonnet composition. To this end, critics often cite Millay's "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines." In keeping with my emphasis on the ways in which desire works to delimit female agency, the aspect of metapoesis examined in this section is the self-conscious reference to a particular trope of desire: allusion to famous portrayals of desiring lovers, all of whom embody the ideological elements of Petrarchism.<sup>63</sup> In this area, Parker's use of metapoesis is more deliberate and thorough than Millay's, with regard to both the number and severity of her departures from formal sonnet requirements, and in the self-conscious invocation of Petrarchan themes. It also seems

---

<sup>63</sup> As discussed in Chapter One of this study.



Hackneyed examples of separation of the lover and beloved—ranging from death to an unemotional goodbye at a train station—elicit the “appropriate” scripted romantic response from the speaker: she would “clutch [her] breast and weep” at love’s demise. Likewise the male lover, in an even more formulaic reaction, behaves “aptly”: he “would tread the floor and . . . mention poison and the grave.” Such posturing clearly annoys the speaker, since she is acutely aware that, underneath their courtly cover, the seeming lovers are “enemies.” The equation of major and minor events further demonstrates the superficiality of courtly love. Death and a too-casual goodbye at the train station are given equal weight; likewise there is no distinction between the significance of sinning and “wander[ing] through the door.” Such ironic juxtapositions ridicule conventional tropes and reinforce the speaker’s detachment from the values inherent in traditional Petrarchan sonnets.

But the speaker’s disdain for courtly behaviors is not enough to free her from them. Due at least in part to the prevalence of the Petrarchan sonnet, the romantic ethos is too entrenched in popular culture for one dissident voice to eradicate it. The speaker, stuck within romantic and poetic constructs, is no match for the addiction of “the mooning world” to the chivalric ideal. Truth thus becomes subordinated to myth in the service of societal gratification, and the lovers “correctly” continue their pantomime, “prettily” sighing and swearing devotion. Such exaggerated passion, ranked with that of the legendary Abelard and Heloise, cannot be extinguished even in death; buried together, the posturers will even “live as lovers when [their] bones are bare.” The speaker’s not-so-subtle accusation that bourgeois society is blind and stupid for valuing the caricature of romantic convention—despite its obvious hyperbole and pretense—gets



describes the physical characteristics of an other: a conventionally beautiful woman. In fact, the speaker's voice in this sonnet is ambiguously gendered, a detail which suggests that Parker may be imitating a male courtier. Jan Montefiore explores the historical dependence of the amatory sonnet on the "I-Thou dyad," a Petrarchan structure that emphasizes the positioning of the female object-muse by the male poet as a tool for him to use in his process of self-definition (98). Within such a dyad, the woman is "reduced to a function of her lover's narcissism" (Miller 769). This process of aestheticizing the feminine, then, denies the possibility for female agency entirely, as the woman is merely a configuration of the male imagination, the purpose of which is to reflect the male imago.

The lady of "Sonnet [1]" is carefully objectified through the use of *blazon*, an exquisite series of artistic and imaginary similes and comparatives that are commonly associated with Petrarchism. Her throat shines like a marble statue, her cheek is "cooler...than petal washed with dew." Moreover, she is not without the requisite rose-red mouth and star-bright eyes of the typical female love objects that served as poetic inspiration to Spenser, Sidney, Wyatt and others. The lady's object status is also reinforced through the grammar of the poem: passive construction in lines three, eight and thirteen effaces the woman behind her qualities. She doesn't own the glance, the voice or the grace attributed to her.

So mesmerizing are Parker's phrases that a reader can make it to line fourteen without realizing that the "lady fair" does not constitute much in the way of an actual

woman, but is rendered ineffectual as the poem progresses.<sup>66</sup> Throughout “Sonnet [1]” Parker cleverly relies on the reader’s associations with traditional sonnet language to disguise the subtext of the poem: the systematic stifling of female agency—both physical and intellectual—through the machinery of the patriarchal poetic process. The praise of the lady’s beauty and the linguistically seductive descriptions provide an aesthetic distraction from the fact that the lady is being dismantled into her physical components: a head, a mouth, a glance. Not only is she described piecemeal, she is merely—or maybe less than—the sum of her parts which, sadly, prove insubstantial. She cannot walk—she “float[s]”; her speech is made up of throbbing emotions instead of words; her hands flutter uselessly “like lilies in the wind.”<sup>67</sup> Her head, the would-be source of intellect, “is poised,” passively, “like blossom on a stem”; a fragile and weightless thing, snapped off with the easy flick of a finger. It is interesting that Parker does not say the lady’s head is poised upon a human neck or body; her use of an aesthetic but incorporeal metaphor keeps the emphasis on the piecemeal, insubstantial nature of the lady, effectively creating the image of a head without a body attached to it. In addition to the weakness of her physical structure, the inner workings of the lady’s mind are also limited. The continued description of her head in line ten, “wrapped closely round about with fragrant bands,” is on the surface reminiscent of the wreaths of flowers commonly described in pastoral

---

<sup>66</sup> Bishop’s first self-titled “sonnet” also makes a self-reflexive comment on the object-position of the female, through the use of a musical conceit. Like Parker’s here, Bishop’s sonnet becomes “thick” through the use of turgid, mind-numbing prose.

<sup>67</sup> There are extensive connotations and allusions that adhere to the notion of the lily flower. In literature the lily reigns as the queen of blooms; it is the epitome of beauty, virtue and perfection. Its beauty, however, is also fragile and helpless, as in Matthew 6:28: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin.” The phrase “lilies in the wind” suggests that Parker’s “lady fair” is both weak and purposeless.



poetry, especially when one takes into account the flowery language contained in the first nine lines. When line ten is taken alone, however, it is logical to read “bandages” (or even “bind” or “bound”) for “bands.” A “disembodied” head encased in fragrant bandages more accurately describes the embalment or mummification process, an image—if an extreme one—of restricted intellectual activity.

Parker’s own voice doesn’t emerge until the last line, buried, as it were, under a preponderance of objectifying clichés.<sup>68</sup> Line fourteen serves to both contradict and comment on the desirability of the female position aestheticized in the conventional sonnet. The line begins with a direct rebuttal, a clear indication that the image of femininity so glorified throughout the poem is in fact *not* a depiction the author/speaker values or endorses. Rather, the elaborately cultivated “lady” is revealed to be an “awful” construction; the lovely descriptive phrases of the first thirteen lines are refuted by one final adjective—the lady is “thick.” This word connotes both a physical and mental stolidity, a testament to her ineffectual status. At the end of the poem, the lady may indeed be “fair,” but she can neither move nor think. Interestingly, the last line also contains an implicit address to Parker’s female audience, in particular those who have internalized the Petrarchan notion of “ladydom,” as opposed to “womanhood.” For those who are gullible enough to be swayed by the intoxicating vision of woman-as-art-object, the poem’s final words are a wake-up call; a last chance to shake off the spell of the romantic love and see how tightly the fourteen-line construct binds a woman’s sphere of

---

<sup>68</sup> Montefiore points out the woman poet’s “obvious difficulty of speaking in a form which defines one as muse, not maker.” Miller applies this observation to Parker, stating that “At the broadest level, Parker undercut her own ascension to muse or loved object through her irony . . . in sacrificing the sober intensity of romantic love to humor, she broke up the loving dyad with the implied intervention of her audience” (124).

existence. Thus Parker demonstrates the way sonnets themselves contribute to an enticing and aestheticized view of what proves to be an awful construction, and how easy it is for the reader to drink in a limiting notion of womanhood along with the language that creates it.

Parker leaves the thematic “turn” or “volta” in this sonnet until the final line, which does not allow for much poetic space in which to refute this generic depiction of the feminine she despises. Aside from Parker’s fondness for the “ironic last line” negation or reversal she uses in many of her poems, there are a couple possible reasons for stacking the deck thirteen-to-one against her own thematic position. On the one hand, waiting until the final line to counter the pattern of objectification that is built up over the first thirteen demonstrates the speaker’s authority: her ability to dismiss the patriarchal tradition in a single line emphasizes the emergent strength and confidence of the female voice. It is more likely, however, that this ratio more accurately reflects the cultural privileging of the masculine speaking subject, and reinforces the struggle of the female poet’s voice to emerge from within such literary hegemony.

Compared with Parker’s clear use of metapoesis to implicate the sonnet form in the transmission of reductive values of womanhood and women’s experience, the purpose of Millay’s metapoetic references is far from castigatory. In fact, Millay appears to take the opposite approach to Parker: instead of metapoetic parody, which distances the speaker from the implied values of the lyric, Millay employs metapoetic references that situate her lyric speaker’s experience within, and not against, courtly tradition and romantic myth. Although on the surface her speakers embrace the romantic ideal, the use of metapoesis at key points in the sonnets qualifies the wisdom of such wholesale



that characterizes desire as a harmful trap. Thick-rooted, rank, and subtle, desire invades common sense like a weed. However unappealing the speaker and her friend may recognize desire to be, they acknowledge the simple fact of desire as a natural imperative. Beginning with the word “must” in line five, the conception of desire shifts from nasty to inviting. Rankness becomes “perfume too sweet” to resist with common sense. Along with the sudden shift in tone, a metrical disruption at the end of line six mimics the power of desire to “overthrow” both steady senses and metrics. It is interesting to observe the symmetry of tone and content in the construction of the octave. The lines are divided so that the first and last one and a half lines are prosaic, in that their subject matter is mundane. Talk, taxes, friends, matters going and ending—this is not the stuff of passion. However, in the middle lines (four complete lines plus two half-lines, bounded by the internal punctuation of dash and semicolon) diction quickly becomes more poetic, and alliteration proliferates in service of desire’s sinuousness. Tone also shifts quickly in the space of the octave, from matter-of-fact to seductive, and then just as quickly back: that the friends will relinquish reason to the senses is accepted as a foregone conclusion.

If the octave demonstrates the power of desire to insinuate itself into even the most mundane contexts of human relationships, the sestet reveals the ways in which those who succumb to desire “rewrite” the meaning of erotic episodes. In this case, the reality of an adulterous affair is simultaneously exposed and obscured through allusions to famed moments of capitulation in romantic myths. The speaker compares her own surrender to that of Isolde, Guinevere, and Francesca—all heroines whose stories of heightened passion have come to exist outside of the medieval texts from whence they originate. In order to attain their desires, however, each of these women was complicit in



This sonnet also features a speaker who clearly privileges legendary romantic myths as the exemplars of the highest form of love; however, in using these myths to gloss and extol her own passion, the speaker reveals the flaw in her perspective. Her bias toward the extreme, and her need to establish her own experience in love as consummate creates an attitude of pride and even arrogance in the speaker. In reading romances only for “the amorous line,” she ignores the cautionary and catastrophic components of those tales. Likewise, Helen and Iseult are not identified by name; instead, hazy allusions to “some wome[e]n,” and the metonymic reference to Trojan and Irish waters, are used to invoke legendary power in the service of the speaker’s passion while subordinating the iconic legacies to her own experience in love. The speaker goes on to claim that only the women of ancient myth parallel her passion—there is no modern equivalent: she is the only living heir to the great romantic myths. Moreover, it is important to note that, while the speaker is not unaware of the negative qualities of “unregenerate passions,” her configuration of herself in terms of such extreme desire causes her to assign positive value to the destruction that is a consequence of all such liaisons. Beginning in line five, we find diction that complicates the notion of love as glorified or transcendent by referring to its “cost.” The rarest love, if the speaker’s claim to uniqueness is to be believed, is linked to suffering, heedlessness, treachery and death. Thus, it becomes necessary to ask whether the speaker seeks out famous and idealized tales of betrayal—Guinevere’s of Arthur, Iseult’s of Mark, and Helen’s of Menelaus—as a justification for what may be read as the speaker’s adulterous affair. The overriding message, as in most of Millay’s sonnets about love, is that the experience of unbridled passion is worth any consequence and sacrifice.

To what extent can it be argued that Millay's location of her speakers' experience of desire within myth constitutes feminist critique? Any such assessment is complicated at best, since Millay, in her use of speakers who demonstrate and privilege strong sexual desire, seems on one level to affirm rather than dismantle dominant cultural ideology. However, romantic myths in sonnet *xxvi* are invoked in such a way as to create ambivalence toward the arrogance of romantic paramours, and the destruction they leave in their wake. DuPlessis asserts that the invocation of myth by a woman writer implies a choice to engage subject material that is often "actively hostile to historical considerations of gender":

To face myth . . . is to stand at the impact point of a strong system of interpretation masked as representation, and to rehearse one's own colonization or "iconization" through the materials one's culture considers powerful and primary. (106)

Millay's allusion to the same group of female icons in the sixth sonnet in *Fatal Interview* also argues for the use of meta or mythopoesis to question the idealized forms of romance depicted in traditional sonnets. In sonnet *vi*, the speaker configures herself in *opposition* to the famed women of erotic myth: Cressida, Helen, Elaine and Iseult are not exalted but reduced to "buried girls" and "ghost[s]." The reduction and dismissal of these women arises out of the speaker's frustration with her lover's "pale preoccupation with the dead" to the exclusion of all else, especially the impassioned and warm-blooded speaker. Here we see how idealized romantic fantasy actually precludes the opportunity for the real and human experience of love. The speaker observes that she cannot compete with the dead myths of which her lover daydreams, "Since that which Helen did and ended Troy / Is

more than I can do though I be warm.” The speaker tries to shake her lover out of his idealism through an appeal to *carpe diem*:

When you lie wasted and your blood runs thin,  
 And what's to do must with dispatch be done,  
 Call Cressid, call Elaine, call Isolt in!—  
 More bland the ichor of a ghost should run 12  
 Along your dubious veins than the rude sea  
 Of passion pounding all day long in me.

The danger, the speaker realizes, of internalizing romantic ideology, is that mortal women are no match for it. A woman might strive to imitate the feminine ideal, the “face that launched a thousand ships,” or she might define herself in opposition to it: as long as the romantic myth is recognized and accepted as “natural,” cultural expectations for women that are gendered and limiting will continue to form roadblocks to the pursuit of agency within existing hegemonic social structures.

### **Owning Desire: Possession and its Consequences**

The model of desire in the traditional sonnet positions the male poet-lover as the active desirer, and the female beloved as the object of that desire. This model both aestheticizes a hierarchical notion of gender, and reinforces the cultural expectation that the ideal woman would embody the qualities of the romanticized figure of the beloved: beautiful, passive, and voiceless, inspiring male passion while remaining removed from and untouched by desire themselves. Accordingly, female self-assertion or agency would have been antithetical to the ideal notion of femininity. Like women sonnet writers before them, Millay and Parker resist the construction of gender inherent in the sonnet through the simple act of writing: taking up the authorial pen gives women poets both subjectivity and voice. In subject matter, however, Millay and Parker are considerably bolder than



their predecessors. The influence of modernity in American culture created the space for both poets to determine not only the position of the subject, but the subject matter as well: sexualized desire. Prior to 1900 it would have been exceedingly difficult for a woman writer to publish works that dealt with female emotional and erotic experience: as modernist poets, Millay and Parker take advantage of the freedom accorded women in 1920's society to portray the female speaker as an active, desiring subject. Several of Parker's and Millay's sonnets feature speakers who openly assert their sexuality. However, these poems differ in the degree to which each speaker can be said to succeed in using physical passion as a vehicle for female self-assertion.

The traditional sonnet is a genre "laden with figurations exclusive to male poetic authority" (Fried, 243). In the attempt to both limit inherent assumptions of male authority and assert agency, Parker and Millay create female speakers who appropriate the amatory figurations and conceits conventionally attributed to male speakers. This attempt to re-position the female speaker is problematized by the historic sonnet relationship, wherein the role of the speaker-seducer is "inescapably masculine," while that of the love or sex object is feminine (Hubbard 107). The resultant tension within this category of sonnets reflects both the "difficulties of creating a feminine speaker in the amatory poem," and the woman poet's "internalization of poetic tradition...and struggle with the love sonnet's seductive yet (for women poets) impossible plot: she both yields to poetic convention and walks away from it" (Hubbard 107).

One way Parker and Millay engage this conflict is through their invocation of and explicit reference to sexual passion. In the critical attention accorded Millay's use of the genre, it has been asserted that the demands and restrictions of the sonnet comprise a



lines so as to distance herself from what she considers a watered-down version of passion.

For Parker, the “sea” of the first six lines constitutes a one-dimensional, passive model of femininity, consisting merely of a “level reach of blue.” And while the phrasing flows soothingly along, a preponderance of diction that connotes limitation undercuts the metrical prettiness. The woman described by this kind of pallid sexuality is controlled and contained by the “marked and measured” lines of the sonnet, and the speaker equates stereotypically desirable feminine characteristics—“sweet” and “pretty”—with traits which limit women’s substance and independence. Line six, with its “sands, spread glittering and warm” also suggests that culturally approved female sexuality should be of the sort that is easily accessible to men. Women in this love may enjoy “fair weather” but this particular fairness requires that women also be “quiet,” “obedient,” “humbl[e],” and “untroubled.”

Neither speaker nor author can sustain an interest in the regulated Petrarchan structure of love, even to finish out the octave. This sonnet’s volta comes early, in lines seven and eight, as the speaker, bored with of the lackluster imagery that depicts “fair” love, defines the kind of love that compels her:

I have a need of wilder, crueller waves;  
They sicken of the calm, who knew the storm. 8

So let a love beat over me again,  
Loosing its million desperate breakers wide;  
Sudden and terrible to rise and wane;  
Roaring the heavens apart; a reckless tide 12  
That casts upon the heart, as it recedes,  
Splinters and spars and dripping, salty weeds.

The sestet's metrical inversions and rough articulations augment the violent images of a love the speaker asserts she needs, despite the destruction and chaos it brings. The negative connotations of a love described as "sudden and terrible," "reckless," and "desperate," raise the question of why the speaker invites such an apparently painful experience. The synaesthesia of "Roaring the heavens apart" gives the impression that part of this love's appeal lies in its ability to generate powerful and unusual sensations in the speaker, a welcome dissonance when compared with the metaphor for lack of sexual fulfillment: the docile, calmer sea. In fact, her choice of a wild, stormy passion over the harmonious but vapid rendition suggests that the speaker finds the first more authentic than the second: pain is, at least, something she can feel. Moreover, the violent diction of the sestet serves to create a metaphor for powerful and possibly empowering sexual satisfaction. Words and phrases with conventionally painful connotations are employed in such a way that their cumulative effect implies orgasm more than injury. Beginning in line nine, diction and imagery build toward the peak of sexual passion, as well as its aftermath. The speaker invites an experience of intercourse that beats over her, is quick to rise and wane, and splits her apart. It culminates in orgasmic release, as suggested by words in the final line such as "splinter," "spar," "dripping," and "salty." However, the same diction that intensifies the speaker's physical experience implies that there exist emotional consequences: in the wake of such love, the heart is left with the painful wreckage of the affair.

While this sonnet argues for unmediated (except, perhaps, through metaphor) sexual expression as the prerogative of women as well as men, it also questions the degree to which Parker's speaker is truly in charge of her erotic experience. On the one

hand, the speaker's direct assertion in line seven identifies her as an active, desiring subject: "I have a need." In choosing her version of passion, the speaker empowers herself—as opposed to serving someone else—through her sexuality. Her desire to experience passion as total and consuming is an expression of a desire for power itself. However, even as the sestet defines the kind of desire the speaker wants, it limits her subjectivity. Parker's speaker may reject tepid, regulated lovemaking in favor of uncontrollable passion, but she is also the passive recipient of the wilder variety: instead of being the primary mover, the speaker is acted *upon*. The grammatical subject in the sestet is "a love," which performs all of the operative verbs. These verbs, moreover, as well as some surrounding diction, all connote the sexual behavior of the phallus. So while Parker's speaker has enough agency to choose a mode of sexual expression that satisfies her needs, she nonetheless must rely on an outside force, an implied male other, for their actual attainment.

The difficulty for female sonnet writers of reversing the traditional subject/object position may be linked to their ability to reimagine or overcome cultural expectations for romantic relationships. The subjectivity of Parker's speakers, then, is limited by the degree to which Parker had internalized the ideology of romantic love. Despite the poetic inseparability of her nose and thumb, in her personal life Parker cared very much what people thought of her: she was acutely aware of social mores, and often strived to conform to them, adjusting her behavior with (and expectations for) the men in her life in the process. As a young girl, Parker compensated for the lack of social graces in her boisterous family by cultivating a quietness of tone and demeanor that reflected her desire for respectability. And, as we have already seen in her relationships with Edwin

Parker, John Garrett and Alan Campbell, the adult Parker had internalized the cultural expectation of final happiness in marriage.

These expectations did not affect Millay nearly as much. The opposite attitude was inculcated in the young Millay by her mother Cora, who provided a model of individualism uncommon in the 1890's, one marked by "a formidable degree of courage...the sure knowledge of her own worth, and the ability to choose a course of action and pursue it in the face of the social and economic pressures of the period" (Gurko 4). This quotation might also be applied to Millay herself, who knowingly risked both her position at Vassar and the financial security of an early benefactress, Caroline Dow, when she made choices considered unseemly for young women of her social milieu. She later resisted the pressure to marry Floyd Dell, who wanted all the conventional trappings of middle-class marriage, an institution that held no value for Millay (Gurko 93).

Millay's female speakers demonstrate far more agency than Parker's speakers are able to achieve. Although references to sexuality are much more subtle, Millay's speakers clearly control the course and experience of their desire. Sandra Gilbert notes that in her love sonnets Millay "enact[s] an erotic role reversal" by which the female speaker assumes the authority of the traditionally male poet-lover (305). In "I shall forget you presently, my dear," the speaker asserts her own authority by diminishing the power of her lover to influence the significance of the affair. Unlike "Fair Weather," where the personal I makes only one appearance, the subjective "I" is present and autonomous throughout the sonnet.

I shall forget you presently, my dear,



For conversation when we meet again.

The relationship described in this sonnet doesn't have even the shelf life of a "little day," but is limited to a "one night stand." Although the speaker does indeed surrender to her desires, diction minimizes both the quality and significance of the experience. "Needs" is coupled with "notions," a term that implies frivolity. An antique word—propinquity—is used instead of the more usual—and sensual—"nearness," creating a tone of scientific detachment. The enthusiasm of "zest" is undercut by its modifier, "certain," and the sexual interaction of the man and woman is reduced to one word, "frenzy," which connotes behavior more animal than human.

Interestingly, the grammar in this sonnet is cleverly arranged so that the man is never once represented as a whole person, but as isolated character traits.<sup>69</sup> Even though the speaker declares herself "undone" by pheromones, she still views the man as an object; his role is a function of her actions as a subject. She finds him fair, she bears his body's weight, but she will not remember him. She is the agent; he, merely the backdrop for her needs. There are two places in the poem where the man might be said to occupy the subject position, but they are tenuous at best. The first of these constructions (*l.3*) uses the passive voice to subordinate object to subject, while also replacing the person with a quality: propinquity. So the woman is not urged directly by the man himself, but only indirectly, through his spatial location. In line fourteen the man is subsumed under the umbrella of the first person plural, "we," and the meeting referred to is indefinite—it has

---

<sup>69</sup> In her essay, "Love's Little Day: Time and the Sexual Body in Millay's Sonnets," Stacy Carson Hubbard reduces the male-female relationship in this sonnet even further: Millay's "strategy of displacing male/female poetic relations to the interiority of the woman speaker" has the effect of "erasing the role of the eroticized and addressed Other" (107).















the element of age which, finally, cannot be overcome in the pursuit of agency within middle-class cultural values.

### **Aging and Agency: Questioning Power Sources**

We have seen how Parker and Millay employ their sonnets to question the romantic ideal from several angles. Whether debunking the myth of final happiness in marriage through the depiction of marital stasis; whether using generic formal conventions to call attention to thematic problems inherent in that genre; or whether subverting traditional positionality, the sonnets' speakers are invested in the project of self-definition and assertion in the face of pervasive cultural values that force women to occupy a limited social position that is rooted in the assumption of gender hierarchy. Ultimately, however, the degree to which Parker and Millay may be determined to have succeeded in defying cultural norms is reflected in the responses of their poetic speakers to the subject and experience of aging. Despite their youthful speakers' claims to passion, and their insouciance in the face of failed love affairs, sonnets that feature older speakers reveal that, in hindsight, female agency within bourgeoisie culture was often derived from physical beauty. The loss of youth, and the realization that their speakers' power was at least partially derived from beauty is devastating, a reaction which suggests that both poets were more bound by social and poetic constructs than they may have thought themselves to be.

From her earliest volumes, Millay's sonnets deal with two primary concerns: the transience of love and the brevity of time. Much of the pathos in her sonnets derives from the speaker's awareness and anticipation of the end of love, beauty and life, even as she is in the beginning of an experience. Millay also treats the subject of aging—the ravages of





speaker moves, in lines ten and eleven of the sestet, from merely insinuating claims to the greatness of her life, to elevating it directly through metaphor:

I am the booth where Folly holds her fair;  
Impious no less in ruin than in strength,

The speaker's claim to greatness is one of magnitude rather than morals. The mythical Greek goddess of infatuation and foolish impulses, *Ate* (Blind Folly), had the power to tempt men into rash and ruinous actions. The speaker boasts that she, even in age, retains the power of a goddess over men. One problem with this assertion is that the kind of female agency that derives from the ability to have power over a man presumes the possession of qualities that were coveted by men in literary and cultural narratives: youth and beauty. The speaker's dubious claim that she will derive agency *through* aging (ruin), and retain her power up to the very point of death is no more than a fanciful notion—more an act of denial than recognition—but it is the kind of flagrant assertion that defined Millay's extravagant spirit and made her the darling of critics and readers alike.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, not long after *Second April* was finished, Millay experienced a protracted period of exhaustion and ennui, and attempted to recover by living abroad for a year. Whether her illness changed her poetic defiance of age and death cannot be determined with any certainty, but the sonnet speakers in Millay's subsequent volumes move ever closer toward the poignant recognition that loss—of power, of beauty, of love—is the result of aging, and an increasing number of her sonnets explore the

---

<sup>70</sup> In the process of asserting that “a conscious intention to defy [body] commodification does not necessarily add up to effective resistance,” Cheryl Walker notes the same extravagant defiance of bodily decline in Millay's approach to her own life. “Millay had both exploited her physical presence as part of her media attraction and insisted that her body was somehow independent of the frames in which others sought to bind its significance” (90).

connection and the conflict of these two concepts.<sup>71</sup> In 1934, the forty-two year old

Millay published *Wine from These Grapes*, which contains a sonnet that again features aging hands:

Time, that renews the tissues of this frame,	
That built the child and hardened the soft bone,	
Taught him to wail, to blink, to walk alone,	
Stare, question, wonder, give the world a name,	4
Forget the watery darkness whence he came,	
Attends no less the boy to manhood grown,	
Brings him new raiment, strips him of his own;	
All skins are shed at length, remorse, even shame.	8
Such hope is mine, if this indeed be true,	
I dread no more the first white in my hair,	
Or even age itself, the easy shoe,	
The cane, the wrinkled hands, the special chair:	12
Time, doing this to me, may alter too	
My sorrow, into something I can bear.	

In this sonnet there exists none of the brave defiance that pervades “Let you not say of me when I am old.” Rather, images that connote the weakness of aging are compounded. Instead of a single image of withered—but aestheticized—hands, the reader is bombarded by a cane, orthopedic shoes, a “special” chair, white hair, and even age itself. Pointedly in this sonnet, the “wrinkled hands” are not associated with worship but with “dread.”

Finally, the kind of “age” depicted in this poem is indeed “passionless,” unless sorrow, remorse and shame can be considered legitimate replacements for romantic passion. The speaker, moreover, now comprehends that her power is subordinate to that of Time; consequently, she is forced to cede the subject position to Time, and occupy the

---

<sup>71</sup>In “The Female Body as Icon: Edna Millay wears a Plaid Dress,” Cheryl Walker examines Millay’s later poetry, specifically poems from the 1939 volume *Huntsman, What Quarry?*, in order to explore the connection between a woman’s physical decline and her cultural relevance. Walker focuses on the body as “Millay’s primary theme,” and explores the vacillation of an aging poetic persona that views her body as “a site under siege but impervious to exterior forces of corruption,” but also as vulnerable to both “cultural [and] biological incursions” (91).

object position herself. Her power of resistance is limited to hope and perseverance, qualities which are both abstract and, in this poem, conditional. The speaker has hope only if Time has the power to remove non-physical qualities like remorse and shame, or alter sorrow into a more tolerable quality, though it is hard to imagine what one might replace sorrow with in this particular case. Evidently Millay did not attempt to address this issue either: as a substitute for sorrow she can only suggest the vague “something I can bear,” a phrase that reinforces the doubt of both speaker and reader that Time could or would be generous in that regard.

It is significant that Millay’s final, posthumously-published volume, *Mine the Harvest* (1954), contains no sexually passionate themes. By the time Millay reached her mid-fifties (likely earlier), she had ceased to write sonnets that celebrate, or even feature romantic love. Instead Millay shifts the focus in her sonnets from her persona of lover to a concern with her role in the world as a poet and steward of her poetic legacy. Sonnets in this volume emphasize the powerlessness of age and the immediacy of death; where love does play a role it does so only as a shadow of itself. In the first three sonnets of *Mine the Harvest*, Millay conducts a transition from her memories of physical passion to the power of the mind. The third sonnet ends with a shift in valuation of experience from external to internal; specifically the mind’s freedom to “compute, refute, amass, / Catalogue, question, contemplate, and see.” Before she can reach this conclusion, however, Millay must address her former devotion to the immediacy of physical experience. In the first sonnet, “Those hours when happy hours were my estate,” Millay reduces love to something known only through memory:

Those hours when happy hours were my estate,—



is questionable.<sup>72</sup> The reality of the speaker's situation is that certain avenues of experience are officially closed to her by virtue of her failing sexual power.

Dorothy Parker's approach to aging and romantic love is, not surprisingly, more pessimistic than that of Millay. Parker sees age as the undeniable end of female agency, and her speaker is utterly defeated by it. In "The Homebody," Parker depicts an interesting double-bind for women who have passed the age of sexual desirability. The speaker in this sonnet defines herself as a "homebody," a recluse from society who now views the domestic sphere as a kind of refuge:

There still are kindly things for me to know,  
 Who am afraid to dream, afraid to feel—  
 This little chair of scrubbed and sturdy deal,  
 This easy book, this fire, sedate and slow. 4

Ironically, although she no longer has access to the cult of youth and beauty (the speaker is "sworn to meet [Beauty] as a foe"), she must continue to suffer *in her memory* the loss of the romantic pleasure she once had, as well as the knowledge that she will have no more pleasures of that kind:

...nor cry the woe  
 Of wounds across my breast that do not heal;

In opposition to the view put forth by Millay, that memory and experience confer their own, if limited power, this sonnet evinces only the bittersweet tone of the sadder-but-wiser girl grown old, one who recognizes and fears the costs to the spirit of dreaming and

---

<sup>72</sup> Hubbard attributes more agency to the speaker of this sonnet, asserting that "in a manner reminiscent of Shakespeare's mock-old man, [she] manage[s] to draw authority from the experience that ripening age represents, reaping in memory what their senses have sown" (105). However, there is a real cultural difference in the way age is perceived in men and women, and any "authority" the speaker draws from her age and sexual experience is qualified by the lack of anyone over whom to exert authority, since the gate of experience is closed to the speaker, and her ownership of the body and its experiences is temporary, earmarked for a younger generation of women, who will also only possess sexual authority for a limited time.

feeling. Whereas a young girl at the apex of desirability might expect to have her dreams of love fulfilled, or at least entertain new dreams in place of the old, the cost to a woman past her prime of tapping into her erotic desires is the futility of knowing those desires will not be fulfilled, and the ache of living with that knowledge. The speaker's apparent defense against the loss of youth, beauty and romance is to arrange both her inner and outer worlds in such a way as to preclude passion. Her chair is "little" and cheaply made, "easy" books make no demands on her intellect, and her fire, a metaphor for passion, is controlled—"sedate and slow." Likewise, unglamorous domestic qualities like "scrubbed and sturdy" replace more conventionally youthful qualities like "wild" or "hopeful." The speaker's self-imposed restriction of her sphere of activity constitutes a safe haven from rejection and from the memory of what she has lost. She has withdrawn from all passionate and imaginative experience, which results in the poverty of her inner, as well as her outer world. Finally, we see that the speaker, with the dubious luxury of hindsight, discovers that she continues to pay the price of her youthful love affairs: the "wounds across [her] breast . . . do not heal."

In the sestet, a series of delicately balanced metaphors reinforce the speaker's loss of agency and assert that the pain of lost love has its terminus only in (metaphorical) death. The speaker conjectures that the death of her ability to feel is the only thing that can resolve her heartache:

It may be, when the devil's own time is done,  
That I shall hear the dropping of the rain  
At midnight, and lie quiet in my bed;  
Or stretch and straighten to the yellow sun;  
Or face the turning tree, and have no pain;  
So shall I learn at last my heart is dead.

The nature metaphors here would seem to signify nature's "restorative" powers. The "dropping of the rain" customarily represents healing and renewal, while the sun is a source of life and energy. Here, however, the speaker knows only that if time and nature eliminate her pain, it will not be because she has healed, but because her heart is dead. Moreover, the speaker's awareness of natural beauty actually causes rather than dispels her pain. Thus through its depiction, both of female isolation in a reduced sphere of activity, and of the seemingly eternal diminishment of the female spirit in the wake of lost love, "Homebody" reveals the ways that agency derived through male admiration and exaltation of women is finite. The mythical power of the eternal feminine is in reality the opposite of eternal—valuation of the ideal feminine is specifically, and quite narrowly, proscribed by time. With time comes the inevitable loss of youth, beauty, and maidenhood, and an automatic reduction in social desirability, the matrix upon which women in middle-class society build their limited power.

Although Parker's sonnet speakers as a group persist in the attempt to negotiate multiple approaches to the problem of desire and agency, the overwhelming result of these negotiations is failure. In most of Parker's sonnets we see a speaker burdened by romantic love, heartbroken by its loss, afraid of life without it, and frustrated by her lack of fulfillment within it. In other sonnets the speaker positions herself outside of an immediate relationship in order to provide a more disinterested critique, both of the gender hypocrisy inherent in the hegemonic construct of desire that was formalized by the amatory sonnet, and of the futility of expecting that desire, however aestheticized, to prevail in real life. While Petrarchism works as a vehicle for male subjectivity, Parker's female sonnet speakers, despite their many attempts, fail repeatedly to attain the

poetically lauded version of love so methodically instilled through the sonnet tradition.

This failure itself critiques the ideological assumptions of Petrarchism as being in any way desirable for women. Never in any of Parker's sonnets does the speaker "succeed" in possessing or maintaining romantic love; rather, the sonnets as a whole continually reveal the pain, compromise, and loss that seems to be the inevitable lot for women who recognize the social trade-off of female agency for a position of "value" within patriarchal culture.

Ultimately, it is the juxtaposition of aging with desire that exposes the limits of cultural agency for modernist women. The realization that youth and beauty inform the agency of younger speakers results in a withering of self-assertion in older ones.<sup>73</sup> Parker and Millay both make use of an aging speaker to reveal the sad discovery that the convictions of a self-aware "but socially powerless individual cannot survive the impact of real power" (DuPlessis 17). Moreover, the subject of aging reveals the failure of the sonnet to prevail as a legitimate poetic vehicle for women writing about love, a conclusion that will become more apparent in the sonnets of Julia Alvarez. The insurmountable problem for both Parker and Millay is that their poetic attempts at self-assertion take place *within* social and poetic constructs that are too loaded with cultural expectations and limits for women that undercut their attempts to claim agency.

And yet, the attempt to rewrite poetic conventions that normalized and perpetuated the depiction of the female love object must count for something: the very desire of both poets to enact greater agency for women constitutes a step along the

---

<sup>73</sup> Hainsworth has explored the "equation between love and youth which goes back to antiquity and which had been particularly strong in Provençal poetry" (8).



continuum of women sonnet writers who engage the problem of power in hegemonic relationship structures. To quote Helene Cixous, “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as the springboard of subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (“Medusa” 879). The sonnets of Millay and Parker contribute to such a project of transformation; a project that will be advanced by Elizabeth Bishop and Julia Alvarez.

CHAPTER FOUR  
ELIZABETH BISHOP'S SONNETS: THE ABANDONMENT  
OF FORM AND CULTURE

The process of literary and cultural transformation that defined American modernism evolved over roughly five decades, and while Elizabeth Bishop, Dorothy Parker, and Edna St. Vincent Millay all share the designation of “modernist poet,” there was little overlap in their prime years of poetic production. Bishop was born in 1911, eighteen and nineteen years, respectively, after Millay and Parker; and at the time of her death in 1979, she’d outlived them both. The nearly two-decade age gap reflects significant differences in the poets’ cultural experiences and literary outlooks. Bishop was not as affected by, or preoccupied with, the struggle of the New Woman in a bourgeois culture that maintained ties to late Victorian values. Moreover, Bishop rarely employed traditional verse forms—and when she did it was usually to call conscious attention to the role form can play in a meaning-making—and her tone is consistently less emotional and more understated than that of Parker or Millay. Bishop’s poetry relies more on “implication rather than direct explanation,” and her poetic voice tends more toward the (seemingly) casual and matter-of-fact than toward the rhetorically stylized phrasing often invoked by Parker and Millay (Dodd 104). Finally, Bishop’s ties to high modernism are stronger than those of either Parker or Millay; her poetic influences and contemporaries were considerably more

avant-garde.<sup>74</sup>

At the same time, Bishop does share several significant biographical details in common with Parker and Millay. Both Parker and Bishop lost their mothers before the age of five, and as a result, both experienced a lasting loss of stability and sense of home.<sup>75</sup> Like Parker, Bishop's early education included exclusive schools; like Millay, she attended Vassar College. Bishop and Millay were both precocious when it came to writing and publication; each at one point produced and edited her high school literary magazine—Millay even put out a literary magazine before she was out of *elementary* school—and each had her work published in reputable literary magazines while still in college. Bishop and Millay also shared strong ties to the Northeast, ties that informed several of their poems. All three poets were talented musicians (of the three, Bishop's poetry is most informed by her understanding of composition and theory), and all three lived and wrote—for varying lengths of time—in New York City. Their lives all were heavily marked by their struggles with alcoholism.<sup>76</sup> And all three wrote sonnets.

---

<sup>74</sup> Of the early modernists, Bishop was most influenced by Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, but she loved the work of W.H. Auden, and read Pound, Eliot, H.D., and Williams. Even Bishop's most significant "pre-modernist" influences—Hopkins and Herbert—employed innovative and experimental techniques. As her career progressed, she became more focused on how poetry and post-modern poetics were evolving through the work of contemporaries such as Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and James Merrill.

<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Rothschild died when Parker was four years old. Although Bishop's mother did not die until 1934 (when Bishop was twenty-three), she was permanently committed to a mental hospital in 1916, when Bishop was five. Moreover, the several years leading up to the removal of her mother were so unstable that Bishop considered herself a virtual orphan from the age of one.

<sup>76</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, women who drank were considered a threat to the dominant social order wherein women were the child-rearers and caretakers of the home. Millier observes that female drinking "involved a sacrifice of femininity" and led, it was supposed, to "sexual aggression" and the desertion of "female duty" (*Flawed* 14). Accordingly, the excessive drinking of all three poets—at least the early stages thereof—can be viewed as a way to insert themselves into the same arena as male writers, and to declare themselves a step apart from conventional women. Rather ironically, the drinking that eventually eroded their health also helped them construct a subjectivity independent of gender norms.

However, Bishop's public presence differed markedly from those of her predecessors. Parker and Millay consistently flaunted their defiance of societal norms, and their reputations in New York society were earned almost as much for their flagrant love affairs as for their poetry—indeed, their sexual exploits frequently informed their poems. In contrast, Bishop “dreaded . . . the New York literary scene” (Lombardi, *Body* 107). Bishop was reserved and kept her personal life closely guarded, occupying at most a very liminal position in mainstream American culture. Whether this was due more to her natural shyness, childhood trauma, or her lesbianism cannot be determined with certainty, but she lived most of her life with a sense of isolation. Her close friendships were mostly with writers or artists she admired—Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Pearl Kazin, Joseph Summers, Randall Jarrell—friendships that were deepened more through intimate correspondence than through personal interaction or participation in the kind of social circles favored by both Parker and Millay.

The experience of location/dislocation, and the themes of loss, home, and identity that stem from it, are central to much, if not most, of Bishop's poetry and prose. For Bishop, dislocation begins in profound loss and results in isolation and a feeling of homelessness. In her comprehensive study of the relationship between the severe trauma of Bishop's early experiences and her mature poetics, Susan McCabe focuses on the ways Bishop's “vision and language . . . are molded by the events of loss” (8). Bishop lost her father when she was eight months old, and his death was the catalyst in a series of severe psychological breakdowns suffered by Bishop's mother during the next several years. At age five, Bishop saw her mother for the last time: deemed irrevocably insane, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop was permanently committed to a sanitarium, and Bishop was taken to her

maternal grandparents' home in Nova Scotia. Life in Nova Scotia was the happiest time of Bishop's childhood, and also the briefest. Not one year later, she was forced to return to Worcester—her paternal grandparents had devised an arrangement by which Bishop would live most of the year with them, but spend two months of every summer in Nova Scotia; the psychological effects of that shuttling deprived Bishop of the ability to locate her identity in a secure sense of home or place. Bishop was miserable in Worcester: numerous illnesses, anxiety, allergies, and the severe asthma that would plague her throughout her life emerged during this time, and led to a childhood marked by confinement away from her classmates.<sup>77</sup> Finally, in 1918, Bishop was allowed to live with her (maternal) Aunt Maud in Boston, where she stayed until she entered Vassar in 1930. Her aunt's dedicated care resulted in some improvement in Bishop's health, but she still spent many hours alone and housebound. As an antidote to the isolation, the eight-year-old Bishop avidly consumed the volumes of Victorian poetry on Maud's bookshelves, an experience to which she credited the beginning of her lifelong devotion to reading and writing poetry. She read and memorized poems by Tennyson, the Brownings, Emerson, Carlyle, and others, until the poems, as Bishop would later say, became "an unconscious part" of her (qtd. in Millier, *Life* 30). While attending summer camp at age thirteen, a friend gave Bishop the book that introduced her to the poems of Gerard Manly Hopkins, whose work influenced Bishop's own poetics.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> By the time she'd been in Worcester nine months, Bishop had become allergic "to almost everything in the house and yard. Her Worcester schoolteachers sent her home because of her eczema sores, and she was soon bedridden . . . 'At night I lay blinking my flashlight on and off and crying'" (Millier, *Life* 27-28).

<sup>78</sup> The book was Harriet Monroe's 1917 anthology, *The New Poetry*, which Bishop later described as an "important experience" (Brown 292). During that same camp session, Bishop wandered into a Cape Cod bookstore and discovered a book of George Herbert's poetry; Herbert became Bishop's favorite poet, and remained so throughout her life.

The seemingly inescapable—and at times chosen—sense of dislocation and marginalization that pervaded Bishop’s childhood continued throughout her life, making instability and homelessness the constants through which she lived and wrote. After graduating from Vassar and moving to New York City’s Greenwich Village to begin her career as a poet, Bishop again became nomadic, this time by choice. Uninterested in the celebrity culture of New York poets, and intensely lonely in Manhattan, she was unable to settle into a sense of home. Instead she began a lifetime of fairly constant travel to foreign countries, interspersed with extended visits to the houses of friends—temporary comforts that nonetheless served to reinforce her sense of rootlessness.<sup>79</sup> Richard Wilbur, a contemporary and friend of Bishop, describes the fundamental relationship of Bishop’s fragmented life to her poetics. Despite her reticence, Bishop

wrote several autobiographical pieces in which she testified to a lifelong sense of dislocation. That is, she missed from the beginning what some enjoy, an unthinking conviction that things ought to be as they are; that one ought to exist, bearing a certain name . . . that it all makes sense. (263)

The restless Bishop likely preferred the upheaval of relocation because it helped to mask the internal instability she was reluctant to address. She continually applied for artists’ grants, visiting professorships, consultancies and residence positions that took her to too many places to name, but which include Maine, the artist colony Yaddo, Washington, D.C., Seattle, Haiti, San Francisco, Cambridge, Nova Scotia and North Haven. Her letters are peppered with eager—and sometimes desperate—references to the idea of “getting away.” From a literary standpoint, the feeling of temporariness—the state of living

---

<sup>79</sup> The single significant exception to Bishop’s homelessness was her fifteen-year relationship with Lota Soares. Bishop described the house they shared in Brazil as the only home she’d ever known. Finding herself unable to remain in Brazil after Lota’s suicide, Bishop “returned to the . . . emotionally unanchored existence of earlier years, and . . . began to drink heavily once again” (Lombardi, *Body* 111).

always in flux or on the margins—informed an essential part of Bishop’s poetic experience. In her life, however, the daily loneliness and isolation became increasingly intolerable, and she drank destructively as a result.

The poetic themes of isolation and dislocation in Bishop’s work find an ironic parallel in the cultural and literary marginalization she experienced at the hands of critics. Bishop’s poetry did not conform to any of the familiar poetic movements of the modernist period, resulting in some confusion about and resistance to her work.<sup>80</sup> Reviews of her early work established the perception of Bishop as at best a minor poet whose artistic project was small in scope. From her very first review,<sup>81</sup> which praised Bishop’s “avowed humility,” the central characteristics associated with Bishop were “modest” and “reticent,” qualities, asserts Thomas Travisano, which are “demonstrably insufficient to project a writer beyond the level of a minor figure” (*Phenomenon* 921). Indeed, Lee Edelman argues that the early critical assessment of Bishop’s work is the primary reason for a decades-long delay in both artistic appreciation and serious study of Bishop’s poetry:

Critical reception of Bishop, with its complicity in her reductive self-definition, with its acceptance of her willful evasions and its misprisions of her irony, exemplifies an interpretive blindness, which is to say, an ideological blindness, that enacts the very problems of reading on which Bishop's poetry frequently dwells. (182)

In the absence of critics who perceived Bishop’s accomplishments, early reviews effectively consigned her to the margins of literary culture.

---

<sup>80</sup> For more on this, see Thomas Travisano’s essay “The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon.”

<sup>81</sup> In *Trial Balances* (1935). This anthology, which pre-dated Bishop’s first solo volume of poetry by ten years, published three of Bishop’s poems. As her sponsor for the anthology, Marianne Moore wrote a short preface that was intended to introduce Bishop as a new poet, but which sounds far more like a critical review.

Reviews of her first three volumes of poetry persistently damn Bishop with faint praise.<sup>82</sup> Bishop's initial examination under the critical microscope occurred in 1946, with the publication of her first volume, *North and South*. In the majority of these reviews, many of which elide comments on the poems with personal assessments of the poet, "craft" is made the foremost emphasis. When it comes to qualities such as poetic vision, however, Bishop is described as "afraid to risk pure lyricism, and . . . rather shy of ideas" (*Atlantic* 148). Prominent critics of the day, several of whom were friends of Bishop, pride themselves on their ability to discern the finer points of her poetic construction. In the course of praising a poem's metrics, Lloyd Frankenberg declares Bishop to have "an unflinching ear, both metrically and in its precise translation of the visual" (46), while Barbara Gibbs notes that Bishop's rhythms possess a "controlled freedom" (228). Another critical pattern labels Bishop's poems as small in scale or scope, and then attributes the (perceived) limits of her poetic range to personal humility and emotional reticence. Louise Bogan proclaims in the *New Yorker*, "Miss Bishop's poems are not in the least showy. They strike no attitudes and have not an ounce of superfluous emotional weight" (121). Marianne Moore's review, entitled "A Modest Expert," focuses on small-scale features such as the poems' "adornments,"<sup>83</sup> while Selden Rodman accuses Bishop of falling "victim to her own virtuosity," stating that her poems "never stray far from the concrete and particular" and suffer from "overworkmanship" (18). Not

---

<sup>82</sup> Reviews of later volumes reveal a shift in critical focus: critics move from defining craft as distinguishing but limiting Bishop's art, to craft as grounding Bishop's supposedly new-found visionary powers. The first hints of this shift can be found in reviews of *Questions of Travel* (1957), but not until the publication of *Geography III* (1976) was Bishop's critical metamorphosis complete.

<sup>83</sup> "The adornments are structural, as with alliteration, contrast, and the reiterated word as a substitute for rhyme . . . [there is a] verisimilitude that avoids embarrassingly direct descriptiveness . . . enumerative description—one of Miss Bishop's specialties—can be easy and compact" (354).



only is there little in these reviews that would inspire the public to seek out Bishop's volumes, but some reviews are so condescending they likely discouraged a mainstream readership. The overall emphasis on Bishop as a craftswoman implies that she has a skill, but not a "gift" or an "inspiration"—the trademarks of an artist.

Initial reviews of *Poems: North and South, A Cold Spring* (1955), likewise work cumulatively to erode Bishop's poetic reputation: they are filled with language that connotes diminution; litotes that say only what Bishop's poetry is *not* instead of what it *is*; and estimations of new poems as simultaneously indispensable, yet devoid of any further range than her older work. Richard Eberhart's *New York Times* review makes no less than *nine* separate comments that overwhelmingly give the impression that Bishop is at best a static poet. Eberhart finds

the same detached, descriptive, unmoved qualities in the new work as in her old...One of the merits of her poetry is that it is not frustratingly ambiguous. It is also not highly mysterious. She is in control of a measured style. (4)

The volume of reviews of this sort adds up to an accusation of both under-imagination and over-workmanship. Time and time again, reviewer emphasis—even if complimentary—on the discrete elements of poetic form makes Bishop's poetry as a whole seem "unconcerned with philosophical problems, [which] permits them to exist in a field of writing not much larger than themselves" (Hammer 143). A wealth of critical perceptions such as these created a blueprint for reviews that both diminished Bishop's literary significance and elided critical marginalization with the thematic value of the "marginality, power and powerlessness" that Bishop was "critically and consciously trying to explore" (Rich, *Eye* 130).

Ironically, the traits early reviewers decry—detachment, literal description, absence of lyricism and lack of emotional depth—actually comprise in part the strategy of dislocation that is a central component of Bishop’s poetics. Dislocation in Bishop’s poetry shapes the nuanced presence of emotional intimacy, (im)personality, and gender identity—qualities that inform lyric subjectivity, and which typically play a prescribed role in the Petrarchan sonnet. Bishop regularly avoids the lyric “I,” a strategy that not only discourages the reader’s assumption of intimacy, but foregrounds the “possibility of moving beyond the limits of the individual as traditionally understood in terms of a private, inner self” (Foster 101). Moreover, abandonment of the lyric “I” goes hand in hand with poetic self-effacement, creating what Bonnie Costello refers to as the impersonal “mode,” which “usually undermines or ignores the self . . . [and creates] feelings of disunity and disorientation” (*Impersonal* 109). In much of Bishop’s work, space is a metaphor for subjectivity; thus, the question of where and how Bishop locates herself in her poems is problematized by her use of poetic ambiguities and evasions that create an ongoing sense of indeterminacy. Repeatedly, the subjects of Bishop’s poems (such as “The Prodigal,” “Sandpiper,” and “Arrival at Santos”) are located in interstitial spaces: the shifting and indeterminate edges where land meets water; the threshold of sleeping and dreaming; on the margins of society—spaces that are not easily defined or established. Bishop’s experience also takes place in measured or contained spaces, as evidenced in the poems “Visits to St. Elizabeth’s” and “In the Waiting Room,” and in the short story “In Prison.” Contained spaces function as literal and figurative limits and/or barriers to both the subject’s experience and the reader’s interpretation of it. Both kinds

of spaces—containment and marginality—allow for Bishop’s sustained reticence, ambiguous subjectivity, and ambivalence toward emotional attachment.

Taken together, the use of dislocation, impersonality, tonal distance, and ambiguity inform Bishop’s use of the poetic mode known as personal classicism.

Elizabeth Dodd’s study examines twentieth-century women poets’ use of personal classicism as a “reveal and conceal” maneuver by which to avoid the reductive female stereotype of the autobiographical or sentimental “poetess” (112). In personal classicism, poets

combine personal impulses . . . with careful elements of control that allow them to shape, frame—and mute—what are at their core romantic, personal poems. Those elements shown to mitigate the personal center tend specifically to mute or conceal the autobiographical details in the poetry and to imply a more “universal” approach. (1)

For Bishop, the “life of poetry and the life one lived were interrelated but distinct and to be kept separate” (Kalstone 237). When asked directly about the personal significance of any given poem, Bishop commonly ignored the larger implications of the question, preferring to couch her answer within the narrower terms of the poem’s connection to a real, but localized or concrete event. George Starbuck’s attempt to shift the focus of their interview from Bishop’s “knowledge of particular things” to “the philosophy of the poems, the morals,” for example, met with the apparently innocent reply, “I didn’t know there were any . . .” (15). And to Wesley Wehr, Bishop declared, “I *always* tell the truth in my poems. With “The Fish,” that’s *exactly* how it happened. It was in Key West, and I *did* catch it just as the poem says” (324). This somewhat disingenuous insistence on the literality of her poetic detail also conforms to the mode of personal classicism: it deflects attention away from textual complexities, and points instead toward a superficial

identification of the poem's "narrative or 'plot' as the locus of the interpretive issues raised by the text" (Edelman 183). The result is a deliberate encouragement of misreading that Edelman calls a "strategy of evasion" (183). Bishop's poetry evinces all of the central strategies of personal classicism identified by Dodd: a tone of reticence and/or understatement, deceptively simple syntax, use of traditional verse forms, and other "tools of distance" such as persona or allusion (6). Lastly, the incorporation of surrealist imagery, while not a defining characteristic of personal classicism, is also used by Bishop to create dislocation and estrangement.

Considering her reliance, in the greater part of her poetry, on themes that are antithetical to those commonly found in the traditional sonnet, Bishop's sporadic but sustained engagement with this form might at first seem unexpected. The choice of the sonnet seems illogical as well: why employ the genre whose legacy is the "affiliation with the Petrarchan world of unchanging and inescapable love," only to avoid both the revealing intimacy of the lyric self and the theme of romantic desire? (Dubrow 296). Yet Bishop's sonnets have much to say about the double-bind of desire and agency. We see in them the emergence of a postmodern aesthetic: Bishop's poetry more consciously "registers an awareness of the processes through which structures...of self, tradition, language...are ideologically mediated" (Kinnahan 185). Thus Bishop's work has generated a theoretical discourse that pays specific attention to the problems of female subjectivity and poetic self-assertion in her sonnets. Within the framework of dislocation that informs much of her work, I will examine the two sonnets that most directly engage the amatory sonnet tradition. In these poems, Bishop employs personal classicist elements and negotiates formal tropes in ways that initially trouble, and finally refute,

normative cultural values for desire—a strategy that ultimately reveals a critique of the poetics and praxis of the sonnet itself.

Of the twelve sonnets she wrote, Bishop gave two of them the same eponymous title: “Sonnet.” As meticulous as she was in her attention to detail and revision, the choice to replicate a title—particularly this one—cannot be coincidental. The deliberate retention of the title “Sonnet” implies that both poems are self-referential, and thus function as metapoetic commentary on the genre. Since the application of the same title to such structurally disparate sonnets points to an intentional relatedness, a comprehensive reading will not offer an interpretation of one “Sonnet” in a vacuum, but will consider that these poems have been set up in conversation with each other. These two sonnets also constitute the chronological bounds of Bishop’s poetic production: the first was written in 1928, and the second, written in 1979, is considered to be Bishop’s final completed poem.<sup>84</sup> The temporal location of these poems within Bishop’s oeuvre lends additional significance to their relationship: as one of the last poems she composed, *1979* indicates that even at the end of her career, the sonnet still held critical relevance for Bishop. The striking differences in structure between *1928* and *1979* suggest that this “critical relevance” is a problem that goes to the heart of sonnet poetics, one that Bishop found imperative to resolve. Given the many formal and generic disparities between the two sonnets, it seems clear that the later sonnet overwrites the values of its predecessor, and thus constitutes Bishop’s final testament on genre poetics. In a juxtaposition of the two poems, *1979* emerges not only as the window through which *1928* can more clearly

---

<sup>84</sup> I will hereafter refer to these poems by their years of composition, italicized.

be seen as the origin of Bishop's struggle with the implications of form, but also as the solution to—and perhaps vindication of—the sonnet.

One of seven sonnets written while Bishop was (roughly) college-aged,<sup>85</sup> *1928* is typically categorized as part of Bishop's juvenilia; among the body of critical work on Bishop, these poems are rarely mentioned. Though poems of "youth" are commonly assumed to lack maturity or literary relevance, such is not necessarily the case with Bishop. Her articles and essays in *The Blue Pencil*, Bishop's high-school literary magazine, a publication Travisano has deemed superior to the *Vassar Review*, indicate that even as a teenager, Bishop had "begun the transition from [the] romantic norms [she'd inherited] to more modern ones" (Travisano, "Emerging" 36).<sup>86</sup> Likewise, Lee Oser refutes the notion of a "crucial divide between the early and late Bishop" (8), while Margaret Dickie shows that the use of "elaborately rhymed forms," while more common in Bishop's early work, does not coincide with any "particular stage in her development" ("Text" 1).<sup>87</sup> Most notably, *1928* merits attention because it was written in conjunction

---

<sup>85</sup> Bishop attended Vassar from 1930 until 1934. "Sonnet" and "Thunder" were written in 1928; "Some Dreams They Forget" and "Three Sonnets for the Eyes" in 1933; and "The Reprimand" in 1935. Though Bishop did not choose to include these poems in the collections she published during her lifetime, they appear in the posthumously published *Complete Poems* under the heading "Poems Written in Youth."

<sup>86</sup> Travisano's thorough study of Bishop's juvenilia reveals "a unique picture of a distinctive talent emerging from the generalized background of her cultural moment" (33). Bishop's early inclination toward modernism is even more remarkable in light of the fact that, at both Walnut Hill and Vassar, Bishop "was expected to model her verse on Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, Tennyson and Browning... romantic and late-romantic texts... norms [that] hung on long enough to shape the early literary conceptions of Bishop's generation" (33).

<sup>87</sup> There is a tendency in literary criticism to assume a split between a poet's early and mature work; this often results in the glossing over, or even the outright dismissal, of the idea that juvenilia has literary value, whether on its own merit or as part of a continuum of poetic development. This concept of a "split" strikes me as both artificial and arbitrary, although perhaps convenient to certain critical premises. Oser demonstrates the way Bishop's poetry—both early and late—incorporates both formal structures and *vers libre* in the service of modernist impersonality. In this way Bishop "helps foster a larger sense of American modernism from a formal perspective" (8).

with the beginning of Bishop's attempts to develop her poetics. Writing the early sonnets may even have alerted Bishop to the necessity of forming a rationale for her poetry; she recognized that, in writing sonnets, she had "undertaken to solve the most hopeless of problems" (*OA* 10). In a series of letters to poet Donald Stanford in the fall of 1933, Bishop explains and defends the rationale for her formal choices, specifically those regarding her sonnets.<sup>88</sup> Commenting on a sonnet of Stanford's, Bishop wonders if the "weird clearness" of the poem is "because [Stanford's] rhythms are so well in hand." But she follows that seemingly complimentary observation with the assertion that Stanford's regularity of rhythm is "what rather spoils the sonnets for me" (*OA* 10). In a subsequent letter Bishop reiterates her discomfort with meter:

I can write in iambics if I want to—but just now I don't know my own mind quite well enough to say what I want to in them. If I try to write smoothly, I find myself perverting the meaning for the sake of the smoothness . . . I think that an equally great "cumulative effect" might be built up by a series of irregularities. Instead of beginning with an "uninterrupted mood," what I want to do is to get the moods themselves into the rhythm. This is a very hard thing for me to explain, but for me there are two kinds of poetry, that (I think yours is of this sort) *at rest*, and that which is in action, within itself. (11)

Bishop goes on to quote for Stanford crucial passages from a 1929 essay by Morris Croll, "The Baroque Style in Prose." The discovery of Croll's article was highly significant for Bishop, because it expressed precisely her own view of what poetry should do. The essay describes a particular style of writing that would "avoid prearrangements and preparations" so as to retain the "imaginative truth or the energy" of the poem. Croll

---

<sup>88</sup> Yvor Winters facilitated this correspondence on Bishop's behalf, with the idea that Stanford might provide Bishop with a helpful critique of her poems. These initial letters in their series of correspondence revolve around a debate over the sonnet. Stanford sent some of his sonnets to Bishop, likely as an example of the kind of poetics he favored. Although Bishop was considered the neophyte in this relationship, she adamantly defends her choices in "Three Sonnets for the Eyes." Nor does she hesitate to take issue with Stanford's poems, though her critique is subtle and is couched in disclaimers.

defines the achievement of such writing as “a progress . . . a series of imaginative moments occurring in a logical pause or suspension” (433). This concept is so important to Bishop that she needs to make sure Stanford understands the poetics involved:

Further on he [Croll] calls it “a progress of imaginative apprehension, a revolving and upward motion of the mind as it rises in energy” and a “spiral movement.” But the best part, which perfectly describes the sort of poetic convention I should like to make for myself . . . is this: “Their purpose (the writers of Baroque prose) was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking. . . . They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth.” (*OA* 12)

*Not a thought, but a mind thinking.* Out of her extended correspondence with Stanford emerged what is possibly Bishop’s first formalized enunciation of her poetics: the declaration of her intention to create an internal poetic energy that would allow a poem to enact, as opposed to merely describe, the experience and energy of a mind in action. It is significant that Bishop’s early analysis of the use and purpose of verse forms takes place in the context of her engagement with that “most hopeless of problems,” the sonnet.

Despite convincing evidence that Bishop considered “the role of form in literary thinking” to be a question of primary importance (Ellis 5), sustained poetic analyses that center on techniques of form and language are notably absent from current Bishop studies.<sup>89</sup> In her 1964 letter to Anne Stevenson, with whom she extensively discussed her

---

<sup>89</sup> For more on this issue, see Ellis, Perloff, and Rooney, all of whom identify as a major problem of literary criticism since the 1990’s the subordination of readings of literary works to a particular “slant” without regard for the formal elements of said works. Some critics compound this sin by reverse-engineering the meaning of literary works to conform to their theme, ignoring or glossing over content that does not support it. Perloff observes with justifiable concern the pervasive shift in the “governing paradigm for literary study” wherein the “discipline of poetics” is “conspicuously absent . . . [and the] traditional role of literary studies—evaluation—is currently dismissed as largely anachronistic” (655-56). Bishop’s poetry in particular experienced a critical renaissance that emerged in conjunction with the use of what Rooney terms “modes of thematization” (39). In the proliferation of scholarship on Bishop that began in the late 1980’s, Langdon Hammer discerns the proclivity of critics to “conceal or understate the ways Bishop’s work challenges assumptions about self-representation and voice” (137), because to acknowledge Bishop’s strategy would invalidate those critics’ characterizations of her work.



poetics, Bishop insists that “*real* . . . [artistic] expression . . . lies exactly in man’s ability to construct, to use form” (qtd. in Costello, *Marianne* 139). However, the majority of articles and essays on Bishop’s work pay little attention to her use of poetic forms: the elaborately rhymed, formal verse structures she occasionally used—the sestina, ballad, villanelle and, in particular, the sonnet—go largely ignored by critics. Scholarly articles that do take up a formal verse poem (usually “One Art” or “Sestina”), pay scant attention to the literary significance of the poetic structures themselves. In contrast to the few articles that offer ethical and insightful approaches to Bishop’s sonnets, readings that freely manipulate the poems in service of themes, politics, and especially biography, are paramount.

The devaluation of aesthetic criticism in literary studies is at least partially implicated, both in the rarity of studies that mention *1928* by name, and in the preponderance of critical statements that shortchange Bishop’s early sonnets as a group. For example, Jeffrey Powers-Beck declares the wording in some of the early sonnets to be “labored, contorted and archaic.” Rather than consider either the possibility that Bishop’s language might be intentional, or what the choice of archaic diction might indicate, he uses his observation to conclude that the sonnets are “best classed among Bishop’s youthful experiments” (73). Rory Waterman calls upon *1928* in order to note Bishop’s “strict adherence to conventions of theme, form and scansion,” but he makes no move to interpret their use. Instead, Waterman presumes that the existence of a later sonnet which “flout[s]” conventions allows him to conclude, “with hindsight,” that Bishop’s aesthetic choices in *1928* can be “dismissed as the sign of a young poet . . . practising.” Her youth justifies his disregard for the poem.

Generalized statements that link form with gender also serve to preclude thorough poetic analyses in scholarly work on Bishop. Some critics revive the reductive, gender-biased assumption (as we have seen in critiques of Millay's sonnets) that women poets are dependent upon prescribed forms to structure and control the disorder of excessive emotion. Thus emerge critical claims that suggest Bishop's use of formal verse structures could "prevent [her] poetry from indulging its emotional subject matter and intimate speaking voice" (Dodd 6), or that the "framework of a formal pattern was a necessary structure" for Bishop's inclusion of personal details (Schwartz, *Art* 151). Lorrie Goldensohn connects the use of "stanzas built with controlled and stylish symmetry" with Bishop's need to "enclose" particularly "intense" or "guarded" emotional topics such as love and grief ("Unpublished" 36-37). David Wyatt views Bishop's use of Petrarchan sonnet octaves at the beginning and end of "The Map" as poetic bookends that control and buffer the emotional and formal "transgression" in the middle of the poem: "the issue for Bishop [is] how to get emotion into poetry while disguising and disciplining it through form" (30).

All too frequently, critics abandon literary analysis in favor of biography as the primary determinant of poetic meaning. Bishop studies in particular, observes Ellen Rooney, tend to privilege such "modes of thematization," wherein a text is "engaged only to confirm the prior insights of a theoretical problematic" (39). A critic may seize upon a specific detail about or event in Bishop's personal life, and then approach her poems with a view to finding "coded" references to said detail or event. In the process, literary meaning is often artificially restricted—and sometimes contrived. Alcoholism and gender identity are the modes of thematization most frequently used to interpret Bishop's poems,

and sometimes a mode of thematization will be tailor-made to fit Bishop's life. For example, her discovery that Bishop struggled with asthma leads Marilyn May Lombardi to locate the meaning of poems that contain images of "respiration, suffocation, and constriction" in Bishop's "private battle for breath" ("Closet" 48). *Two* studies by Brett Millier are rooted in the premise that Bishop's struggle with alcoholism is the central critical lens through which to discern her poetic meaning. In order to read a kind of water imagery—specifically that which posits the "figure of the ocean wave" as the embodiment of oppositional themes such as "tension-release, expand-extinguish, or advance-retreat"—as a metaphor for alcoholism in Bishop's poetry, Millier draws on several of Bishop's early poems, including the sonnet *1928 (Prodigal 72)*. Millier reads the terminal action of each individual wave that melts into the shore as a "local oblivion," and while she finds it "tempting" to consider the oblivion of the wave a metaphor for "the oblivion that drunkenness offers," she stops short of making that claim directly. Instead, she makes a series of smaller assertions designed to approximate the claim. First and foremost, claims Millier, imagery of water that ebbs and flows "belongs to a broad theme of retreat and withdrawal that occurs throughout Bishop's work, from the 'Sonnet' of 1928 to 'The End of March' (1974) and 'Santarem' (1978)" (*Prodigal 72*). Millier then narrows her broad theme by asserting that "the impulse to drink may be psychologically connected to the impulse to retreat" and, since imagery of withdrawal occurs "early . . . and . . . consistently throughout [Bishop's poems] letters and journals," the theme of retreat and withdrawal *can* "describe [the] habit of mind" of an alcoholic (*Prodigal 72*).

In the end, Millier equates the oblivion of the wave with the oblivion of drunkenness—albeit tenuously—via implication and transitive logic.<sup>90</sup>

A considered evaluation of *1928*, one not confined by modes of thematization, begins in the same approach to literary analysis Bishop demanded of her students, to “concentrate more on . . . all the complexities of language and form” (qtd. in Wehr 319). One doesn’t have to read beyond the octave to notice that *1928* calls deliberate attention to its formal tropes, which suggests the possibility that part of the poem’s meaning is “encoded” in the choice of form (Dickie, “Text” 2). It has been argued that *1928* constitutes Bishop’s “assertion of the value of traditional form in the face of contemporary modernist disregard for it” (Huang-Tiller). In the case of both eponymous sonnets, particularly *1928*, I would argue quite the opposite—that while form itself is very important to Bishop, her invocation of traditional forms more often communicates an “ironic sense of the literary past” (Oser 7), and incorporates contradictions and ambiguities that reflect a distinctly modernist sensibility. Jacqueline Vaught Brogan notes that, “far from being traditional, . . . Bishop’s use of poetic conventions was always and continued to be one of her primary vehicles for making biting social commentaries” (240). And despite its engagement with formal verse structures, the pointed disparity between form and content in *1928* enacts a modernist tension between the woman poet’s

---

<sup>90</sup> Perhaps the most egregious result of this particular kind of misprision occurs in Millier’s reading of Bishop’s eighty-three line poem, “At the Fishhouses.” In her effort to make Bishop’s real-life struggle with alcoholism the key to an encoded meaning in this poem, Millier considers only two lines (ll 73-74). In actuality these lines are part of an extended description by which Bishop translates the abstract concept of human epistemology through the concrete symbol of a harsh, inhospitable sea, a sea so cold as to be destructive. Bishop uses the phrase “burn / as if the water were a transmutation of fire” to connote an extreme coldness comparable to the burning of frostbite. Millier, however, reduces these lines to the phrase “water that burns,” out of which she contrives the term “firewater.” Millier then reframes “firewater” as an allusion to the Native American word for distilled spirits in order to conjecture finally that, because Bishop was an alcoholic, the cold sea represents “the drug with which she medicated [her] sense of loss” (*Prodigal* 67).

attempt to claim agency in the sonnet, and the restrictive cultural and gender norms encoded within its conventions. In this regard, *1928* actually undercuts the value of traditional form and reveals a young poet already vaguely troubled by a perceived inadequacy of form that she could not yet succinctly define.

Early hints of Bishop's future rejection of formal sonnet conventions find their way into this first iteration:

I am in need of music that would flow  
 Over my fretful, feeling finger-tips,  
 Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,  
 With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow. 4  
 Oh, for the healing swaying, old and low,  
 Of some song sung to rest the tired dead,  
 A song to fall like water on my head,  
 And over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow! 8

There is a magic made by melody:  
 A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool  
 Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep 12  
 To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,  
 And floats forever in a moon-green pool,  
 Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

Within the parameters of traditional Petrarchan structure, *1928* is about as perfect a sonnet as sonnet can be.<sup>91</sup> As its title suggests, the poem demonstrates a near-complete conformity to sonnet conventions: rhyme scheme, meter, the octave/sestet structure, the position of the *volta*. A profusion of musical devices attempts to lull the reader into the speaker's seemingly magical dream state. Abundant use of alliteration—in nearly every line—creates the “music” and movement the speaker so desperately needs. Phrases like “fretful, feeling finger-tips,” “bitter-tainted trembling” and “some song sung” link sounds

---

<sup>91</sup> “Perfect” is meant here to denote completion which, in the sonnet, refers to the fulfillment of structural requirements, rhyme scheme, and metrics.

like musical notes throughout the octave. Pervasive assonance that invokes the long “o” vowel sound (“flow/Over,” “slow/Oh,” “old and low,” “over,” and “glow”) emulates the elongated sounds of romantic pining, which in turn points toward music as a metaphor for erotic desire. The use of anaphora as well (ll 2-3, 8) amplifies the sense of endlessness associated with the speaker’s yearning. Finally, the octave contains images that invoke four of the five senses (taste, touch, hearing, and sight); this use of imagery involves the speaker directly in the desired music-making, almost as if she were an instrument. Limbs quivering like the strings of a cello, fingers moving *fretfully*, lips trembling—all combine to create the “song like water” for which the speaker yearns. Taken together, the aesthetic elements in the octave actually compose the desired melody. In a sad irony, though, even as the speaker performs the music she needs, she remains unfulfilled.

Despite the proliferation of musical devices and hypnotic diction, an aura of incompleteness and dissatisfaction pervades the octave. The rhapsodic description nearly disguises the fact that the speaker is still “in need” at the end of it. Musical though it may be, this sonnet’s “melody” defies the common understanding of what it means to be melodious; it is less an ode than a dirge. The octave, with its redundant rhymes and repetitive meter moves with a deliberateness that seems deadly dull, exemplifying Bishop’s analysis of meter, published in the (1934) *Vassar Review*, that makes a key distinction between rhythm and timing in the harmoniousness of a poem. In her discussion of what preserves the “unique feeling of timeliness” in poetry,” Bishop asserts that when rhythm is created by “the syllables, the words in their actual duration and their duration according sense-value . . . then the *timing* has been right. This does not mean

that a monotonous, regularly beating meter means good timing” (“Gerard” 661).

Bishop’s early commitment to this poetic suggests that rhythmic monotony is not the accidental result of a poet’s lack of maturity or imagination. Rather, pointed use of metric regularity in *1928* may be read as a deliberate construction that questions whether adherence to formal conventions is always a determinant of aesthetic value.

More generally, the establishment of a self-conscious relationship (whether of conformity or detachment) between formal tropes and lyric speaker has been identified as a poetic strategy. Susan Stewart notes that in the work of modernist women poets who employ formal verse structures, monotonous meter and relentless repetition often “signif[y] the surrender of the will to compulsory form.” Techniques of redundancy function as

a means of representing the transport or waylaying of subjective intention. To this extent they demonstrate that we cannot necessarily conclude that strict form signifies authorial mastery or control; it as readily can signify the submersion of will within convention. (40)

*1928* conforms to Stewart’s observations with uncanny exactitude. The traditional male-authored Petrarchan sonnet offers a double reward for the flawless execution of formal conventions: the prestige of poetic mastery accrues to the lyric speaker (and by extension to the poet), and within the context of the poem, the speaker often achieves the emotional consolation he desires. In contrast, the same flawless execution of formal tropes by a female poet/speaker results in the loss of poetic authority; *1928* enacts the forfeiture of female subjectivity to a traditionally masculine verse structure. Mastery, Bishop seems to suggest, comes at a cost: the self-effacement of her speaker.

A significant shift in the voice and tone of the poem takes place between the octave and sestet. In the octave, readers are privy to a lyric self in a heightened state of

introspection. The intimacy of a first-person speaker who reveals her deep longing for erotic fulfillment through imagery of her physical body is both honest and vulnerable, and allows for an affinity between poem and reader. At the end of line 8, however, this connection is abruptly withdrawn, replaced in the sestet by a disembodied voice that is not fully self-conscious. It is as if a screen has been placed between the lyric speaker and her own experience: the ability to perceive and express her needs simply disappears.

Whereas in the octave a confidential tone and sense of urgency, combined with specificity of detail and the use of personal pronouns, invests the speaker with humanity, the tone in the sestet is impersonal and detached. The sestet proclaims its lines in a disembodied, authoritative voice; assertions about the effects of poetic melody have the tone of official finality. In the tonal difference between octave and sestet, a hint of moralizing can also be heard: the abruptness with which the cold, omniscient sestet extinguishes the lyric self may be apprehended as a rebuke—a rejection of the speaker's attempt to assert her desires.

In addition to the sudden loss of personal tone, the sestet further creates a sense of detachment through the image of the heart that is not so much physical (like the “limbs” of the octave) but imaginary. The heart, a metaphor for emotion, is removed from the realm of active experience described in the octave, and “sinks through fading colors” to the magic but permanent sleep of the sestet. Dodd observes the appeal to surrealism in Bishop's early poems:

Bishop addresses attraction, heartbreak, depression—in short, the human emotional condition and the stuff of many a romantic poem—through such detached and surreal metaphors that the speaker herself is distanced from her pain, carefully observing it.” (Dodd 115)



Dodd refers here to “The Weed,” an early poem that is analogous to *1928* in its appeal to surrealism, but her comment could just as easily refer to *1928*. The emotional pain of unfulfilled desire can be endured only so long before it must be sublimated or buffered so as to protect the speaker’s consciousness, even though such protection has sinister implications, such as the “feeling of being trapped . . . overwhelmed by a moment of physical ecstasy that cannot be sustained” (Dickie, *Stein* 94). David Kalstone likewise notes the way the early poems address “personal preoccupations” through abstraction:

Many of her best poems of the 1930’s are concerned precisely with divided lives and can be read as versions of seventeenth-century poems about the soul trapped in the body . . . [O]ften the versions are troubled, as with “The Man Moth” and “The Weed,” poems whose protagonists only reluctantly reenter the waking or everyday world. (“Trial” 123)

Bishop’s *1928* seems to anticipate Kalstone’s observation, with one remarkable exception: for the protagonist of *1928*, division is insurmountable. As the sestet performs its conceit of self-enclosure, the speaker becomes—and remains—trapped in the ambivalent solution of the non-waking world.

Though it continues the lyricism of the octave, the sestet does not move to fulfill the speaker’s desire but instead withdraws from it: if the octave is the “flow” of *1928*, the sestet is its ebb. The lyric “I” is eclipsed, and the speaker’s agency along with it. Having detached the speaker from her subjectivity, the sestet further proceeds to anesthetize the poem, making use of the sonnet’s metrical and lingual conventions to cease musical progress and slowly recede, sinking into a closure wherein both poem and speaker are held in an eternal, death-like suspension. The “magic” referred to at the *volta* of the sonnet is qualified by the indefinite article; it is of *a particular kind*, and not, as it turns out, the kind that Bishop’s speaker needs. Magic in the sestet takes the form of a “spell”

that quietly subdues the speaker's senses, until she "sinks . . . / To the subaqueous stillness of the sea." The alliteration throughout the sestet consists primarily of sibilant and non-plosive consonants, which gradually retard the rhythm of the sestet to a somnambulant cadence; the accumulation of the "s" consonant has a particularly smothering effect.

By the end of the sestet, the accumulated effect of diction that connotes suffocation adds a sinister note of ambivalence to the fate of the speaker. The magical sleep state in the final three lines of the poem holds conflicting notes of attraction and fear. The description of the speaker's fate—to "floa[t] forever in a moon-green pool"—is tempting in its seductive offer of peace, of escape from the fretful world of the octave. However, such dream-like fulfillment demands a trade-off: the speaker must relinquish the opportunity to live in a world where desire and its realization are possible, and instead must sink into a metaphorical sleep—a subconscious state in which self-awareness is "forever" suspended.<sup>92</sup> The gradual cessation of movement in the sestet further suggests that the suspension of self is permanent; this "sleep" is nothing more than an aestheticized image of death. The phrase "held in the arms," which usually connotes comfort, here implies an entrapment that renders both speaker and poem inanimate. Moreover, the constraints that hold the speaker, "rhythm" and "sleep," suggest a two-fold

---

<sup>92</sup> In George Starbuck's compelling interview with Bishop in 1976, she offers a reflection that, in the context of *1928*, seems rather poignant: "I think I've been awfully, oh, asleep all my life. I started out to study music, to be a music major. And somehow, I got into trouble with that. I liked it; I gave it up; I wasted a great deal of time. I studied Greek for a while; well I wasn't very good at that; then, when I got out of college, I thought I'd study medicine" (24). When Starbuck later mentions what a "stroke of good fortune" it was that Bishop and Marianne Moore became friends before Moore even knew Bishop had poetic "ambitions," Bishop interrupts: "Oh, I didn't even have ambitions. As I said, I must have been half-asleep" (27). Bishop's comments indicate that she perceived the experience of her own lack of agency as a kind of real-life sleepwalking; a liminal state in which she wasn't a participant in her own life.

defeat. First, the speaker falls victim to an ironic inversion of mastery. The aesthetic perfection of the sonnet suggests she has mastered the form, but really her functionality is gradually subordinated to the conventions with which she complies.<sup>93</sup> As a result, she becomes incapacitated and finally subsumed, not only by conventions of rhyme and meter, but by the sonnet's "internal history, its own evolution, and it[s] accrue[d] weight of allusion" (Stewart 40). Second, the sonnet, named originally for "the little song," acts paradoxically in *1928*, as an impediment to music. Together, the loss of momentum, morbid tone, and the progressive detachment from human emotion asserts a causal relationship between traditional sonnet conventions and the loss of female agency, and thus sends the message that the sonnet form may well be detrimental to the goals of women poets like Bishop. Technical mastery of the genre does not confer on Bishop's female speaker the kind of subjectivity accorded her male counterparts; in this regard the reliance on form is revealed to be merely a "projection of the need" for self-assertion, a "contrivance of desiring" (McNeilly 92). The progress of *1928* demonstrates a critical awareness of how form comes to negate lyric self-expression: when form is allowed to *predetermine* the progress of the poem instead of acceding to the demands of meaning, the result is stasis, both personal and poetic.

Beneath the literary qualities that problematize the relationship of formal aesthetics and poetic agency lies an equally significant conflict. The subtext of *1928* explores the difficulty of mediating erotic desire in the woman-authored sonnet. In order to avoid the sticky wicket created by the traditional depiction of poetic autonomy as

---

<sup>93</sup> In his reading of "Crusoe in England," Gregory Orr observes that "the rhapsody of observation and detached imagination" undercuts "the primacy of human emotional needs," resulting in an aesthetic but spiritually impoverished landscape. The perfect emptiness of the speaker's poetic landscape in *1928* parallels Orr's characterization of Crusoe's imaginative landscape: "Nothing is missing and yet what a pitiful whole it is" (35).

male-gendered, Bishop attempts to remove herself from the need to distinguish gender. Rather than project her locus of desire onto a human love object, the speaker depicts a desire that “allows her to deflect sexual identification while simultaneously sustaining a powerful erotic presence” (Diehl, *Women* 92). This is accomplished, as Joanne Feit Diehl argues, through the use of the American Sublime—the literary legacy of transcendentalist poets Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. The Sublime offered access to power, autonomy, and agency to those who possessed the exceptional intellect and imagination required to achieve it. But the Sublime, like the sonnet, is constructed on the premise that only men have the requisite intellectual and artistic abilities; thus women poets had to define and interpret the Sublime more broadly. Diehl explores the way women poets, including Bishop, “revise the Sublime in order to grant themselves access to power” (*Women xi*).<sup>94</sup> Diehl’s study provides a strong rationale for the connection of the Sublime with Elizabeth Bishop, who wrote to Anne Stevenson that she considered herself “descend[ed] from the Transcendentalists” (qtd. in Diehl, “Poetics” 17). Bishop’s poetry “establishes itself as belonging to that alternative tradition of women poets whose redefinition of the Sublime centers on the interrelation of the imagination and sexual identity” (*Women* 91).

In this regard, *1928* can be likened to an early foray into surrealist imagery during the time when Bishop was still influenced by that movement. However, the power of the sublime to “redefine gender as a space of indeterminacy” becomes problematic when the sublime comes up against the demands of traditional sonnet conventions (Foster 67). One

---

<sup>94</sup> It should be noted that Diehl does not appeal to the philosophical model of the Sublime favored by Kant and Longinus, but invokes a more contemporary definition based on the psychoanalytic model, which locates the Sublime in the life of the body, in sensation, and in sexual feeling.

the one hand, *1928* exists in the intangible space between waking and dreaming, and lacks specific or concrete references. In this way, it resists location or anchoring in “reality.” The poet-speaker likewise operates at a remove from the poem, from life: although there is a powerful erotic presence in the poem, she does not address it directly, but sublimates it through the metaphorical desire for music. For example, in the culmination of the octave, the speaker ostensibly describes her desire for song, but the image she calls on to support this desire creates a tone that goes beyond generalized eroticism to suggest sexual ecstasy: “a song to fall like water on my head / and over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow!” (ll 7-8). Her dream is for an emotional release: but within the structure of the sonnet, that release is not experienced as a moment of sublime transcendence, but through grim undertones of withdrawal from the world. The final exclamation in the octave is as close as Bishop comes to experiencing the tension between “desire and its repression . . . the momentary intense experience of a discontinuity between desire and the possibility of its fulfillment” that marks the experience of the Sublime (Clarke 360). George Lensing observes this same emotional pattern in much of Bishop’s poetry, defining it as a technique by which the poem at first appears to invite “the sensation of a dramatic emotional climax, but then immediately force[s] its diminution by some act of qualification, equivocation, or denial” (59). Such is the case in *1928*: the sestet demonstrates the power of gender norms encoded in the traditional sonnet first to qualify and finally to subsume the emotional progress attempted in the octave. Although the speaker begins by expressing her almost desperate desire for ravishment, in the end she is merely vanquished, separated from her own power of desiring. The sestet, as we have seen, denies her any chance of emotional fulfillment.

As lyrically evocative as Bishop's early sonnet is, the absence of metaphorical "breathing room" results in the creation of a poem whose ultimate action is to extinguish itself. *1928* is "a poem at rest"; it lacks the "progress of imaginative apprehension" and the "upward motion of the mind as it rises in energy," traits initially defined by Morris Croll, and immediately identified by Bishop as the perfect enunciation of her central poetic goals. While *1928* may be an exemplar of traditional sonnet form, the disjunction between formal perfection and the lyric experience of the speaker suggests we take a closer look at the connection "between experience and the patterns of language that are called on to express it" (Shetley 22). In so doing, we discover in *1928* a direct correlation between poetic effect and poetic meaning.<sup>95</sup> The speaker's utter failure to achieve female subjectivity bespeaks Bishop's early dissatisfaction with the limitations of the sonnet form. Moreover, the failure of *1928* reveals *why* traditional sonnets represent "the most hopeless of problems." If the sonnet's identity, its essence, depends upon the success with which it performs the conventions that define it, it will never be able to enact "a mind thinking" without becoming less itself. It is a contradiction that cannot be escaped. Ultimately, we can conclude that, far from a careless poetic exercise in an unfashionable poetic form and more than an overwrought experiment, *1928* offers a meaningful connection to Bishop's mature oeuvre, and exemplifies what was for Bishop a life-long conviction that successful poetry could enact an essential truth.

---

<sup>95</sup> Willard Spiegelman's careful study of the use of description is extremely helpful in understanding Bishop's use of the technique. Rather than adornment or accuracy of depiction, the "primary purpose" of description, as Michel Riffaterre puts it, is "not to offer representation but to dictate an interpretation" (qtd. in Spiegelman 6).

Fifty years after writing *1928*, Bishop returned once more to the sonnet form, this time to explode the conventional parameters of the sonnet mode.<sup>96</sup> In *1979* Bishop self-consciously violates and re-configures both the formal and conceptual space of the sonnet, juxtaposing the entrapment and self-effacement of her early poem with the boundless freedom and agency of her final one. The apparent subversiveness of *1979*, boldly proclaiming itself a sonnet while fulfilling none of the traditional expectations associated with it, raises the question: why insist on the titular reference to a formal genre only to disregard its conventions? Jeredith Merrin observes that, in contrast to the historical use of sonnet form to “claim immutability, constancy, unchangingness,” *1979* constitutes a “whimsical version” that can “lay claim to . . . perpetual mobility, a kind of perdurable mutability” (162).<sup>97</sup> Laurans takes the rationale for formal irregularity in *1979* a little further: in Bishop’s poetry, “formal qualities are related to thematic ones . . . [and] form always yields to the exigency of what she is trying to say” (76). Thus *1979* requires the intentional “subordination of form to meaning” to create a “sense of spontaneity” in the poem (Laurans 76). Interestingly, the formal workings Laurans identifies in Bishop’s poem parallel the poetic objectives in the essay by Croll that Bishop discovered and embraced as her own so many years earlier—a recognition that suggests Bishop did indeed achieve a poetic strategy to correlate with the theory she’d found so influential.

---

<sup>96</sup> Although the scope of this study cannot encompass the development of Bishop’s eventual shift toward greater strength of poetic agency, Harrison observes that the writing Bishop did in the mid-1950’s, while she was living in Brazil, marks a turning point of sorts, wherein “her poetry became increasingly alert to the economic, racial, and gendered structures that configure speakers and subjects” (*Poetics* 146).

<sup>97</sup> Merrin’s emphasis on the “whimsicality” of *1979* strikes me as too unanchored in its simplicity. T.S. Eliot comes much closer to the mark in his essay “Reflections on *Vers Libre*,” which emphasizes the need for a polarity or balance to the form, a quality he refers to as “this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse” (185). Merrin’s analysis includes no “fixity,” without which the playfulness she finds novel would soon become monotonous itself.

The manipulation of form in *1979* results in a poetic energy that would be far less possible with fixed verse; in breaking apart the constrictions of the traditional sonnet, Bishop creates “the resonance that seems embodied within and emanates from the objects and events of the poem” (Mann 50).

Out of Bishop’s radical revision of established verse structures comes a poem from which emanates a sense of triumph, of finality, of accomplishment. *1979* is more than a progress of poetics; it offers a journey that ends in revelation. Without rejecting the sonnet outright, Bishop creates a new relationship between poetic form and subjectivity—one that apprehends the source of conflict without being weighed down by its heaviness—and suggests greater possibilities for female agency. An examination of *1979* reveals the ways in which Bishop realizes the desired integration of form and experience that she described to Donald Stanford forty-six years earlier. *1979* is Bishop’s *poem in action*:

Caught—the bubble in the spirit-level, a creature divided; and the compass needle wobbling and wavering, undecided.	4
Freed—the broken thermometer’s mercury running away; and the rainbow-bird from the narrow bevel of the empty mirror, flying wherever it feels like, gay!	8  12

The poem calls immediate attention to its many and deliberate formal inversions of traditional sonnet tropes, inversions that privilege poetic freedom over compliance with convention. Inasmuch as they are impossible for an informed reader to overlook,



these inversions also indicate the most fundamental way in which *1979* demonstrates the poetic energy lacking in *1928*. Conventions that give the sonnet its familiar shape are drastically altered: sestet precedes octave, the physical break on the page that customarily divides the two stanzas is missing, and individual lines are short and uneven. The altered frame, slimmer and more vertical, augments the visual “pace” or movement through the poem. At first glance the use of rhyme appears random and sporadic, especially in comparison with a typical sonnet scheme. However, as I shall shortly demonstrate, the calculated arrangement of unstressed and imperfect rhyme reinforces Bishop’s message about subjectivity. Significantly, the meter in *1979* is both unrestricted and unpredictable; traditional iambics are replaced with commanding dimeter. Yet even Bishop’s use of dimeter is not strict but proximate; it creates emphasis without rigidity, allowing Bishop to achieve a “rhythm [that is] unified, but mixed, and flexible” (Bishop, “Gerard” 661). The meter in *1979* scans in almost perfect accord with Bishop’s detailed elucidation of sprung rhythm:

[T]he stress always falls on the first syllable of a foot and any weak syllables at the beginning of a line are considered part of the last foot of the line before, it is natural that the scansion is continuous, not line by line. This is what Hopkins calls “rove over” lines, and he says “the scanning runs on without break from the beginning, say, of a stanza to the end and all the stanza is one long strain, though written in lines asunder.” In this manner the boundaries of the poem are set free, and the whole thing is loosened up; the motion is kept going without the more or less strong checks customary at the end of lines. (“Gerard” 666)

The effect of “rove over lines” is reproduced in *1979*, particularly in lines seven through fourteen: movement within the lines accelerates in concordance with the sense of freedom being enacted in the text. In contrast, the “inverted sestet” (*ll.*1-6) has a more halting tempo: the meter is first arrested by the use of strong caesura after words that

convey hesitation (“Caught—,” “divided,” and “undecided”), and is further impeded by diction that connotes instability (“wobbling,” “wavering”). The cumulative inversion and dismantling of traditional sonnet conventions helps call into question the concept of unified subjectivity upon which the amatory sonnet has historically relied.

*1979* willfully abandons paradigmatic sonnet subjectivity: there is no “unified self” *as such*. The poem is entirely without a lyric “I,” or any hint of personal experience. The suspension of the first-person pronoun rejects the poetic authority of the “I” that imposes itself upon the world, and makes room for what Jeffrey Gray terms “the performance of a subtler subjectivity” (60). In the absence of an identifiable human speaker, the reader’s focus is redirected to the external action of the poem, in which four objects set up an apparent dichotomy between the concepts of “caught” and “freed.” The “bubble in the spirit-level,” the “compass needle,” the “broken thermometer’s mercury,” and the “Rainbow-bird” replace the lyric self as the main organizing principle of the poem—an ironic reversal of sonnet conventions which allows Bishop to avoid gendered subjectivity. Irony governs the depiction of the first two objects—the only items that are literally whole, but which have the least integrity. The “caught” portions of the level and compass—the bubble and the needle—are pivotal to the functioning of their instruments. Here, however, they are construed as ineffective; “divided” and “undecided.” A series of unstressed, imperfect end rhymes, along with a pair of internal half-rhymes in line five, reinforces the view of these objects as enfeebled. The rhymes themselves (“-ble,” “-vel,” “-ded,” “-dle,” “-ing,” and “-ded”) are less than actual parts of words: they are merely weak ending sounds whose lack of audible distinction reduces their impact to a mumble.

The “freed” objects in the octave—the thermometer and mirror—are more complex and fully realized than their “caught” counterparts; moreover, they are not contained merely by irony, but point confidently toward the poem’s paradoxical revelations. Both reflect a shift in location from inner to outer world: the previously contained quicksilver is released; the light refracted through a prism flashes in all directions. Yet, unlike the level and the compass, the thermometer and the mirror are too distinct in significance to be construed as a pair, based on the amount of agency each possesses and the way that agency is enacted. The broken thermometer occupies a middle ground. It accomplishes much more than the ineffectual sestet images: its brokenness allows the mercury to take action, which it does, in a delightful quartet of rolling dactyls that come to a stop on the poem’s first instance of masculine end rhyme (“mercury / running away”). Once released, the mercury experiences itself independently of its former glass-wrought vessel—in “running away” it knows the joy of its own agility—and becomes individuated.<sup>98</sup> However, its existence on a higher plane of experience than the level and the compass is a matter of degree. Essentially the thermometer remains an instrument; it enacts nothing on its own. In this regard it belongs with the other two “material” tools of measurement.

---

<sup>98</sup> Critics who privilege the concept of “whole” over “broken” in *1979*, as well as those who read the destabilization in the poem as a metaphor for Bishop’s experiences of loss and homelessness, all tend to misread the mercury’s action of “running away” as “fleeing” an oppressive environment, or “escaping” imprisonment. However, close attention to the literary tropes Bishop assigns to those lines indicates how they should be read (a principle Bishop reiterated tirelessly in her teaching). Dactylic meter is the cadence of merriment, while mercury has numerous allusions to and connotations of “playfulness,” “changeability,” and “mischief”; its quickness is enchanting. And anyone who has sat at a high school chemistry lab table—with that *one* tiny droplet of mercury assigned to it—and flicked that droplet with a fingernail knows the open-mouthed delight at the instantaneous appearance of hundreds of fractured silver pin-heads skittering across the marble. In “running away,” the mercury is simply doing its “elemental” thing, which is a joy to watch.

At this point in the poem, it starts to become clear that the “obvious” inverted Petrarchan division of sestet / octave that the poem initially sets out has become complicated by the noticeable “Shakespearean” logic of the arrangement of the objects in their poetic space. The first three objects are concrete tools, each accorded a tercet, and the final object is a complex symbol that creates and enacts itself over the course of five lines. Thus emerges an alternate configuration of four poetic stanzas—three tercets and a subtly-rhymed quintain—which increase in significance as we move through the poem. Accordingly, *1979* emulates the thematic progress of a Shakespearean sonnet, wherein the first two stanzas reinforce basically the same idea, the third contains an element of transition, and the couplet bears the most significance. But just as she does with the Petrarchan division, Bishop cleverly manages an inversion of the Shakespearean breakdown as well. The shortest part of a Shakespearian sonnet is the longest component of Bishop’s, and the even “division” of the four-line stanza is set at odds with Bishop’s asymmetrical tercets.

In keeping with the progress of imaginative significance in the poem, the final “object” in *1979* not only is the most complex, being comprised of three integral parts, but has the power to act autonomously. The last five lines evolve—though not in linear fashion—into a performance of poetic agency. The magical “rainbow-bird” is presented first, but in order to understand its significance, one must “progress backward” through the ensuing two lines to determine the historical moment and manner of its genesis. The empty mirror and its bevel together beget the synergistic accomplishment of the rainbow-bird, but both parts have independent significance as well. The mirror, already a culturally entrenched psychoanalytic symbol at the time of the poem’s composition,

signifies a critical moment of emergence—both of the ego (subjectivity) and of the awareness of unconscious desire mediated through the body’s eroticism. A human being first becomes “self-aware” when it recognizes its reflection in a mirror, and from that point on works to inscribe his own sense of self and order upon the world. Consistent with Bishop’s abnegation of ego-driven subjectivity in the poem, the mirror remains empty so as to avoid the fixation of identity “within a mirror of the self” (Oser 11). Interestingly, the mirror is not only a symbol of subjectivity: it can also be considered a special category of tool. Primarily the mirror is a tool of creation, and its generative powers make it the physical object of highest order in the poem. At the same time, it is a tool of measurement. But the mirror is incapable of objective measurements; it is therefore less “sensible” (and less accurate) than concrete, objective tools such as the compass and level.<sup>99</sup> Mirrors measure and validate the self in the act of viewing itself—a hyper-subjective form of navel-gazing, often found at the core of the lyric sonnet, that Bishop sets out to avoid in this poem. The penultimate pairing of half rhymes (“mirror” with “wherever”), reflects the poem’s emphasis on the indefinite nature of subjectivity, and implies that the “use [of] the sonnet as a path towards insight or introspection is misleading” (Tyler 383). Likewise, the refusal of an internal locus for self-identification reinforces the notion that Bishop’s ideal sonnet, like its mirror, is an empty vessel, incapable of either conferring or containing subjectivity. Ultimately, the emptiness of the mirror is not sinister or “ominous,” as Merrin has suggested (131). In the Lacanian sense, the empty mirror argues for the idea of freedom from a subjectivity born into and defined

---

<sup>99</sup> It strikes me as an overriding irony that a large percentage of Bishop’s poetry is concerned with how to measure things, and with measurement itself. While she lived, she was most often defined by her ability to measure what she saw, using accuracy of observation and precise description. Yet the dominant metaphor in this poem is built around the denial of any value in measurement.

by hetero-normative notions of gender. Thus emptiness leads to clarity, both literal and figurative—an understanding and recognition that produces the joyful rainbow-bird.

Without the empty mirror, Bishop's rainbow-bird, the only truly imaginary symbol in the poem, would not exist. The rainbow-bird is both the most invoked and the most misapplied image in *1979*; few critics manage to excavate its meaning to the degree needed to apprehend it correctly. Even Thomas Travisano's recent study of Bishop's late poetry depends on the attribution of autobiography to elements of her poems. Travisano creates five "broad categories of concern that Bishop explored in the quartet of poems published after *Geography III*" ("Geography" 226). He assigns *1979* to the category titled "Abstract Self-Portraits," and thus reads the broken thermometer and the rainbow-bird as Bishop's "versions of an alternative self," a claim which suggests that these objects are there primarily to disguise Bishop's subjectivity ("Geography" 234). The most common critical assumption is that the rainbow-bird is an object that has been trapped, whether in "his cage" (Dickie, *Stein* 102) or in the mirror, and requires release. Lombardi's rainbow-bird "breaks free of his prism," an inaccurate conflation of *prism* with *prison* (*Body* 12),<sup>100</sup> while for Goldensohn, the bird "seems in its flight close to retreat" (*Biography* 285). Diehl believes that "the *conversion of mercury into a 'rainbow bird'* transforms the previously entrapped substance into a dazzling presence" (Diehl, *Sexual* 42; emphasis added). David Young's hypotheses regarding the fate of the rainbow-bird are similarly confusing: "Did it really get out of the bevel, or did it just seem to? Was the mirror broken and does a broken mirror reflect a destroyed self?" (45).

---

<sup>100</sup> Bishop was careful to make all of the objects in *1979* genderless, Lombardi's presumptive assignment of the masculine gender to Bishop's rainbow-bird is both misleading and unfounded.

In fact, the rainbow-bird does not need to “get out of the bevel;” it is not released, nor does it seek escape—because it is not trapped or “caught.” Instead, the rainbow-bird is *created*. The critical awareness needed to interpret the rainbow-bird comes from the precise understanding of the rainbow-bird’s identity on a literal level. Specifically, the rainbow-bird Bishop’s poem imagines is the result of an actual rainbow formed through the refraction of light, which occurs when light enters and leaves a reflective medium, such as glass, at an oblique angle. The edges of two angled, reflective surfaces, such as the face of the mirror and its beveled edge, form a prism. When pure light travels through a prism, it becomes refracted, or bent, splitting into the full rainbow-spectrum of color. Thus the “rainbow-bird” is the imaginatively conceived version of the light spectrum produced by the prism formed at the point where the two surfaces of glass meet. Given the necessities of science, it becomes clear that the emptiness of the mirror is required for the particular transmission of light that both creates the rainbow-bird and allows for its unrestricted movement. In “flying wherever / it feels like” the rainbow-bird enacts and celebrates its agency. Without the burden of subjectivity, a lyric self to cloud the mirror, there is room for a metaphorical journey to enlightenment. *1979* both encounters and moves beyond the subjective emphasis on what can be known and measured; on the human urge for permanence, “to grasp or know or make a home” (Gardner 32). In letting go of the need for “guarantees of mastery,” we—like the rainbow-bird—can dwell in a space that is “powerfully charged and frail and alive” (Gardner 32). Finally, it must be noted that, although free of the ambivalence and tortured indecision of figures in other Bishop poems (“The Sandpiper,” “The Prodigal,” “Cirque d’Hiver,” et al.), the rainbow-bird retains a feature in common with them: it originates in

a space that is both tightly proscribed and marginal—the narrow edge—but, unlike the other poetic figures, it is not required to live there.

The poetic closure of *1979* argues for a parallel experience between the rainbow-bird and the form it so gaily inhabits. Bishop's cavalier sonnet, both subversive and insouciant, is free to determine itself; to bring objects into action; to delight in disorder. Several critics express dissatisfaction with the outcome of *1979*—in particular with the poem's refusal to provide some notion of certainty or intrinsic meaning of human experience. *1979* is deemed "a highly asocial poem, void of companionship and resting spots" (Harrison, "Dailiness" 269); the objects are "eerily non-human, and the [poetic] space . . . is deafeningly empty of human presence" (Goldensohn, *Biography* 280). To appreciate the resolution of this sonnet, one must not look for an overriding insight or expect the sonnet to become merely a "vehicle for meaning . . . only in the living context of a human situation" (Orr 35). Instead, the reader must accept a paradoxical "closure that is not closure." As Lee Edelman rightly points out, "Bishop's is a poetry conscious of the inevitable mediations of selfhood, the intrusions of the 'I,' that make direct contact with any literality—with any 'truth'—an impossibility" (92). The final rhyme of the sonnet would seem to argue against the notion of ambivalence in the poem's closure; the connection of "away" in line nine with the "gay!" in line fourteen puts forth a tone of emphatic declaration. Bishop's closure avoids the "authoritarian gesture" in favor of "letting the object go" (Szirtes 417).

Perhaps the dissatisfaction with a closure some see as uneasy or ambivalent stems from the perception that Bishop leaves her use of the word "gay!" too unqualified. However, multiple interpretations of the word "gay" help sustain the life-affirming



energy that enacts the rainbow-bird. During the evolution of the sonnet in the thirteenth-century, the word “gay” was “the Provençal term for the art of poetry, *gai saber*, or gay science” (Dodd 117). In this context, Bishop’s final exclamation can be seen to align sexuality with poetry itself. Merrin’s reminder of the medieval definition that means both “merry” and “brightly colored” expands the inclusiveness of the concept as opposed to restricting its meaning to an “encoded,” hidden language of lesbianism (Dickie, *Stein* 82).<sup>101</sup>

Harrison’s lament at the perceived failure of *1979*’s resolution most dramatically reveals what seems to be a need on the part of some critics to reinvest Bishop’s sonnet with subjectivity on her behalf:

The poem closes without looking back at the ambivalence and tension that produced this release. The . . . closing stresses defiantly do not look back, but we must. We mourn the absence of ‘an *Elizabeth*’ here, because we are still in that world, discovering how to make our . . . painful intimacies livable. (“Dailiness” 270)

In fact, Bishop’s sonnet does not “look back” because Bishop is not mourning the loss of a self whose experience in normative culture could never be unified in any case. Harrison ignores Bishop’s poetic invitation to open ourselves up to the idea of breaks and fissures in both form and subjectivity, and becomes “caught” in the “fictive” myth that Bishop’s poem attempts to dispel: “the assumption of the self as a rigidly bounded entity” (Ostriker 178). Harrison’s refusal to accept Bishop’s abandonment of the lyric self in *1979*, and her further demand (ironically self-centered) that readers cast their real-world experience in terms of “painful intimacies” constitutes an excellent illustration of the argument that the

---

<sup>101</sup> Schwartz reports a conversation with Bishop in which he recalls that “she said she wanted to restore the last word of the poem, ‘gay!,’ to what she called its ‘original’ non-sexual meaning” (“Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Sonnet’”).

ability of any given form to transmit meaning is largely dependent on the reader's

ability to recognize how the discourse surrounding that form is being appropriated:

Writing deploys strategies that are meant to produce effects, dictate a posture, and oblige the reader. It lays traps, which the reader falls into without even knowing it, because the traps are tailored to the measure of a rebel inventiveness he or she is always presumed to possess . . . Th[e] dialectic of imposed constraint and invention occurs where conventions that put genres in a hierarchy; that codify forms; and that distinguish between discourse that is literal or figurative . . . encounter the schemes of perception and judgment inherent to each community of readers. (Chartier 1)

Bishop's final sonnet emphasizes an appreciation of instability and *disorder*, while rejecting the premium placed on the kind of knowing that only occurs within traditional parameters. The epistemology of *1979* argues in favor of the knowledge one discovers in letting go of the need to determine or impose it, and encourages the movement away from description of life and toward engagement with it.

The truth of Bishop's final sonnet resides in a poetic paradox that calls on the willingness to shift one's view of the poem from the literal to the imaginative, so as to "experience" more than "hear" the tones of joy, discovery and transcendence that prevail in the outcome of the poem. (One can successfully "read" the poem without this paradox, certainly—it makes no demands, but only invites and welcomes.) In accordance with this re-visioning, the negative connotations suggested by some of the poem's diction ("caught" "divided," "broken," "narrow") do not have the power to hold the poem's resolution hostage to ambivalence. Instead, they serve as a reminder that limitations are part of every refashioning; in "the contrast between fixity and flux" Eliot finds "the very life of verse" (185). It is a question of how best to make use of those limitations. The juxtaposition of *1979* with a similarly paradoxical poem may offer more insight into the

way Bishop's paradox subverts the negative connotation of brokenness, and transforms its ambivalence into a gift. Differences in poetic language are actually superficial; the poem's approach to subjectivity is remarkably similar to that of Bishop. Imagine Bishop's rainbow bird, grafted, in a translucent overlay, above the last stanza of "Easter Wings," by George Herbert—Bishop's favorite poet, first and last:

With Thee  
Let me combine,  
And feel this day Thy victorie;  
For, if I imp my wing on Thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Paradox transforms. Absent the need for certainty in *1979*, instability and vulnerability undergo a transformation from weaknesses to strengths: "it feels like, gay!"

To the extent that form is about limits, *1979* conveys what a world without limits might feel like. The absence of description and the poem's continuous location in the present allow the sonnet to dissolve the customary distance between the implied reader and the poem. Finally, because *1979* does not enforce a distinction between self and other, the imaginative mind of the reader is free to recognize and inhabit the object-experience—in the present moment and in conjunction with the poem. Making that leap, one can imaginatively enact one's own agency. This is the essential revelation of *caught* and *freed*.

Thus *1928* and *1979*, Bishop's two "bookend" sonnets, poignantly encapsulate the progress of a self, the journey from desire to agency. Taken together, Bishop's self-titled sonnets offer a hopeful message: the reassurance that all of us—not just the poets—can (and perhaps must) reach the point where we are able to "write our lives" in the midst of contradiction. No need to put chaos into fourteen lines and keep him there; it is far more

liberating to live with chaos and like it. To validate transgressions of conventional form is to accept and even welcome the inevitable disarray and paradox of life. *1979* signifies the embrace of a lifetime of contradictions, an embrace that left Bishop free to be at once “formalist” and “modernist”—to define herself and her poetics both within and against tradition.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### POETIC SHAPES, CULTURAL SPACES: FORM, VOICE, AND AGENCY

#### IN JULIA ALVAREZ' SONNET SEQUENCE, "33"

Of women poets who explore sites of conflict between women's psychological and spiritual needs, and the cultural beliefs and structures that limit those needs, it is Julia Alvarez who most successfully re-envisioned women's possibilities for both desire and agency in the sonnet. The daughter of a wealthy and prominent family in the Dominican Republic, Alvarez was born in New York City in 1950, after her father's involvement in the underground movement to overthrow the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo caused the family to flee the country. When she was three months old, her family returned to the Dominican Republic, and her father continued his work with the underground movement. As members of the privileged class, Alvarez and her three sisters were educated at an elite English-speaking school; their mother's family ties (both political and cultural) to the United States and her love of all things American greatly influenced their upbringing. In 1960, when the attempt to overthrow the Trujillo regime failed, Alvarez' father narrowly escaped arrest: in the middle of the night the family fled to the United States, this time for good. This event was the first major disruption in the life of ten-year-old Julia (who was not told of the family's immigration plan until she was on the plane to New York); an event which plunged her head-first into the questions of selfhood and national identity the adult Alvarez would explore in many of her novels.

Although recognized primarily for her works of fiction, Alvarez declared her intention to become a poet at an early age, and poetry remains her “first love” (“Clean” 128). During her college and post-graduate years, Alvarez had poems in anthologies and journals, and she received numerous awards and grants for her poetry. Her first volume, *The Housekeeping Book* (1984), was a hand-crafted book of which only twenty-five copies were printed. Later that year Alvarez published *Homecoming: Poems*, which contained the Housekeeping poems and a sonnet sequence titled “33.” Alvarez sought positions that afforded her adequate time to write: an MFA degree, two summers of graduate courses at the Bread Loaf School of English, a writing residency, and a seemingly endless series of short-term poet-in-residence positions across the country. After struggling for years as an itinerant writer (she had eighteen addresses in fifteen years), Alvarez was offered a tenure-track position at Middlebury College in 1988. Three years later, her first novel, *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, was published. It had taken almost ten years to write, but it both guaranteed her tenure and launched a prominent career in fiction writing.

Throughout her writing life, Alvarez has remained wary of ethnic descriptors that would limit her “ideal of multiple American identities,” and “overshadow” the emphasis she places on herself as a writer (Fernandez). Just as Elizabeth Bishop refused to allow her work to be categorized as “feminist” or “lesbian,” Alvarez “visibly recoils” when her ethnicity is used in “an attempt to relegate her to the margins of American Literature” (Sirias 6). Ironically, Alvarez must refute both the notion of universal “Latina” representation, and the circumscription of her identity as “other”:

The bad part of being a “Latina writer” is that people want to make me into a spokesperson . . . What I [also] find is that I am exoticized; “Oh,

those people are so interesting” is the kind of attitude I get sometimes.  
 (“Two”)

When Alvarez first arrived in New York, she felt more like an exile than either an American or a Dominican. She was initially shocked and confused by the rapid pace of American English, and her lack of fluency became a target for the anti-Hispanic prejudices of her classmates.<sup>102</sup> The immediate effect of this alienation upon the normally extroverted Alvarez was that she “withdrew into silence,” hiding out at the library, quietly absorbing English through books (Alvarez, “Unlikely” 197). In the sixth grade, a favorite teacher became the catalyst for a moment of recognition, in which Alvarez both found her voice in English for the first time *and* internalized the poetic qualities of language. The realization that she could not only think and speak, but *imagine* in English was paramount: “I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language” (*Something* 29).<sup>103</sup>

Language—and not geography or nationality—is the vital component in Alvarez’ sense of identity and place. The epigraph page of *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems*<sup>104</sup> borrows a quotation from Czeslaw Milosz to underscore how important language is to her: “Language is the only homeland.” In two separate interviews, Alvarez has elaborated on the reasons Milosz’ statement resonates with her: “I think what Milosz meant is that the ability to create a place and feel like you belong in the human family

---

<sup>102</sup> Alvarez recalls that, soon after her arrival in New York, she was frequently taunted with the word “spic.” When she asked her mother what the word meant, her mother told her ten-year-old daughter that she must not have heard right, and that those kids were actually saying “speak.” The clever explanation had the effect of further emphasizing the importance of language to Alvarez. (About)

<sup>103</sup> Many fans of Alvarez’ work are surprised to learn that she considers herself more “English dominant” than bilingual. Having been educated only in English, Alvarez retains the spoken Spanish of her childhood, but cannot craft her more complex intellectual and poetic thoughts in Spanish.

<sup>104</sup> From this point forward I will use the truncated title *Homecoming* to refer to the 1996 expanded version of the original 1984 publication.

happens through language” (“Clean” 134-35). “The page is where I’ve learned to put together my different worlds, where I’ve put down my deepest roots” (“Citizen” 32). For Alvarez, the experience of exile cannot extinguish the deep desire to experience both oneself and one’s connection with others. Alvarez does this most successfully in the language of poetry.

In comparison with her novels, to which volumes of critical work have been devoted, Alvarez’ three poetry collections remain largely unexplored.<sup>105</sup> In addition to the 1984 publication of *Homecoming: Poems*, Alvarez has published *The Other Side / El Otro Lado* (1995), the revised and expanded version of *Homecoming* (1996), and *The Woman I Kept to Myself* (2004). The intensity with which she speaks about her poetics and the integrity she assigns to poetry as a medium of language should not be overlooked. In poetry, Alvarez finds “the heart of language,” and believes it was her “love of the language, the love of each word . . . [and] the brevity of form” that drew her to write poetry before prose:

A poem is very intimate, heart-to-heart, whereas I think a story weaves a world that you enter. You can feel close to a character or a situation, but it’s not that intense one-to-one of a lyric poem, in which every word counts. There is nothing else, no narrative world, just the language in a poem, a voice speaking to you. (“Citizen” 23)

Alvarez also describes the comparative difficulties of writing poetry: poetry requires an “intense particularity about words,” and sometimes calls upon the poet to risk a level of self-exposure, or metaphysical “nakedness,” that makes one feel uneasy or vulnerable (“Clean” 130, 128). Beyond the personal challenges to the writer, Alvarez affirms a

---

<sup>105</sup> A select few of Alvarez’ poems tend to be repeatedly invoked, usually in the larger context of Alvarez’ “multicultural” identity, or in connection with one of her novels. The lack of critical attention, either to the formal aspects of individual poems, or to the comprehensive literary merits of a volume, likewise has been noted by Fernando Valerio-Holguin and Catherine Wall.



larger, ethical responsibility of the poet by asserting that the “clarity of vision and precision of expression” poetry requires is “a moral act” (131).<sup>106</sup>

*Voice* and *writing* are the central metaphors for *identity* and *agency* in Alvarez’ poetry. Finding her voice has, perhaps, been her most significant struggle as a writer. Susan Lanser makes the very good point that “authorial voice has been so conventionally masculine that female authorship does not necessarily establish female voice” (18). Alvarez spent years, first internalizing, then emulating the voice that “grounds Western literary authority,” and which is “constructed in white, privileged-class, male terms” (Lanser 6). Her education exposed her almost exclusively to “all these great male writers whose voices sounded important”; consequently, the adult Alvarez “tried to model [her] own voice after them” (qtd. in Boryga).<sup>107</sup> At age thirty-three, while writing the *Housekeeping* poems, Alvarez encountered her own voice for the first time, and realized that “the stuff I was writing before sounded stilted” (“Citizen” 25). The emergence of her literary voice—both as a woman and as a Latina—led to the development of what Eda Henao identifies as a commonality among writers who “explore dichotomies of power” within their respective cultures: the presence of a “subversive element...[which] extends itself into the craft of writing and the traditional, canonical, and prescriptive forms” of narrative (124).

One of the themes most integral to Alvarez’ writing and experience is the primary narrative of female gender in Western culture: the happily-ever-after story that

---

<sup>106</sup> In this statement Alvarez draws on Joseph Conrad’s definition of art as a “single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe” (11).

<sup>107</sup> Speaking to an audience at Cornell University in 2010, Alvarez revealed that “a large portion of her early poetry” consisted of remodeling the great male poets, and “noted that channeling the styles of authors such as Yeats got her through graduate school and a residency” (Boryga).

culminates in marriage. Throughout her autobiographical essays in *Something to Declare*, Alvarez describes the many ways, both literary and cultural, in which she was influenced by patriarchal constructions of romantic love. Alvarez grew up in an extended family that expected her to internalize the assumption that marriage was the culmination of happiness for a woman. Because she addresses this myth directly in “33,” the passage is worth quoting at length:

Scheherazade was not the approved heroine of my childhood. Instead, the golden model I was given by my parents, my aunts, and teachers was the age-old fairy-tale princess: Cinderella, mixed in with lots of Sleeping Beauty and the Virgin Mary.

*Once upon a time there was a sweet, pretty, passive, powerless, and probably blond (stay out of the sun!) princess who never played hooky from school or told lies about who broke the crystal ball in her grandmother’s garden. The handsome (Catholic) prince of the land fell in love with her, married her, and she lived happily ever after as his lucky wife and the mother of his children.*

This is the true shape of every happy woman’s life, I was told...Especially once I hit adolescence, I was told this story over and over. (*Something* 141)

It is significant that Alvarez chooses the lyric form in order to refute a narrative. Kelli Johnson has pointed out the way Alvarez’ prose works take advantage of the flexibility and openness of narrative; its performativity “allows her agency and resists the boundaries and borders of definable, containable spaces” (xix). And as Alvarez has said of traditional forms, “much of [a woman’s] heritage is trapped in them” (“Housekeeping” 205). Yet it is in Alvarez’ volume of poetry, *Homecoming*, that we encounter her most comprehensive treatment of the tension between patriarchal ideology and female agency.

The central work in the *Homecoming* collection is “33,” a sequence of forty-six sonnets.<sup>108</sup> Together, the poems set out to examine the correlation between the romantic love myth and the dis-integration of female identity.<sup>109</sup> In her 1994 essay “Housekeeping Cages,” written ten years after the initial publication of *Homecoming*, Alvarez delineates the feminist politics of connecting the romantic double-bind with the use of a form commonly identified by its restrictions:

I don't feel that writing in traditional forms is giving up power, going over to the enemy. The word belongs to no one, the houses built of words belong to no one. We have to take them back from those who think they own them . . . I think of form as a territory that has been colonized, but that you can set free. See, I feel subversive in formal verse. (16)

Alvarez goes one step further, from theorizing a gendered approach to traditional verse forms to a definitive enunciation of her sonnet poetics:

What I wanted from the sonnet was the tradition that it offered, as well as the structure. The sonnet tradition is one in which women were caged in the golden cages of beloved, in perfumed gas chambers of stereotype. I wanted to go into that heavily mined and male labyrinth with the string of my own voice. (17)<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> The 1984 publication of “33” had forty-one sonnets; Alvarez added five more to the 1996 version.

<sup>109</sup> The majority of work (both prose and poetry) in Alvarez' oeuvre weaves feminist questions of voice and identity into the broader contexts of ethnicity, nationality or politics, and marginalization. This sonnet sequence is a singular exception; the subtext of multicultural otherness is noticeably missing from “33.” In one sense, the absence of identity politics makes it *possible* to discuss Alvarez' sonnet sequence within the framework of bourgeois feminism similar to that which I apply to Parker and Millay—and in fact I do take advantage of this circumstance to help delimit my argument. However, it is not my intention to “gender-wash” my reading of “33.” Whether or not they are explicitly treated, factors that contribute to hybrid constructions of identity may be considered implicitly present in a given literary work.

<sup>110</sup> From a research perspective, it is fortunate to have such clear declarations from Alvarez. Among the particular women sonnet writers who are the focus of this study, it has been much more the exception than the rule to uncover statements made by the poet for the specific purpose of providing interpretive clues, whether about the details of an individual poem, or about poetic “intentions.” The *Homecoming* volume(s), and the decade of history surrounding their evolution, must hold special meaning for Alvarez, for, outside of the two instances cited above, I have encountered no further statements in which Alvarez demonstrates a similar investment in poetic disclosure.

In “33,” Alvarez strategically disrupts and appropriates particular sonnet conventions, creating her own distinct blend of structure and subversion, poetics and politics. Each sonnet has fourteen decasyllabic lines and, although the visual space between octave and sestet has been eliminated, the shape of the poem on the page clearly evokes the sonnet form. But there ends Alvarez’ strict commitment to formal rules. Under the cover of a precisely-measured exo-structure, the sonnets dispense with predictable meter, favoring the rhythms of conversational speech. Line enjambment and slant-rhyme pervade the sequence and likewise help accommodate the metrical irregularities of such speech elements as questions, colloquialisms, objections, and asides. This is not to say that “33” is devoid of traditional meter: Alvarez frequently—but calculatedly—injects iambic meter into phrases, lines, and sometimes whole quatrains. Such instances often coincide with passages that either attempt to reinforce the romantic mythos or point to situations that are “out of sorts.” Especially at the beginning of the sequence, sonnets slide seamlessly in and out of iambic pentameter, as if to bridge the gap gradually between traditional meter and the music of everyday speech.

Of the small handful of critical essays (in English) that engage “33,” few do more than identify the sonnet tropes exploited in the sequence. But Alvarez’ choice to conform to certain conventions while ignoring others is itself informed by a complex set of poetic strategies that contribute additional meaning to her use of form. Formal transgression is primarily accomplished through loose meter, enjambment and weak rhyme, in order to supplant the plodding of traditional iambics with the unrestricted energy of natural speech. In contrast, traditional form is invoked through adherence to the basic architecture of fourteen lines of (usually) ten syllables—but the reason for that is less

clear. Why, after all, go to the trouble of retaining the building blocks of meter if the goal is to recreate conversational speech, with all of its irregularities?

In “33,” Alvarez creates a strategy of appropriation based on structure, whereby quantitative devices are set against qualitative ones. The juxtaposition reveals that the sonnets conform most stringently to quantitative conventions: numbers of lines and syllables which, not coincidentally, are the devices that establish external structure. In contrast, radical deviations from traditional form occur in those devices responsible for the internal quality of the sonnet—its rhyme and meter. Moreover, Alvarez’ manipulation of the *volta*—a device that seldom receives sufficient analysis—is ingenious in its inconsistency. As a formal trope, the *volta* indicates a turn, or change in the direction of the sonnet, and thus contributes to its structure. Although the *volta* is sometimes superficially categorized as quantitative, based on the line number in which one “expects” to find it, it functions primarily a qualitative device, connected as it is to the internal thought of the poem. With a few notable exceptions, the sonnets in “33” each contain a *volta*, but its location might correspond to any of several modes: the Petrarchan, the Shakespearean, and a compressed version of the Shakespearean mode in which *volta* only arrives in the fourteenth line. Thus, the placement of *volte* in “33” may vary, but the *logic* of the placement is consistently predicated on the poem’s content.

In the 1996 expanded edition of *Homecoming*, Alvarez augments the earlier declarations of “Housekeeping Cages” with commentary that assesses the accomplishments of *Homecoming*. The afterword, entitled “Coming Home to *Homecoming*,” not only reveals Alvarez’ motivation for revising her first volume of poetry, but offers an interpretive context in which to consider the speaker of “33”:

In writing *Homecoming*, I can see now how fiercely I was claiming my woman's voice . . . Still, it amazes me how little I dared speak of some of the confusions and complications . . . .

In trying to find the voice that the speaker of "33" so anxiously searches for, I could not admit the further confusions of my bilingual, bicultural self . . . did not address my experience as a Dominican-American woman. Indeed, that earlier voice did not even feel permission to do so, as if to call attention to my foreignness would make my readers question my right to write in English. (119)

While it is customary to assume a line of demarcation between the voices of the enlightened poet and the lyric speaker, in "33" that line is considerably blurred. Alvarez makes several literary moves that encourage her audience to read "33" as an account of her personal experience: the first half-dozen sonnets make implicit references to documented events in Alvarez' life; her lyric speaker's name is revealed to be "Julia"; the "Afterword" of *Homecoming* conflates the voice of the poems with the voice of their author. These maneuvers help create the impression that the speaker can directly engage the reader in a way that comes across as authentic—as confidential without being confessional. As Fernando Valerio-Holguin has noted, Alvarez "has established an interesting system of intertextual links that connect her poetry to her novels and essays" (787). Alvarez finesses these techniques so effectively that her sonnets project the qualities of lyric imagination while simultaneously tying thematic truths to the mundane details of lived experience.

In choosing the sonnet as the vehicle for "33," Alvarez surrenders the wider agency accorded to narrative and places her speaker willingly, if not quite comfortably, into a narrowly defined and culturally gendered poetic space. At the same time, however, Alvarez modifies the formal constraints of the sonnet by setting up "33" as a sonnet cycle, or sequence: she gives her speaker additional room and time to discover her female

voice. This “space-claiming” can be read as an initial act of poetic self-assertion, laying the groundwork for further exploitation of the genre as the sequence progresses. Moreover, the use of a sequence “establishes a link with tradition extending back to Sidney and Dante” (Muratori 229). In positioning her poet-author not just within the tradition of male sonnet writers, but among the most powerful of them—those who wrote sequences—Alvarez retains the distinction of poetic mastery while revealing the weaknesses of her lyric speaker. Finally, the sequential structure allows Alvarez to incorporate strategic elements of plot structure into the lyric mode, giving “33” the flexibility to address the speaker’s experiences in love as a progression or journey, one that invokes archetypal components of the romantic narrative. Possessed of the benefits of narrative but minus its obligations, the individual sonnets in “33” retain the values of poetry, while the overarching framework provides for counter-narrative and critique. Thus the sonnet sequence, “33,” sharply reveals the cultural embeddedness and seeming impossibility of the romantic myth, and enacts the speaker’s arduous journey toward both poetic authority and female agency.

The first sonnet in the sequence functions as a kind of prologue that both sets the scene—the state of mind in which the speaker is currently suspended—and reveals the inciting incident—a birthday. The speaker is a woman poised on the cusp (or perhaps the precipice) of a significant event in her life, and though the specific nature of this event is not initially identified, the reader is immediately alerted to the sense of power and consequence that accrues to it. In a heightened state of awareness, the speaker perceives herself surrounded by an aura that is both magically and erotically charged, as evidenced by the language she uses to describe it. She is “a witch / at full moon,” for whom the

slightest touch translates to sexual tension: “I stiffen / if I’m grazed by an arm or a hand combs through my hair.” Her magical state is “infused” with paradoxical energies that inject a sense of foreboding into the scenario: everything is “dangerous with love”; imagination goes hand-in-hand with “hazard”; and mortality is disguised in magic.

Metaphors of enchantment continue into the final line of the sonnet, until the last four words interrupt the speaker’s figurative experience with the reality that informs it: “thirty-two, I turn thirty-three.” The imbalance between figurative and literal language is revealing. The speaker’s extraordinary use of imaginative description to construe what is basically an ordinary event seems excessive, and suggests that she is both susceptible to and over-invested in the romantic perspective. More importantly, the speaker’s continual invocation of the magical suggests that this birthday is less about a literal than about a psychic experience. Symbolically, the act of turning thirty-three marks a paradigm shift wherein the notion of aging becomes an ineradicable component of one’s self-concept. The speaker can no longer use magical thinking to create the illusions that, like Prospero’s cloak, will protect her from the vicissitudes of growing older.

Her birthday having forced her out, at least statistically, of the demographic that culturally defines “youth,” the speaker must face the attendant realities of middle age. The fanciful pretensions of the opening sonnet abruptly give way to the conversational voice, marked by honesty and directness, with which the speaker engages the reader throughout the remainder of the sequence. Sonnets 2 through 6 can be read as a subgroup of poems whose plainly stated admissions explore contexts in which aging is perceived as limitation. In sonnet 2 the speaker recalls the fact of her divorce, but her youth—age twenty-nine—allows her to reframe divorce in positive terms. Divested of both the status



that accrues to married women and the ability to define herself through romantic attachment, the speaker initially imagines all kinds of self-actualizing possibilities. She vaguely idealizes divorce as an opportunity to turn her romantic passion toward “some constructive cause,” sublimating her sexual energy through dreams, religion, charity, and male friendship. Her heroism (she likens herself to Mother Theresa and Joan of Arc) lasts until the heroic couplet of the sonnet, where it is offset by ambivalence at the realization that she’s lost her erotic power over men, who no longer see her as an object of desire, but choose other women instead. Her initial confidence in the idea of self-definition outside of the romantic arena thus reveals itself to be no more than bluster. Worse, she cannot go running back to the romantic construct: once “unsexed,” the speaker (like Lady Macbeth), is left with nothing—she feels simultaneously “unfeminist and unfeminine.”

The early middle-aged (for lack of a better term) speaker is beset by additional vulnerabilities. Her parents’ admonitions remind her that remaining single is culturally viewed as a failure punishable by loss: the speaker will be forced to go “without husband, house, or children.” For the unmarried woman, aging is accompanied by social invisibility, and signifies not only the closing of doors but the “closing of stories” as well: outside the happily-ever-after narrative lie no alternate possibilities by which to construct a worthwhile life. Even if the speaker could ignore the stereotypical parental pressure to “find a husband,” she does not ignore the wisdom of a good friend in sonnet 4.

My friend Carol says aging evens out  
 the advantage of beautiful women  
 over plain ones. The beautiful have to  
 watch their beauty fade in their own and men’s 4  
 eyes. I can only talk small, having been  
 pretty, on good days almost beautiful.  
 These days in conversation with a man,  
 I’ll catch his eyes searching for beautiful 8

women in the room, and I want to cry  
 out: If I could take some years off with my  
 clothes, you'd find a nice-looking girl before  
 you! Ex-gorgeous Carol says men ignore  
 her much more than she's used to or seem bored  
 with her theories. But I hear you, Carol.

The implied conversation between the women further exposes the limitations associated with aging: the societal norm that establishes youth as the first requirement of beauty, the *sine qua non* of female desirability. Both women offer anecdotal evidence to support the notion that Petrarchan conventions of beauty still inform the way men approach their social interactions with women. The speaker experiences the humiliating disregard of a man who, while talking with her, blatantly “search[es] for beautiful women in the room.” Carol’s story, presumably because she is more beautiful than the speaker, seems less severe: “men ignore / her much more than she’s used to or seem bored / with her theories.” In both cases, the women’s ideas, their voices, are proven to be less important than their looks. This is also the first sonnet that communicates viscerally the agony of aging in a culture wherein a woman’s value only declines as she gets older. Although the speaker makes no external response to being overlooked, the cry of her inner voice reveals how poignant is her awareness of the man’s inattention: “If I could take some years off with my / clothes, you’d find a nice-looking girl before / you!” The present pain of the “ex-gorgeous” Carol is compounded by the memories of her youth, when she experienced the power of being known for her beauty. Carol’s description of her plight in lines three and four evokes a famous passage from Dante’s *Inferno* and one of the great literary examples of romantic suffering—the love story of Paolo and Francesca.<sup>111</sup> In

---

<sup>111</sup> The fifth canto of Dante’s *Inferno* features Paolo and Francesca—lovers who in life prized romantic love above all else, and whose eternal punishment for misdirected desire is having to remain as spirits in

describing the additional pain for beautiful women of “hav[ing] to watch their beauty fade in their own and men’s eyes,” Carol, like Francesca, reminds readers that the recognition of one’s predicament makes that predicament worse. However, a ray of hope offsets the curse of self-awareness: the connection women have through shared experience provides an audience in which to voice rejection of destructive values. By the end of the sonnet the speaker addresses her friend directly: “But I hear you, Carol.” This acknowledgement hints at the beginning of speaker’s ability to identify, as she does in sonnet 6, “words”—and not beauty—as “the right inheritance.”

Unfortunately the speaker’s attachment to the romantic myth is not so easily shed. Taken together, sonnets 7-11 present the minefield of post-divorce dating: an arena populated with the less-than-ideal partnership options available to women who can no longer play the ingénue. As relationship material, the men in these poems are pitifully inadequate in their selfishness: they pursue the speaker as a way to get their needs fulfilled—they have no actual desire for her *per se*—and offer nothing in return. One (divorced) man, who has custody of his child, “wants to fall in love with a stepmother”; another requires someone to absorb his emotional “neediness.” A “sad” man at a “self-improvement / weekend” is opportunistic enough to use his turn in the group therapy circle as a public bid for sex: he says “right out” to the speaker, “I want to sleep with you.”

In contrast to the men who wear their ulterior motives on their sleeves, the man in sonnet 8 does not have an agenda. Trusting in the possibility that he might be interested in her as a person, the speaker opens herself up to him at their first meeting. Her desire to

---

the presence of a love they can no longer experience but only remember. Francesca asserts, “there is no greater sorrow than the remembrance of happy times in misery.”

have a real connection with someone causes her to make herself more accommodating and available than the romantic construct dictates—a move that backfires on her:

A man invited me to eat with him at the Sirloin Saloon. I accepted although I'm borderline vegetarian and conversation was all I wanted,	4
don't ask me why. I said, I know I'm not supposed to come unless in the back of my mind I think maybe we've got a lot in common and could maybe fall in love.	8
Of course, that's the prime cut! Most likely we're both starved for sex and split up when we get too serious. We gabbed till our order cooled down. It was a pleasure to have met a woman he could just talk to, he said. My steak was raw. I cut it and it bled.	12

The purpose of the man's invitation is less a "date" than to have someone to "eat with him." In light of the fact that she's "borderline vegetarian," the speaker's acceptance signals her willingness to compromise her most basic needs, and she rationalizes the forfeiture by telling herself that "conversation" is "all" she wants. What she really wants, however, is the romantic ideal: the possibility that talking might lead to "fall[ing] in love." As quickly as she voices this hope, she compromises again. Love is "the prime cut!"—off limits to strict vegetarians as a matter of course, and similarly unlikely to be wasted on "borderline" meat eaters. Having voluntarily sacrificed both food and love, only carnal desire remains on the table. Plagued by appetite, the speaker once again plies the grammar of lowered expectations: the assumption that "most likely" they are "both starved for sex" allows the speaker to rationalize intercourse as a logical outcome of the date.

But the speaker's last choice—casual sex—is taken out of her hands as well: before they even begin eating the man makes a statement that reveals he has already assessed—and is essentially done with—the speaker. Part formality, part cliché, the man's ostensibly polite expression, "It was a pleasure to have met / a woman he could just talk to," is a rejection disguised as a compliment. Use of the past perfect tense indicates that, in the mind of the man, the evening has been completed already; the verbs surrounding the core construction imply completion as well. In conjunction with the past perfect tense, the infinitive form creates distance through the replacement of a first with a third-person pronoun. Effectively, the man removes himself from the equation. What's more, the man avoids the basic conversational intimacy of the second person; instead of directly addressing the speaker as "you," he vaguely generalizes her as "a woman," even as she sits before him.

Worse than the man's lack of interest, and worse than the knowledge that her willingness to forego her own needs was not rewarded—even worse than the awareness that she has been rejected—is the fact that the speaker must endure the man's company for the remainder of a meal she could not stomach to begin with. The last line of the sonnet restores the speaker's perspective but not her conversational voice: pain and humiliation have forced a linguistic retreat into metaphor. Unable to look anywhere except down at her plate, the speaker's agony escapes in monosyllables: "My steak was raw. I cut it and it bled." The previous image of meat as a metaphor for carnal desire is here replaced by "steak" as a figure for the heart, but the attempt to distance herself through metaphor, both from her pain and from the lie she told herself about what she

wanted, ultimately fails. The speaker gets “the prime cut” after all—just not in the way she imagined.

The final sonnet in the “male encounters” subgroup also features a conversation between the speaker and a married female friend. Like Carol, the married friend speaks from a place of honesty, but her perspective is rooted in the dishonest conviction that it is better to be married than to be oneself. With devastating bluntness, the friend scoffs at the myth of final happiness, insisting that marriage has nothing to do with ideals, and everything to do with practicality. While in some ways her advice echoes the subversive narrative strategies identified by Joseph Boone and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (see Chapter One), the married friend remains dedicated to the belief that finding a husband is the primary goal for a woman. The trick, she tells the speaker, is first to choose a man based on more rational criteria: the heart of an ideal husband is “well-off, considerate, [and] good” (in that order). Second, the security of a practical marriage requires pretense: the speaker should re-fashion herself in order to attract a wealthy man, and then *pretend* to believe in the romantic myth so as to participate in willful self-delusion.

Having both comprehended the futility of the romantic myth for older women and rejected the untenable trade-off of selfhood for security, the speaker begins an extended search for answers. Over the next twelve sonnets, roughly a quarter of the sequence, she contemplates the roles of philosophy, gender, religion, history, and family in the formation of female identity, and interrogates the validity of the dominant societal norms that construct women’s experience. But sonnet 24 interrupts the speaker’s ruminations, jolting her into the present with a profusion of exuberant “Happy Birthday!” telephone calls, and even a ringing doorbell: the UPS guy, a “handsome lad,” rides in like a knight

on a white horse with birthday deliveries. But small talk reveals a ten-year age difference, and the celebratory tone disintegrates: good wishes turn to emphatic reminders of the speaker's age and concomitant loss of sexual capital. Her resulting feelings of displacement drive the speaker back to the romantic myth, and she spends the ensuing six sonnets in an effort to play out the romantic fantasy in real-life, apprehend the role of movies in her own romantic entrenchment, and expunge—at long last—the power of the myth to define her identity.

The speaker's extended flirtation with the UPS guy prompts her to consider seducing him, but before she makes her play, she rehearses the scene in her head.

HE: Age doesn't matter when you're both in love!  
 SHE: You say that now, wait till you've had enough.  
 HE: I love for keeps. I'll never let you down.  
 SHE: You lie, my dear, you'll lay me in the ground. 4  
 HE: Statistics say I'll probably die first.  
 SHE: Statistics say most couples get divorced.  
 HE: Better to love and lose than not at all.  
 SHE: Better to read the writing on the wall! 8  
 HE: You go by loss, you might as well not live.  
 SHE: Or live, single, and psychoanalyzed.  
 HE: It breaks my heart to hear you talk that way.  
 SHE: (Boy in her arms, wiping his tears away, 12  
 prescribes the cure for existential ache)  
 Come in, my sweet, and have some birthday cake.

This poetic exchange engages several aspects, outlined in a study by Mary Chapman, of the way language operates “in a gendered public sphere: the relationship between... language and collectivity; [and] how language paradoxically both produces and speaks the self” (62). Chapman examines women writers' historic use of two aspects of language in particular—quotation and ventriloquism—as rhetorical strategies with which to resist

gender inequalities.<sup>112</sup> Alvarez employs both of these strategies in sonnet 26, but in a way that ironizes the notion of female conquest, verbal or otherwise. Capitalized pronouns and exaggerated clichés create a “staged” element to the poem: this calls into question the validity of a universal, gendered conversation that is suggested by the grand application of pronouns to Every Man and Every Woman. Moreover, the “conversation” exists within the construct of romantic fantasy. Thus, even though the female speaker has the proverbial last word, the notion that the mastery of language can be a successful vehicle for female agency is severely undercut.

The sonnet alternates between two voices—HE and SHE—that juxtapose youthful idealism with a more skeptical realism born of experience. The generic, gendered identities suggest that HE and SHE may be read as cultural stereotypes (even though the scenario of a young man pursuing an older woman defies the Petrarchan stereotype, the relationship is still constructed as a gendered hierarchy wherein a male speaker professes his desire for the beloved). Their dialogue also takes place in the public sphere; it appeals to language that is common, accessible, and shared. Cliché, however, is an ironic form of collective language: it is inauthentic speech, having no real meaning beyond the superficial. The fact that the entire negotiation is conducted through clichés suggests that the speaker’s fantasy narrative is a sham. Form also points toward the fraudulent nature of the romantic myth. The strict adherence to traditional iambic pentameter alludes to stereotypical constructions of gender; its stiltedness underscores the

---

<sup>112</sup> Quotation not only refers to the assembly of snippets of real, historical words of others, but can include “imagined conversations” (61). Chapman defines ventriloquism as “speaking for or being spoken by another” (62).



artificiality of the relationship; and slant rhyme calls into question the heroism of the couplets.

The speaker's imagined conversation constructs a dynamic in which SHE appears to have more agency than HE. HE is the pursuer, SHE the pursued; and though they have the same number of lines, her voice is given more weight: SHE has a powerful rebuttal for (almost) every claim. However, female self-assertion proves ineffective in the face of emotional appeal: the moment HE expresses heartbreak, SHE gives in—and the relationship devolves from equal partnership into a mother/son dynamic that restores the traditional balance of power to the male by making his needs and desires the focus of female energy.

The speaker's actual attempt at seduction confirms the ironies behind her fantasy exchange. The UPS boy's casual rejection of the speaker, and his consignment of her to a sexless identity—the mother-figure—makes clear just how absolute is her exclusion from narratives of desire. The finality of this recognition restores the speaker's philosophical perspective, and she perceives the extent to which romantic desire is culturally encoded in the way the Western world understands and experiences love. She is able to see her own need for romantic transcendence as ambivalent:

I'm watching a romantic movie play  
 in Plato's cave; half of the time I don't  
 believe in it and put the management  
 down for its taste. Take that crap off! I say.           4  
 Other times I get so addicted, I'm  
 one of the mainliners, high on romance,  
 hallucinating that in truth a man's  
 body is one of the Absolute Forms.                   8

Like the sonnet, cinema is another “classic form in which . . . women [are] trapped, love objects” (“Housekeeping” 18). Institutions such as Hollywood, which depend on the

romantic narrative to make money, encourage the internalization of “the valentine movie.” Although she recognizes her dependence on the romantic myth, the speaker wants so badly to access the culturally prized but sham experience of falling in love that she knowingly (and repeatedly, one may infer) chooses “the wrong man” as a cover beneath which she can play out the Jungian process of anima projection. She postulates the romantic construct as a hindrance for both sexes: men, too, can be forced to play a part in the “romance programs [they were] taught.” Even if men and women do become “bored” with the narrative, however, it is the only show at the Cineplex. They are stuck “waiting till the movie stops / to learn to love.” At the very end of sonnet 30, the speaker finally reaches the point where—no longer blinded by the workings of *eros*—she can relinquish the romantic construct. She does so in four words: “Lie there, my art.” The phrase is richly allusive. The primary reference is to a decisive moment in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, where Prospero, laying down his magic cloak, gives up the power of illusions for the chance at authentic human connection. The phrase also hearkens back to the first sonnet in the sequence in which the speaker, in similar fashion to Prospero, prioritizes an illusion, investing the romantic myth with magical properties. The change in the speaker’s perspective between the first and the thirtieth sonnet is notable; the depth of the effort required to change it, even more so.

The speaker’s success in both dismantling the romantic myth and re-locating herself outside of it does not lead immediately to real avenues for self-discovery. In order to eradicate the effects of her decades of investment in a gendered construct of identity, the speaker requires a means of reorganizing her past experience so as to “separate out . . . the other-defined self” (Annas 11). The speaker’s ritual process of redefinition begins



of *Grass*.<sup>113</sup> None, however, have identified Alvarez more extended allusion to Whitman in the six lines that follow. In her elaboration of the multitudes, the speaker similarly enacts the enthusiasm for humanity found in Whitman's "I hear America Singing,"<sup>114</sup> as she catalogues and rejoices in the varied ways one may recognize one's connectedness to humanity.

In her allusion to "multitudes," Alvarez pays homage to the diversity and inclusiveness she finds in Whitman ("Citizen" 22). Nonetheless there are interesting differences to be found in the ways their respective speakers engage with those multitudes. The grammar of Whitman's speaker follows the active subject-verb-object pattern: "I contain multitudes." His verb, though not a powerful one, bears the slight connotation of a hegemonic relationship, and his construal of the "multitudes" puts them at a remove. In contrast, Alvarez' speaker neither acts upon the multitudes nor constructs their identities through the lens of her experience. Rather the relationship is one of parity and exchange: the speaker is one part of a multivocal dialogue with a humanity that is not expressed in the abstract but the particular. Her verb construction, moreover, is passive. "I am in love with," suggests the speaker is engaged in an ongoing process of self-knowledge that is partly determined by others. In sonnet 36, then, the speaker's recognition that love thrives in meaningful human connection gives her the power to

---

<sup>113</sup> *Song of Myself*, a long poem made up of 52 segments, comprises the entire third book of Whitman's magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*. In segment 51 of *Song*, Whitman declares: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

<sup>114</sup> Whitman's, "I Hear America Singing," is the eighteenth of twenty-four individually titled poems in Book I of *Leaves of Grass*. The speaker rejoices in the plurality of voices or "varied carols" that constitute "America." The mechanic, carpenter, mason, shoemaker, plough-boy; the "young wife at work," and "the girl sewing or washing" all number among Whitman's carolers, "Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else / The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly, / Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs" (ll. 9-11).

reframe desire even in the act of writing *sonnets*: language, not *eros*, is the true medium of agency.

In the final sonnet of “33” the speaker attempts to reconcile her newly claimed subjectivity in a world where the notion of identity is fractured at best. She finds the solution in her commitment to writing—as both an active way of loving and as a sustainable form of agency.

Sometimes the words are so close I am more who I am when I’m down on paper than anywhere else as if my life were practising for the real me I become	4
unbuttoned from the anecdotal and unnecessary and undressed down to the figure of the poem, line by line, the real text a child could understand.	8
Why do I get confused living it through? Those of you lost and yearning to be free, who hear these words, take heart from me. I once was in as many drafts as you.	12
But briefly, essentially, here I am. Who touches this poem touches a woman.	

Where sonnet 36 posits an understanding of identity formed through the interaction between self and world, sonnet 46 forges that same understanding through the interaction of self and *word*. A conventional Petrarchan set-up of octave-sestet posits the relative ease of a journey toward self-knowledge that takes place on paper, against the dissonance of “living it through” on a daily basis. The last three lines of this sonnet might appear to suggest that the goal of life is to move from an unstable formation of identity to one that is fixed, whole. Such a conclusion, however, contradicts what the speaker has learned in the process of finding her voice. If one replaces the binary construct of identity as either fractured or whole with the notion that it might be considered *fluid* (like Alvarez’ use of enjambment), the ambivalence of the conclusion is resolved. The speaker, in accepting—

and perhaps welcoming—the notion that self-knowledge can be recognized only “briefly, essentially” invites a “richer” experience of life, one that acknowledges “the dignity of being a complicated human being” (Alvarez, “Two” 1).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alvarez, Julia. "About Me." *juliaalvarez*. n.d. Web. 29 July 2012.
- . "Citizen of the World: An Interview with Julia Alvarez." By Juanita Heredia. *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers*. Ed. Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2000. 19-32. Print.
- . "A Clean Windshield." Interview with Julia Alvarez. *Passion and Craft: Conversations with Notable Writers*. Ed. Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998. 128-44. Print.
- . *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems*. New York: Plume, 1996. Print.
- . *Homecoming: Poems*. New York: Grove P, 1984. Print.
- . "Housekeeping Cages." *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*. Ed. Annie Finch. Brownsville, Oregon: Story Line P, 1994. 16-18. Print.
- . *The Other Side/El Otro Lado*. New York: Plume, 1995. Print.
- . *Something to Declare*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1998. Print.
- . "Two Sides of an American Identity." Interview by Maria Elena Fernandez. *Los Angeles Times* 23 Mar. 1997. Web. 7 Aug. 2012.
- . "An Unlikely Beginning for a Writer." *Mascaras*. Ed. Lucha Corpi. Berkeley: Third Woman P, 1997. 188-99. Print.
- . *The Woman I Kept to Myself*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2004. Print.
- Annas, Pamela. "A Poetry of Survival: Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich." *Colby Quarterly* 18.1 (March 1982): 9-25. Print.
- Backscheider, Paula R. *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. Print.
- Ben-Ze'ev, Aaron, and Ruhama Goussinsky. *In the Name of Love: Romantic Ideology and its Victims*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

- Bermann, Sandra L. *The Sonnet Over Time: A Study in the Sonnets of Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Baudelaire*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988. Print.
- Billone, Amy Christine. *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2007. Print.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Collected Prose*. Ed. Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1984. Print.
- . *The Complete Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983. Print.
- . "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry." *Vassar Review* 23 (February 1934): 5-7. Rpt. in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983. 660-70. Print.
- . *One Art: Elizabeth Bishop Letters*. Ed. Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994. Print.
- Bogan, Louise. Rev. of *North and South*, by Elizabeth Bishop. *New Yorker* 5 October 1946: 121. Print.
- Boone, Joseph A. *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1987. Print.
- Boryga, Andrew. "Julia Alvarez Relates Her Struggle as Author, Finding Writer's Voice." *Cornell Daily Sun* 10 Sept. 2010: n. pag. Web. 12 Aug. 2012.
- Brogan, Jacqueline Vaught. "An Almost Illegible Scrawl": Elizabeth Bishop and Textual (Re)Formations." *Elizabeth Bishop In the Twenty-first Century: Reading the New Editions*. Ed. Angus J. Cleghorn, Bethany Hicok, and Thomas J. Travisano. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2012. 239-254. Print.
- Brown, Ashley. "An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983. 289-302. Print.
- Brownstein, Rachel M. *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels*. New York: Viking P, 1982. Print.
- Burnley, J.D. "Fine Amor: Its Meaning and Context." *The Review of English Studies* 31.122 (1980): 129-48. Print.
- Burns, E. Jane. "Courtly Love: Who Needs It? Recent Feminist Work in the Medieval French Tradition." *Signs* 27.1 (2001): 23-57. Print.
- Cappellanus, Andreas. *The Art of Courtly Love*. Trans. John Jay Parry. New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1959. Print.



- Chambers, Iain. *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Chartier, Roger. *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995. Print.
- Clark, Suzanne. *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. Print.
- Clarke, Bruce. "Wordsworth's Departed Swans: Sublimation and Sublimity in 'Home at Grasmere.'" *Studies in Romanticism* 19.3 (Fall 1980): 355-374. Print.
- Conrad, Joseph. Preface. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. By Conrad. New York: Doubleday, 1914. 11-16. Print.
- Costello, Bonnie. *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991. Print.
- . "The Impersonal and the Interrogative in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983. 109-32. Print.
- . "Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop: Friendship and Influence." *Twentieth Century Literature* 30.2/3 (Summer-Autumn 1984): 130-49. Print.
- Cox, Virginia. "Sixteenth-Century Women Petrarchists and the Legacy of Laura." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35.3 (Fall 2005): 582-606. Print.
- Croll, Morris W. "The Baroque Style in Prose." *Studies in English Philology: A Miscellany in Honor of Frederick Klaeber*. Ed. Kemp Malone and Martin B. Ruud. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1929. 427-56. Print.
- Curran, Stuart. "Charlotte Smith and British Romanticism." *South Central Review* 11.2 (1994): 66-78. Print.
- Dasenbrock, Reed Way. "Wyatt's Transformation of Petrarch." *Comparative Literature* 40.2 (1998): 122-23. Print.
- DeKoven, Marianne. "Modernism and Gender." *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Ed. Michael Levenson. New York: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Diehl, Joanne Feit. "Bishop's Sexual Poetics." *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Ed. Marilyn May Lombardi. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1993. 17-45. Print.
- . "'Come Slowly: Eden': An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse." *Signs* 3.3 (1978): 572-87. Print.

- . *Women Poets and the American Sublime*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. Print.
- DiFrancesco, Maria, and Luz Maria Umpierre. "Poetic Dissidence: An Interview with Luz Maria Umpierre." *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 27.4 (Winter 2002): 137-54. Print.
- Dickie, Margaret. "Elizabeth Bishop: Text and Subtext." *South Atlantic Review* 59.4 (November 1994): 1-19. Print.
- . *Stein, Bishop, and Rich: Lyrics of Love, War, and Place*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997. Print.
- Dodd, Elizabeth. *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Gluck*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1992. Print.
- Dolan, Elizabeth A. "British Romantic Melancholia: Charlotte Smith's Elegiac Sonnets, Medical Discourse and the Problem of Sensibility." *Journal of European Studies* 33.3-4 (2003): 237-53. Print.
- Dubrow, Heather. "'Nor is Here One Single Here': Towards a Reevaluation of Immediacy in the Sonnet Tradition." *Literary Imagination* 12.3 (November 2010): 296-306. Print.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. Print.
- Eberhart, Richard. "With Images of Actuality." Rev. of *Poems: North and South—A Cold Spring*, by Elizabeth Bishop. *New York Times* 17 July 1955: 4. Print.
- Edelman, Lee. "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room.'" *Contemporary Literature* 26.2 (1985): 179-196. Print.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "Reflections on *Vers Libre*." *New Statesman* 3 March 1917: 518-519. Rpt. in *To Criticize the Critic, and Other Writings*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965: 183-189. Print.
- Ellis, Jonathan. *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006. Print.
- Epstein, Daniel Mark. *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001. Print.
- Fairley, Irene R. "Edna St. Vincent Millay's Gendered Language and Form: 'Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree.'" *Style* 29.1 (1995). Print.
- Falk, Candace. *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman*. New York: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984. Print.

- Finch, Annie. "Coherent Decentering: Towards a New Model of the Poetic Self." *The Body of Poetry: Essays on Women, Form, and the Poetic Self*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005. 95-102. Print.
- Finke, Michael C. *Metapoesis: The Russian Tradition from Pushkin to Chekhov*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Print. Sound and Meaning: The Roman Jakobson Series in Linguistics and Poetics.
- Foster, Thomas. *Transformations of Domesticity in Modern Women's Writing*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002. Print.
- Frank, Elizabeth. *Louise Bogan: A Portrait*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. Print.
- Frankenberg, Lloyd. "A Meritorious Prize Winner." Rev. of *North and South*, by Elizabeth Bishop. *Saturday Review* 12 October 1946: 46. Print.
- Freedman, Diane P. *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995. Print.
- Fried, Debra. "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets." *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Ed. William B. Thesing. New York: G. K. Hall, 1993. Print.
- Friedman, Estelle B. "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s." *Journal of American History* 61 (1974): 373-93. Print.
- Fries, Charles C. "The Periphrastic Future with Shall and Will in Modern English." *PMLA* 40 (1925): 963-1024. Print.
- Gardner, Thomas. *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999. Print.
- Gibbs, Barbara. "A Just Vision." Rev. of *North and South*, by Elizabeth Bishop. *Poetry* January 1947: 228. Print.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. "'Directions for Using the Empress': Millay's Supreme Fiction(s)." *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995. Print.
- . "Female Female Impersonator: Millay and the Theatre of Personality." *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Ed. William B. Thesing. New York: G. K. Hall, 1993. Print.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979. Print.
- . *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988. Print.

- Goldensohn, Lorrie. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*. New York: Columbia UP, 1992. Print.
- . "Elizabeth Bishop: An Unpublished, Untitled Poem." *American Poetry Review* 17.1 (January/February 1988): 35-46. Print.
- Gould, Jean. *The Poet and Her Book: A Biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1969. Print.
- Gray, Jeffrey. *Mastery's End: Travel and Postwar American Poetry*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005. Print.
- Gurko, Miriam. *Restless Spirit; The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Crowell, 1962. Print.
- Hainsworth, Peter. *Petrarch the Poet: An Introduction to the Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*. London: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Hammer, Langdon. "The New Elizabeth Bishop." *Yale Review* 82.1 (1994): 135-149. Print.
- Harrison, Antony H. *Christina Rossetti in Context*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988. Print.
- Harrison, Victoria. "The Dailiness of Her Center: Elizabeth Bishop's Late Poetry." *Twentieth Century Literature* 37.3 (Autumn 1991): 253-272. Print.
- . *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Hassett, Constance. "Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Reticence." *Philological Quarterly* 65 (1986): 495-514. Print.
- Henaio, Eda B. *The Colonial Subject's Search for Nation, Culture, and Identity in the Works of Julia Alvarez, Rosario, Ferré, and Ana Lydia Vega*. Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen P, 2003. Print.
- Hecht, Anthony. "The Sonnet: Ruminations on Form, Sex, and History." *The Antioch Review* 55.2 (1997): 135-47. Print.
- Heiney, Donald. "Intelletto and the Theory of Love in the Dolce Stil Nuovo." *Italica* 39.3 (1962): 173-81. Print.
- Huang-Tiller, Gillian. "Elizabeth Bishop's Feminist Poetic Travel From 'Sonnet' (1928) to 'Sonnet' (1979)." *Elizabeth Bishop Papers*. Vassar College, 25 July 2002. Web. 17 January 2005.

- Hubbard, Stacy Carson. "Love's 'Little Day': Time and the Sexual Body in Millay's Sonnets." *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*. Ed. Diane P. Freedman. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995. Print.
- Johnson, Kelli Lyon. *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2005. Print.
- Johnson, Robert. "A Moment's Monument: Millay's Sonnet and Modern Time." *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*. Ed. Diane P. Freedman. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995. Print.
- Jones, Ann-Rosalind. "Surprising Fame: Renaissance Gender Ideologies and Women's Lyric." *The Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. Print.
- Juhasz, Suzanne. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976. Print.
- Kalstone, David. *Becoming a Poet*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989. Print.
- . "Trial Balances: Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore." *Grand Street* 3.1 (Autumn 1983): 115-135. Print.
- Kinnahan, Linda A. *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.
- Kesler, R. L. "The Idealization of Women: Morphology and Change in Three Renaissance Texts." *Mosaic* 23.2 (1990): 107-26. Print.
- Labbe, Jacqueline. *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1998. Print.
- Langland, Elizabeth. "Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel." *PMLA* 107.2 (1992): 290-304. Print.
- Lanser, Susan Sniader. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992. Print.
- Laurans, Penelope. "'Old Correspondences': Prosodic Transformations in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983. 75-95.
- Lehman, David. "In Prison: A Paradox Regained." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983. 61-74. Print.

- Lensing, George. "The Subtraction of Emotion in the Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop." *The Gettysburg Review* 5.1 (Winter 1992): 48-61. Print.
- Levin, Phillis. "Introduction." *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.
- Lombardi, Marilyn May. *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995.
- . "The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art." *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Ed. Marilyn May Lombardi. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993. 46-69. Print.
- Mann, Charles Edward. "Elizabeth Bishop and Revision: A Spiritual Act." *American Poetry Review* 25.2 (March 1996): 43-50. Print.
- Marti, Mario. *Storia dello Stil Nuovo*. Leche, 1972. Print.
- McCabe, Susan. *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994. Print.
- McNeilly, Kevin. "Toward a Poetics of Dislocation: Elizabeth Bishop and P. K. Page Writing 'Brazil.'" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 23.2 (1998): 85-108. Print.
- Meade, Marion. *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This?* New York: Penguin, 1989. Print.
- Mermin, Dorothy. "The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets From the Portuguese." *Journal of English Literary History* 48.2 (1981): 351-67. Print.
- . "Women Becoming Poets: Katherine Phillips, Aphra Behn, Anne Finch." *Journal of English Literary History* 57.2 (1990): 335-55. Print.
- Merrin, Jeredith. "Elizabeth Bishop: Gaiety, Gayness, and Change." *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender*. Ed. Marilyn May Lombardi. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993. 153-72. Print.
- Michailidou, Artemis. "Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anne Sexton: The Disruption of Domestic Bliss." *Journal of American Studies* 38.1 (2004): 67-88. Print.
- Milford, Nancy. *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Random House, 2001. Print.
- Millay, Edna St. Vincent. *Collected Sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Perennial Library, 1988. Print.

- Miller, Nina. *Making Love Modern: The Intimate Public Worlds of New York's Literary Women*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Millier, Brett C. *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. Print.
- . *Flawed Light: American Women Poets and Alcohol*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2009. Print.
- . "The Prodigal: Elizabeth Bishop and Alcohol." *Contemporary Literature* 39.1 (Spring 1998): 54-76. Print.
- Minot, Walter S. "Millay's 'Ungrafted Tree': The Problem of the Artist as Woman." *New England Quarterly: A Historical Review of New England Life and Letters* 48.2 (1975): 260-9. Print.
- Montefiore, Jan. *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*. London: Pandora, 1987. Print.
- Moore, Marianne. "A Modest Expert." Rev. of *North and South*, by Elizabeth Bishop. *Nation* 28 September 1946: 354. Print.
- Moore, Mary B. *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2000. Print.
- Morgan, Gerald. "Natural and Rational Love in Medieval Literature." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 7 (1977): 43-52. Print.
- Müller-Zettelmann, Eva. "'A Frenzied Oscillation': Auto-reflexivity in the Lyric." *Theory Into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*. Ed. Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. Print.
- Muratori, Fred. "Traditional Form and the Living, Breathing American Poet." *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly* 9.2 (Winter 1986): 217-41. Print.
- Nemerov, Howard. "The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop." Rev. of *Poems: North and South—A Cold Spring*, by Elizabeth Bishop. *Poetry* December 1955: 179. Print.
- Oppenheimer, Paul. *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. Print.
- . "The Origin of the Sonnet." *Comparative Literature* 34.4 (1982): 289-304. Print.
- Orr, Gregory. "The Two-way Ladder: On the Friendship and Mutual Influence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell." *American Poetry Review* 20.5 (September/October 1991): 31-35. Print.

- Oser, Lee. "Thinking in Form: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Poetry." *Harvard Review* 16 (Spring 1999): 6-11. Print.
- Ostriker, Alicia Susan. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon P, 1986. Print.
- Paden, William D. "Old Occitan as a Lyric Language: The Insertions from Occitan in Three Thirteenth-Century French Romances." *Speculum* 68.1 (1993): 36-53. Print.
- Parker, Dorothy, and Colleen Breese. *Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.
- Parker, Dorothy, and Stuart Y. Silverstein. *Not Much Fun: The Lost Poems of Dorothy Parker*. New York: Scribner, 1996. Print.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. Print.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Presidential Address 2006: It Must Change." *PMLA* 122.3 (May 2007): 652-662. Print.
- Pettit, Rhonda S. *The Critical Waltz: Essays on the Work of Dorothy Parker*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2005. Print.
- . *A Gendered Collision: Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker's Poetry and Fiction*. Cranbury: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2000. Print.
- Pines, Davida. *The Marriage Paradox: Modernist Novels and the Cultural Imperative to Marry*. Gainesville: University P of Florida, 2006. Print.
- Pinsky, Robert. "Elizabeth Bishop, 1911-1979." *New Republic* 10 November 1979: 31-32. Print.
- Preston, John Hyde. "Edna St. Vincent Millay." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 3 July 1927: 342. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Ed. William B. Thesing. New York: G. K. Hall, 1993.
- "Prize Poet." Rev. of *North and South*, by Elizabeth Bishop. *Atlantic* August 1948: 148. Print.
- Powers-Beck, Jeffrey. "'Time to Plant Tears': Elizabeth Bishop's Seminary of Tears." *South Atlantic Review* 60.4 (November 1995): 69-87. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "The Eye of the Outsider: Elizabeth Bishop's Complete Poems, 1927-1979." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. New York: Norton, 1986. 124-35. Print.



- . "Three Conversations." *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*. Eds. Barbara and Albert Gelpi. New York: W.W. Norton, 1975. 114. Print.
- . "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English* 34 (October 1972): 21-22. Print.
- Roberts, Josephine. "The Life of Lady Mary Wroth." *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983. Print.
- Robinson, Daniel. "Reviving the Sonnet: Women Romantic Poets and the Sonnet Claim." *European Romantic Review* 6.1 (1995) 98-127. Print.
- Roche, Thomas P. *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequences*. New York: AMS P, Inc., 1989. Print.
- Rodman, Selden. "Carefully Revealed." Rev. of *North and South*, by Elizabeth Bishop. *New York Times* 27 October 1946: 18. Print.
- Rooney, Ellen. "Form and Contentment." *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History* 61.1 (March 2000): 17-40. Print.
- Rosenblum, Delores. "Christina Rossetti and Poetic Sequence." *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*. Ed. David Kent. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987. 132-58. Print.
- Rossetti, Christina. *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*. London: Penguin, 2001. Print.
- Schiesari, Julianna. *The Gendering Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992. Print.
- Schwartz, Lloyd. "Elizabeth Bishop's 'Sonnet.'" *The Atlantic Online: Poetry Pages*. 29 March 2000. Web. 25 March 2012. Print.
- . "Introduction." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983. xvii-xix. Print.
- . "The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, 1971-1976." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983. 133-152. Print.
- Shetley, Vernon. *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. Print.
- Sirias, Silvio. *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood P, 2001. Print.
- Smith, Charlotte. *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*. Ed. Stuart Curran. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.

- Soper, Kate. "Productive Contradictions." *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*. Ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Spiegelman, Willard. *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Spiller, Michael R. G. *The Development of the Sonnet*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- . *The Sonnet Sequence: A Study of Its Strategies*. New York: Twayne, 1997. Print.
- Stanbrough, Jane. "Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Language of Vulnerability." *Critical Essays on Edna St Vincent Millay*. Ed. William B. Thesing. New York: G. K. Hall, 1993.
- Starbuck, George. "'The Work!': A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop." *Ploughshares* 3.3/4 (1977): 11-29. Print.
- Stewart, Susan. "Lyric Possession." *Critical Inquiry* 22.1 (Autumn 1995): 34-63. Print.
- Szirtes, George. "Formal Wear: Notes on Rhyme, Meter, Stanza, Pattern." *Poetry* 187.5 (February 2006): 416-424. Print.
- Thesing, William B., ed. *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1993.
- Travisano, Thomas. "The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon." *New Literary History* 26.4 (Autumn 1995): 903-930. Print.
- . "Emerging Genius: Elizabeth Bishop and the Blue Pencil, 1927-1930." *The Gettysburg Review* 5.1 (Winter 1992): 32-47.
- . "Geography IV, or The Death of the Author Revisited: An Essay in Speculative Bibliography." *Elizabeth Bishop In the Twenty-first Century: Reading the New Editions*. Ed. Angus J. Cleghorn, Bethany Hicok, and Thomas J. Travisano. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2012. 233-238. Print.
- Tyler, Meg. "'You Cannot Rest': Bidart, Lowell, Bishop, and the Sonnet." *Literary Imagination* 12.3 (November 2010): 377-384. Print.
- Umpierre, Luz Maria. "Sexualidad y Metapoesia: Cuatro Poemas de Julia Alvarez." Trans. Catherine Ramsden and Pablo Valentín. *The Americas Review: A Review of Hispanic Literature and Art of the USA* 17.1 (Spring 1989): 108-14. Print.
- Valerio-Holguin, Fernando. "Julia Alvarez (1950-)." Trans. Maura Velasquez-Castillo. *Latino and Latina Writers*. Ed. Alan West-Durán. Vol. 2. New York: Scribner, 2004. 783-801. Virtual Reference Library. Web. 9 Aug. 2012.

- Varnes, Kathrine. "Julia Alvarez." *New Formalist Poets*. Ed. Jonathan Barron and Bruce Meyer. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2003. 16-23. Print.
- . "Practicing for the Real Me: Form and Authenticity in the Poetry of Julia Alvarez." *Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic and Galician Studies* 10 (1998): 67-77. Print.
- Vickers, Nancy. "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme." *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Ed. Elizabeth Abel. U of Chicago P, 1982. 95-108. Print.
- Vela, Richard. "Daughter of Invention: The Poetry of Julia Alvarez." *Postscript: Publication of the Philological Association of the Carolinas* 16 (1999): 33-42. Print.
- Walker, Cheryl. "The Female Body as Icon: Edna Millay Wears a Plaid Dress." *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*. Ed. Diane P. Freedman. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995. Print.
- Wall, Catharine E. "Bilingualism and Identity in Julia Alvarez's Poem: 'Bilingual Sestina.'" *MELUS* 28.4 (2003): 125-43. Print.
- Waterman, Rory. "Caught and Freed: Manipulations of Form in Elizabeth Bishop's 'Sonnet' and 'One Art.'" *Able Muse: A Review of Poetry, Prose and Art* (Summer 2009) Web. 4 March 2012.
- Wehr, Wesley. "Elizabeth Bishop: Conversations and Class Notes." *Antioch Review* 39.3 (Summer 1981): 319-38. Print.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Boston: James R. Osgood & Company, 1881. *The Walt Whitman Archive*. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.
- Wilbur, Richard. "Elizabeth Bishop." *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983. 263-66. Print.
- Williams, William Carlos. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1967. Print.
- Wilson, Edmund. "A Toast and A Tear for Dorothy Parker." *New Yorker* 20 May 1944: 75-76.
- Wiltenburg, Robert. "Millay and the English Renaissance Lyric." *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Ed. William B. Thesing. New York: G. K. Hall, 1993.
- Winslow, Ann, Ed. *Trial Balances*. New York: MacMillan, 1935. Print.
- Wyatt, David. "Bishop in Love." *Hopkins Review* 4.1 (Winter 2011): 25-41. Print.

Young, David. "The Bevel and the Mirror." *Harvard Review* 16 (Spring 1999): 41-45. Print.

Zimmerman, Sarah. "Charlotte Smith's Letters and the Practice of Self-Presentation." *Princeton U Library Chronicle* 53.1 (1991): 50-77. Print.

## VITA

Catherine Ramsden was born and raised in Beloit, Wisconsin. Before attending Loyola University, she attended the University of Notre Dame, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English, *Magna cum Laude*.

Prior to entering the Doctoral program at Loyola, Catherine worked in business in New York, New York and Newport Beach, California. She later taught high school in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, receiving her State of California Ryan Teaching Credential in Secondary Education in 1992.

While at Loyola, Catherine served on the board of the English Graduate Student Association, and on the English Department Writing Committee. She was named a Gannon Center Women's Scholar in 2007, and was a member of the Organizing Committee for the 2011 National Meeting for the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender. Between 1999 and 2011, Catherine was also an instructor at DePaul University, specializing in the teaching of Professional Writing for Business.

Currently, Catherine lives in Chicago, Illinois, and teaches at City Colleges of Chicago, Truman College.