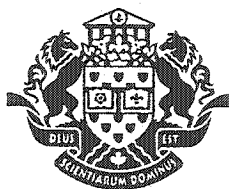


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Mother and Daughter

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“As Though Thy Song Could Search Me and Divine”:
The Intersubjective Innovations of Augusta Webster’s Sonnet Sequence Mother and Daughter

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Thesis presented to the University of Ottawa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English

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Abstract

Augusta Webster's (1837-1894) sonnet sequence Mother and Daughter (1895), twenty-seven sonnets spoken by a mother who is also a poet to her daughter and only child, combines the popular Victorian genre of motherhood poetry with the long-standing and highly codified tradition of the romantic sonnet sequence. Webster's fusion of these genres questions the primary assumption which underlies both traditions, that the poetic object, be it beloved or child, must be distanced from, "other" to, the poet himself or herself. Webster suggests a different, even radical, model of poetic creation and interaction between poet and object, as the daughter becomes an integral part of, and takes an active role in, the development of the mother-poet's psyche and the related writing of the sonnet sequence itself. The mother-daughter relationship which develops throughout the sequence is one of reciprocity and connectivity.

Chapter 1 will provide background to the two genres under discussion, the familiar and often-explored sonnet sequence and the rarely-discussed topic of Victorian motherhood poetry. The second chapter introduces the intersubjectivity theory of feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin as an entrée into the relationship of mutuality, then explores the intersubjective nature of selected sonnets. Chapter 3 discusses the breakdown and re-establishment of the reciprocal relationship, while Chapter 4 examines the effects of this intersubjective relationship on the aging mother's poetic confidence and the linguistic maturation of the mother-daughter relationship.

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Introduction

Augusta Webster (1837-1894), poet, journalist, and dramatist, was also a mother. Few Victorian women poets were mothers and, although poetry about children was popular in the Victorian era, the relationship between poetry and motherhood was examined only on select occasions. Few nineteenth-century women poets were mothers themselves, and those who were often found motherhood a hindrance rather than a help to their poetic endeavors.¹ As a result, although women poets often examine their relationship to the larger poetic tradition, they rarely examine themselves as mothers writing poetry. Webster's sonnet sequence Mother and Daughter (1895) is one of those rare occasions where motherhood and poetry interact. These twenty-seven sonnets are spoken by a poet who is also a mother, speaking frankly about the growth of her relationship with her daughter and only child. As the daughter matures and the mother ages through the progress of the sequence, their relationship changes as well. Nevertheless, the unifying theme, and the goal for both mother and daughter, is a relationship of mutuality and connection. Like most sonnet sequences, Mother and Daughter examines the mental states of the poet; unlike many sonnet sequences, the object of the poetry, the daughter, takes an active rather than a passive role in the exploration and development of the mother as an individual as well as a poet. In spite of Webster's unique use of the sonnet sequence tradition, the new attention being paid to Victorian women's poetry since the 1970s, and the growing feminist interest in the voice and subjectivity of the mother, no critic has discussed Mother and Daughter, other than to note its existence.² The sequence itself, however, merits the same sort of thorough examination as has already begun for Webster's dramatic poetry.

This thesis will examine the most striking innovation of Mother and Daughter: its integration, adaptation, and development of two disparate poetic genres, the sonnet sequence and motherhood poetry. Webster's fusion of these genres questions the primary assumption which underlies both traditions, that the poetic object, be it beloved or child, must be distanced from, "other" to, the poet himself or herself. Webster suggests a different, even radical, model of poetic creation and interaction between poet and object, as the poetic object becomes an integral part of, and takes an active role in, the development of the poet's psyche and the related writing of the sonnet sequence itself. In order to explore the extent of Webster's innovations, I will conduct an overview of both sonnet sequence and motherhood poetry conventions as they were understood in Webster's day to establish the models from which she was working. Then I shall undertake a close reading of Webster's sequence to show how she approaches the issue of the development of the poetic self in a way which integrates, rather than objectifies, the poetic object.

Although Webster was a well-respected poet during her lifetime, her works widely read and admired by many, her name was utterly absent from the Victorian canon from her death until the 1990s. Over the past twelve years, Webster's reputation has once again begun to grow and her dramatic monologues are now finding their way into anthologies and university syllabi. While she was most adept in the dramatic vein, she was prolific, writing in many other areas. Webster undertook her poetic apprenticeship in the early 1860s, publishing two volumes of poetry and a three-volume novel under the pseudonym Cecil Home. Her first book of poems Blanche Lisle (1860) was well received in the Cambridge circles in which she moved at the time (Watts-Dunton "Mrs. Augusta Webster [obituary]" 355). She also published two translations of Aeschylus in her own name, although her husband Thomas "edited" the first to provide an authoritative presence to the public.

By the mid-1860s, Webster had emerged as a dramatic poet and monologist. The three volumes of poetry Dramatic Studies (1866), A Woman Sold, and Other Poems (1867), and Portraits (1870) can be considered to be her greatest poetic achievements, as they established her reputation as a poet of “imaginative vigour and dramatic force” (“Dramatic Studies [review]” 404). Her dramatic monologues were lauded for their “mental portraiture,” and Webster was often placed on par with Robert Browning for her “power of going out of oneself and thinking the thoughts of others” although, for some critics, this strength of voice was not found to be seemly in a woman poet (403, 404). Nevertheless, some critics were so taken with Webster’s “strength of thought and felicity of diction” that they concluded “it would be hard to deny her the proud position of the first living English poetess” (“Portraits [review]” Examiner 324).³ Moreover, Webster was often praised as a poet of the highest order, one whose “subtlety of thought, feeling, and observation . . . demand that attention which only real lovers of poetry are apt to bestow” (“Portraits [review]” Westminster Review 415). It is this subtlety in Webster’s poetry which has drawn current critics to her work for, if Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues reveal the self-delusions of the speaker, Webster’s dramatic monologues uncover social inequalities and injustices within the larger fabric of Victorian society. Webster’s dramatic monologue “A Castaway,” spoken by an upper-class prostitute, has been most often treated by critics who are drawn to the poem’s revelation that every aspect of Victorian society is complicit in the problem of prostitution.⁴ Indeed, Webster’s abilities in subtle critique are such that contemporary reviewers rarely comment on the political undercurrent in Webster’s poetry. One reviewer of A Woman Sold, however, observed that, in the title poem, “there is a sub-flavour of wonder and defiance, or at least of something which might speedily become defiance”; some critics’ unease

with Webster's "manly" tone and strength of expression may also be a reflection of their discomfort with her social commentary ("A Woman Sold [review]" 411).

Webster continued in the dramatic vein in her four closet dramas, The Auspicious Day (1872), Disguises (1879), In a Day (1882), and The Sentence (1887). These dramas were praised as highly by the critics as were Webster's dramatic monologues. In his Athenaeum review of The Sentence, Webster's play about Caligula, Theodore Watts-Dunton does complain that "[i]f historic characters are to be used at all in fiction -- and we are by no means sure that they ought to be used at all -- they should never be manipulated by the dramatist in order to meet the mere exigencies of plot" (314). Apart from this ideological dispute, however, he praises Webster's "female characters [as] always delineated with a strong and sure hand," and finds one of the play's revelations to be a "very fine touch -- indeed, one of the finest in contemporary drama" (314). William Michael Rossetti also praises Webster's dramas, singling out The Sentence as "one of the masterpieces of European drama" (Webster Mother and Daughter 14). In spite of its popularity as a genre in the later Victorian decades, closet drama has received very little attention by current critics. The increase in attention to Webster's writings has helped to bring closet drama into the critical consciousness, as some critics are starting to use her dramas, as well as those of other women writers, to begin theorizing about the basic nature of the closet drama.⁵

Webster turned to lyric verse later in her life. The verse-tale Yu-Pe-Ya's Lute (1874) combines her dramatic bent with a more lyrical style, while the poetry of A Book of Rhyme (1881) continues this lyrical interest. The latter book is more concerned with formal poetic elements than her previous works, exploring songs, sonnets, and rispetti, and foreshadowing the exploration of the sonnet and the sonnet sequence Webster undertakes, and is published incomplete and posthumously, in Mother and Daughter (1895). The reviews of Mother and

Daughter admire the parental affection depicted in the sonnets, and the Athenaeum reviewer concludes that “[n]ever has the sacred bond between mother and daughter been more beautifully depicted than in the sonnet-sequence before us” (“Mother and Daughter [review]” Athenaeum 340).⁶ Webster’s reasons for abandoning the dramatic monologue (but not the closet drama) are not known, although she did issue a new edition of Portraits as well as a collection of previously published verse in 1893. These two volumes were well received in the Athenaeum, as the reviewer praised in Webster’s lyrics (most of which came originally from A Book of Rhyme) her “acute consciousness of the brevity of life and beauty . . . the terse clearness of the style, the clean-cut finish of the form” (422). The elements of Webster’s lyrics which the reviewer admires are also integral parts of her sonnets, and one of the main themes of Mother and Daughter which shall be explored in my argument below is how the poet allows the daughter to infuse hope into the speaker’s “acute consciousness of the brevity of life and beauty.”

In addition to poetry and drama, Webster also wrote essays and reviews. She wrote first, anonymously, for The Examiner, and many of her essays and reviews from that journal were published in her book of essays A Housewife’s Opinions (1879).⁷ Webster provides a glimpse into her approach toward journalism in the brief preface to this volume: “Though written for immediate appearance in those lighter column of weekly journals which everyone reads and no one recalls, they had, even the most jesting of them, all the care and thought I could have given work meant to last” (v). Most of the essays are indeed “jesting”; one of Webster’s greatest talents as a journalist lies in using humor and wry understatement to press home a more serious, and sometimes more controversial, point. A thorough examination of Webster’s essays would be highly fruitful, for she touches on every aspect of Victorian home life from household management to portrait-painting to children’s music lessons to marriage. Her essays most

frequently cited by current critics are those on the writing of poetry and novels and those on the “woman question.” Webster was a strong proponent of suffrage, higher education for women, and practical education for women, aligning herself ideologically with educators such as Emily Davies and Dorothea Beale. One quotation may suffice as a sample of Webster’s use of ironic rhetoric in support of the woman question. In Webster’s view, London University’s 1878 admittance of women to their examinations was a “public proclamation of a repeal of the women’s mental disabilities acts, a Magna Charta authorizing them to possess abilities and to train them” (*Housewife* 95). Many of these essays, including those that nominally address marriage, can be read as Webster’s statements on the need to provide both practical and higher education for young women.⁸

In addition to writing for *The Examiner*, Webster also wrote anonymous reviews for the *Athenaeum* from 1884 until her death.⁹ This weekly journal was one of the most respected literary reviews in the late Victorian era, and Webster’s inclusion on its staff is a tribute not only to her poetic and prose skills but also to her critical savvy. Webster’s reviews provide some insight into her opinions about the nature of poetry and the poet, although as anonymous reviews for a specific audience in a specific periodical, they cannot be considered to be pure expressions of Webster’s personal opinions.¹⁰ The poet, Webster claims time and again, is one who writes poetry because he or she must: “A poet cannot say, ‘I will not be a poet,’ any more than a fish can say, ‘I will not be a fish’” (“My Lyrical Life [review]” 630). To this irresistible creative drive better poets, in Webster’s opinion, may add one or two additional traits. Some poets will be blessed with a natural “gift of spontaneity,” an almost effortless clarity of diction; others, through “cultivation” of their poetic skills will achieve “very considerable power[s] of poetic expression” (“Unknown Madonna [review]” 691; “Recent Verse” 789).¹¹ Webster’s own poetry was

complimented for its “felicity of diction,” a trait which she sought in other poets’ work, as her reviews are critical of poems in which “the reader is oppressed with ingeniously unnatural images” (“Heartsease and Rue [review]” 593). Webster believed that good poetry will “not merely . . . convey to the recipient mind the poet’s ideas, but . . . arouse in that mind an assimilative consciousness as though the ideas were its own, and also by suggestive influence . . . set it astir with reflex imaginings and with associations of ideas belonging to itself” (“Flower Pieces [review]” 623). This passage looks forward to Mother and Daughter, in which the daughter’s comment that the mother’s poetry “‘could search me and divine’” suggests that, at least within this relationship, the sonnets are able to stir the reader with “associations of ideas belonging to” the auditor (Mother and Daughter 27). A deeper exploration of Webster’s critical comments in her reviews and essays is in order, especially as she evidences in her own poetry such attention to and skill in her poetic craft.

Little is known about Webster’s private life, largely because no personal papers and few letters remain. Julia Augusta Davies (b. 1837), as she was christened, was the daughter of a naval officer, learned Greek with her younger brother in the manner of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and traveled on the continent with her aunt for a year in her early twenties. Her brother Gerald Davies, seven years younger than Webster, attended Christ College, Cambridge, and was later master at the Charterhouse School; he authored a book on the history of the Charterhouse as well as works on art history. Webster’s sister Julia, her elder by two years, married the Cambridge mathematician Isaac Todhunter; Watts-Dunton paints a brief but evocative picture of these sisters in his comment that, in Cambridge, Webster was known as “one of the brilliant daughters of Admiral Davies,” suggesting that Webster’s intelligence and vivacity were a family trait (“Mrs. Augusta Webster [obituary]” 355). In 1863 at the age of 26, Augusta Davies married Thomas

Webster, fellow and later law lecturer in Cambridge; their daughter Margaret was born the next year.

The Webster family moved to London in 1870 so that Webster could be closer to the literary scene there. Theodore Watts-Dunton's biographers claim that Webster "persuaded [Thomas] to resign his partnership in the legal firm at Cambridge and migrate to London, . . . for it had been her dream since girlhood to mix in literary circles" (Hake and Compton-Rickett 17). Her early years in London are clouded, although we do know that she was close friends with Theodore Watts (later Watts-Dunton), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's companion and a respected literary critic in his own right, from her Cambridge days through her death. Webster suffered from an undefined ailment later in life, which she herself calls "a dangerous attack of pleurisy" in an 1881 letter; this letter also attributes her journey to Italy with Margaret in 1881-2 to her illness.¹² In her later years, Webster moved at least tangentially in the William Michael Rossetti circle. She exchanged letters with Christina Rossetti,¹³ and sent her a copy of A Book of Rhyme; Rossetti reciprocated by sending her a copy of A Pageant and Other Poems. Upon returning to London from Italy, she lived at 24 Cheyne Walk, just down the road from D.G. Rossetti. Although D.G. Rossetti's letters do not reveal that he knew Webster personally, she did send him a volume of verse (presumably A Book of Rhyme) in 1881,¹⁴ and she did attend the unveiling of the Rossetti memorial in 1887. Other individuals to whom Webster presented volumes of poetry include Robert Browning¹⁵ and botanist John. R. Wise, and she also had some sort of social relationship which is currently undefined with the William Morris family, in addition to her friendship with Watts-Dunton. An 1886 letter to William Morris's daughter May, politely explaining why she is not able to speak at a Socialist League meeting, reveals not only Webster's association with the Morris family but also her own sympathies for and hesitations about socialism

as a movement.¹⁶ In the early 1890s, however, Webster's health appeared to decline rapidly, as attested by the growing scarcity of her reviews for The Athenaeum, until her death in 1894.

Politics made up a significant part of Webster's early London years. In addition to the politically-minded essays she wrote for the Examiner, she also composed the pamphlet "Parliamentary Franchise for Women Ratepayers" (republished in the Examiner and A Housewife's Opinions), espousing voting rights for women property owners and taxpayers, most of whom were unmarried women.¹⁷ Her argument, that "there seems no earthly reason why the question of extending the franchise to a special class of women whom our laws and customs recognize as qualified citizens in all other respects" should be rejected, is put forward with a forcefulness and directness which her other essays often forgo in preference of wit and understatement, and displays the full power of her political rhetoric (A Housewife's Opinions 227). Webster's interest in women's education is also demonstrated by the two terms she served on the London School Board, the first elected position for which women were eligible in England, in 1879-81 and again in 1885-88 (the interruption being due to her Italian journey). While many of the women who served with Webster on the London School Board were outspoken and highly involved, Webster's political career is characterized by quiet activity. Although she ran for the Chelsea seat as an independent, she usually voted Liberal, and her letter to May Morris reveals Socialist sympathies even though she was not comfortable with the entirety of the Socialist platform (Hollis 102).¹⁸ The image of Webster as a political proponent which one gleans from her writings and political activities is that of thoughtfulness, forthrightness, and pragmatism, supporting W.M. Rossetti's characterization of Webster: "There was not an atom of affectation or pretension about her: her conversation was marked by thought and solidity, without gush or

finessing, and her demeanor was eminently straightforward, frank, and kindly” (Some Reminiscences 2:502).

If little is known about Augusta Webster, even less is known about her daughter Margaret. Margaret does not appear to have married; her personal copy of Mother and Daughter is inscribed “Margaret Davies Webster,” so we know her to have been single as of 1895, at the age of 31.¹⁹ We also know that she made her living as an actress; Margaret made her stage debut in a performance of In A Day, the only one of Webster's plays to be staged, at Terry's Theatre in 1890. After that, she appears to have continued acting, although the details of her career are shadowed.²⁰ Few other facts are known, beyond Margaret's presence with Webster in Italy in 1881-2. Webster does speak fondly of Margaret in her extant letters; writing to Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1873, she tells him “My family was eight years old in November. She is at this moment teasing me to read or tell her a story” (qtd. in Sutphin Portraits 10). In letter to Holmes a few months later, Webster describes her distress over Margaret's bout with congestion, and includes the following image of daughter (which resounds strikingly with Mother and Daughter Sonnet 4):

I have taken her today for a walk to see the spring crocuses from whom I have had to invent messages to her every day since the sun began to shine lately. She was very proud at receiving a message from you and returns “her love and four kisses” -- her usual allowance. (qtd. in Sutphin Portraits 13)

The ease with which Webster integrates her relationship with her daughter into her correspondence with Holmes, in addition to the loving and playful tone which Webster adopts, suggests a true love of and engagement with the young Margaret. One might assume from these brief snips and the tone and affection in Mother and Daughter that they enjoyed a close relationship.

Although we have little direct evidence of the nature of the relationship between Webster and her daughter, we do have some indications of Webster's views on children and childhood. Two of her A Housewife's Opinions essays, "Children's Toys and Games" and "Children's Literature," directly address these issues. She criticizes blatantly educational games, because "they do not teach what they aim at," and because they blur the lines between recreation and effort, preventing the child from learning "the joy of endeavour, the triumph of difficulty overcome" (122, 123). Webster also finds the moralizing children's literature which portrays idealized children to encourage "mental histrionism"; instead, she recommends allowing children "the run of your own library," for the boy who imagines himself as "a Julius Caesar, or a Jack the Giant Killer, or a King Alfred, has a manifest advantage over him whose choice can only wander among the Harolds and Algernons of good ladies' stories of schoolboys" (117, 118). This discomfort with morally loaded real-life tales is reflected in Webster's one foray into children's literature, Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans (1884).²¹ The book is a curious blend of Charles Kingsley's The Water Babies, Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, and Gulliver's adventures, as the little girl Daffodil falls through the bottom of a pond and into the realm of the Croäxaxicans, a kingdom of frog-like beings. An element of fancy permeates the book, as Daffodil learns the Croäxaxican language from the Regius Professor of Everything, befriends the Queen, and dresses (as do all the Croäxaxicans) in clothing made daily from flowers. Webster's one children's work, then, follows her own precept to "let the children play," as it recognizes that children ought to be treated as such, not as a repository to be stuffed full of meaningless facts and overwrought morals (Housewife 124). Just as the poet and journalist Alice Meynell's insightful essays on childhood undoubtedly stemmed from her own interactions with her large family, Webster's desire to respect

the individuality and innocence of childhood, as seen in her writings on children as well as in Mother and Daughter, likely grew from her own experiences as a mother.

It is very probable that Webster had Margaret in mind while she was writing Mother and Daughter. There are certainly indications internal to the sequence that Margaret may be the sequence's daughter; the daughter is referred to as a "pearl" (the meaning of both the Germanic "Margaret" and the French "Marguerite") in Sonnets 7 and 26, and four of the sonnets are inscribed with a place and date, suggesting that these poems are associated with a specific locale and time.²² In addition to the dated poems, perhaps responding at times to specific events, the immediacy of many of the sonnets suggests that these were composed over a long period of time, and the incompleteness of the sequence suggests that this was a work in progress. Additionally, there is the absence of any marriage sonnets in the sequence, notable because Margaret herself did not marry within Webster's lifetime. Webster did, however, treat in her rispetti "The Daughter" in A Book of Rhyme the subject of a mother's reaction to her daughter's marriage, and the absence of the theme in Mother and Daughter could be attributed to Margaret's singleness. Unfortunately, such extrapolations often become circular in their logic without any external corroboration, and there is no evidence external to the sequence to make that connection with unwavering certainty. Although there is no reason to believe that Margaret was not in Webster's mind while she was writing these sonnets, I am nevertheless drawing a distinct line between the "mother-poet" of the sequence and Webster herself; the distinction applies likewise to Margaret and the daughter of the sequence. This movement away from the biographical reading opens up a reading of the sequence as more than simply Webster's personal expression, but rather as a carefully crafted exploration of the intermingling of two distinct but mutually committed individuals.

Although Webster's biography and other writings provide glimpses of her thoughts about children in general and her daughter in particular, the best way to understand Webster's vision of the mother-daughter relationship that she portrays in Mother and Daughter is to look at the poetry itself. Sonnet 1 sets the groundwork from which the rest of the sequence proceeds. It establishes the relationship between the mother and the daughter, and it also outlines the fears with which the mother will deal throughout the sequence.

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

Oh music of my heart, be thus for long:
 Too soon the spring bird learns the later song;
 Too soon a sadder sweetness slays content;
 Too soon! There comes a new light on onward day,
 There comes new perfume o'er a rosier way:
 Comes not again the young spring joy that went. (15)²³

The octave of this poem sets a springtime scene, in which the daughter's "laughters" and the mother's "music" are both equated with the song of the springtime bird who "has no why or how," but simply sings its unreflective song for the joy of singing. However, the end of this spring song is also foreshadowed in the octave, as the speaker states that this voice has been characterized by innocence "till now." The "blending minors" which the speaker foresees impinging upon the voice, those notes of sadness that slide into the otherwise major-toned song of happiness, are expanded upon in the sestet, as the speaker wishes for a continuation of the voice's youthful song, even while recognizing some possible blessings of maturity. The sonnet captures a frozen moment, similar to the moment described by D.G. Rossetti's "A sonnet is a moment's

monument,” in which the mother-poet is fully aware of the pure, unreflective innocence of the daughter’s (as well as her own) voice because she is on the cusp of losing that innocence to the self-consciousness of maturity.

In addition to setting the tone of the sequence, as each sonnet looks back in some way to this tension between youth and maturity, this sonnet establishes the initial roles of the mother and daughter. Line 1 establishes the mother as a poet, and the daughter as the poet’s equal. The speaker’s use of “music” as an image for her poetry (repeated in line 9’s “music of my heart”), as well as “voice” and “breath” used later in the sequence, is a common one in the Victorian women poets’ tradition. Letitia Elizabeth Landon provides some of the most frequent and striking uses of the trope, particularly in “The Improvisatrice” and “A History of the Lyre,” but the image was invoked throughout the century (Armstrong 323, 326). Although one might expect that Webster’s speaker, as both a mother and as the poet writing the sequence, would possess the strict moral and poetic authority over the daughter that one would expect in either a love-sonnet or a motherhood poem, the sonnet does not comply with these expectations. Instead, the “[y]oung laughters” of the daughter are set equal to the poet’s voice in line 1. This early equality looks forward to later sonnets in the sequence where the daughter’s voice emerges as a necessary counterpart to the mother’s and engages in the poetic process along with the mother. In lines 2 and 8, the mother’s and daughter’s voices then meld together into a single voice, again suggesting both equality and connectivity²⁴ between the two voices. This melding is a complex and potentially problematic image, and will be explained further below. The raising of the daughter’s voice to a poetic status continues in line 9; the “music of my heart” appears to be referring back to the mother’s “music” in line 1, but the list of “[t]oo soon[s]” in the sestet relate back to the metaphors for the melded voice of line 2. The sestet’s “music of my heart,” then, refers to both

the mother's poetry and the daughter's voice, suggesting that the daughter's voice, too, is worthy of the music/poetry metaphor, that it is as capable of producing poetry as the mother.

Although the melding of two voices into one in line 2 may look suspiciously like an appropriation of one voice by the other, or an effacement of the individuality of each separate voice, this kind of domination does not actually occur in the sonnet. Upon closer inspection, this single voice simply refers back to both the daughter's "laughter" and the mother's "music," indicating that all that happens throughout the octave, the innocent and unthinking bird-song and the temporary freedom from "blending minors," applies equally to the mother's poetry and the daughter's youthful voice. Furthermore, the melding suggests an innate connection between the two voices, that the rise and fall of the mother's and daughter's voices are intertwined and therefore dependent upon each other. The connectivity is at this stage an innocent one. The circularity of the reasoning for the spring bird's song (a metaphor for the voice in line 2) and the voice's youthful joy "that has no why or how, / But sees the sun and hopes not nor can fear," both indicate the innocent unthinkingness of this young voice. The combining of the voices in line 2 so simply, without explanation or elaboration, also aligns with this theme of unreflective innocence. The concord between the mother's and daughter's voices is unexamined and untested in the most idyllic sense, as they seem to exist in an almost Edenic state of perfect mutuality throughout four of the first five sonnets. Additionally, two singing voices will sound like one single voice only if the two are perfectly in tune, keeping perfect time and matching the flow of each other's song. The perfect tune-matching implied by the melding mirrors the attunement of mother and daughter early in the sequence, an attunement which is lost and regained as the sequence progresses.

Yet this perfect innocent interconnection is, the mother-poet realizes in the "till now" of line 1, a fleeting one. The connection has not yet been examined by either the mother or the

daughter, although the mother realizes that this innocence cannot last. This realization gives rise to the laments in the sestet for the “later song” and the “sadder sweetness,” elaborations on the “blending minors” of line 2. This same desire, for the daughter’s innocent happiness to continue as long as possible, is also voiced in Sonnet 3, as the mother fears to see the daughter’s face “dawn to some unrest,” indicating that she has passed from the “simple tears” of childhood to the “querulous young sadness” of adolescence (17). Neither does the mother look forward to these changes in her own voice; she wishes both voices to remain in the innocent and harmonious state of the octave. Yet she also acknowledges some of the blessings of this pending maturation in lines 12 and 13, in the “new light” and “new perfume,” as the roses which perfume the “rosier way” can only bloom in summer, not the spring of the octave. Nevertheless, the mother-poet realizes that she is poised on the brink of losing this ideal connection, a realization she returns to in Sonnet 15 as she pithily observes that “to have reached the best is leaving it” (32). The sequence which follows this opening sonnet springs forward from this fleeting, paradisaical moment, as the mother-poet deals with the looming maturation processes of both herself and her daughter, then as they build anew, more deliberately and with more strength, the connectivity first experienced here.

This sonnet, like all of Webster’s sonnets, observes strictly the split between the octave and sestet, and uses the tension between the two portions to drive the sonnet’s theme. The formal characteristics of the sonnet as a poem need no explanation here, other than to note that Webster sticks very closely to the Petrarchan sonnet form in rhyme scheme as well as in the relationship of the octave to the sestet (even if her lines do not always scan quite properly). And, although sonnet sequences are also familiar, the traits of a sequence are somewhat more elusive. Each sonnet is a poem in its own right, but it may be as tightly bound to the other sonnets in the

sequence as in Edna St Vincent Milay's Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree or as loosely connected -- to the point of calling into question the appropriateness of the term "sequence" -- as in Shakespeare's sonnets. Mother and Daughter falls somewhere in the middle. Like many sonnet sequences, most notably that of Petrarch, the sequence as a whole has a trajectory of change, even if individual sonnets do not necessarily progress directly from one to the next (although this happens frequently in Mother and Daughter). The result is that talking about the thematic progression, the maturation of the mother-daughter relationship, in the sonnets does not always result in treating the sonnets in a chronological progression. While my thematic approach to Webster's sonnets generally results in a fairly linear discussion, on occasion leaps forward and backward in the sequence need to be made. This approach to Mother and Daughter seems vastly preferable to a strictly sequential, and as a result thematically choppy, discussion.

Before delving in the chapters which follow into my discussion of Webster's sonnet sequence, some background to the traditions in which Webster is working is necessary to illustrate how Webster's poems question and deviate from these traditions. Chapter 1, "Poet and Beloved in Sonnet Sequences and Motherhood Poetry," provides this background for the two traditions of sonnet sequences and motherhood poetry. The first half of the chapter traces the particular manifestation of Petrarchism in late Victorian poetry, concentrating to some degree on Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's engagement with the Petrarchan tradition. If Webster's sequence aligns itself with any particular style of sonnet and sequence, it is with the Petrarchan tradition, especially in formal matters, although its direct engagement with Petrarchism is usually glancing. In the assumptions which underlie the sequence, however, Mother and Daughter asks some radical questions, in the tradition of Rossetti and Barrett Browning, of Petrarchism. Like these female predecessors, Webster questions the necessity of the opposition

between the poet-self and the beloved-other as is displayed in Petrarch's sequence as well as later ones, particularly Dante Gabriel Rossetti's The House of Life. Instead, she suggests a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship.

The second half of Chapter 1 will address the genre of motherhood poetry. As the genre is largely unexplored and sorely undertheorized, a brief definition of "motherhood poetry" is in order. The Victorians did not always distinguish between children's poetry and "motherhood poetry" proper; many poems exist in a gray area between the two easily definable extremes. As a result, the expressed audience for the poetry is not necessarily a good defining factor; for instance, Mrs. Gatty, in her preface to her anthology of motherhood poetry A Mother's Book of Poetry, suggests that these poems be read to children, even though adults were more likely to find their themes appealing (xviii, xix-xx). This audience approach to a definition becomes more problematic when one considers that, although a poem might be written for a child, it will first be read and purchased by an adult, making the intended audience as much adult as child, even though the expressed audience may be children.

Instead, I suggest that we define motherhood poetry as poetry which highlights the subjectivity of the mother or other adult in the face of a child. The adult need not be a parent; the key is that the adult display a vested interest in the child's being, growth (either moral or physical), and existence. Often, as in much of Jean Ingelow's motherhood poetry, the speaker is a friend or relative rather than a mother. Furthermore, the speaker need not be female (in which case it might be more properly termed "parenthood poetry"), although I shall be focusing on female speakers throughout this study. The speaker in Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," for example, demonstrates the proper concern for the little girl's intellectual well-being, and the speaker's subjectivity is foregrounded throughout the poem. In children's poetry, on the other

hand, adults are either nonexistent or are strictly authoritarian, as in Robert Louis Stevenson's A Child's Garden of Verses. Under this definition, some children's poetry, such as Christina Rossetti's Sing-Song or Kate Greenaway's Under the Window, is also motherhood poetry. Other poems, such as Ingelow's "Seven Times One," occupy a gray area in that the speaker is clearly a child, but the poem is not written for a child audience. Furthermore, the continuation of her "Seven Times..." series does focus on the maturing female subjectivity. I would venture to class these latter gray poems as motherhood poetry as well, although I will not be treating any of these more ambiguous poems in my argument.

This, then, is the kind of poetry I shall be treating in the second half of Chapter 1. Although motherhood poetry is a popular rather than a literary form as a whole, and although sentimentality dominates the tone of much motherhood poetry, it is a rich genre in which the more accomplished poets used a variety of approaches, often to great effect. The treatment of the child, however, usually mirrors the treatment of the female beloved in male-voiced love poetry, in that both child and female beloved are objectified, sometimes stereotyped, and rarely individualized. I will be looking at a wide range of motherhood poetry, particularly within Mrs. Gatty's anthology, to typify the tradition, then shall examine select specimens from three women whose motherhood poetry has already been discussed by critics: Alice Meynell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti. Each of these women provide a distinct and engaging image of the mother-child relationship, but each falls victim to the desire to objectify and therefore deny the individuality of the child. Once this historical groundwork has been laid, I can begin to discuss the theoretical and practical issues that pertain directly to my reading of Mother and Daughter.

Chapter 2, "The Establishment of Mother-Daughter Intersubjectivity," introduces and applies a theoretical framework for my reading, drawing from the realm of psychoanalyst Jessica

Benjamin's formulation of the wider psychoanalytic theory of intersubjectivity. In Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity, "the other is not merely the object of the ego's need/drive or cognition/perception," but is instead a self in his or her own right ("Outline of Intersubjectivity" 35). In the traditional psychological model of the development of the self and the relationship between the self and the other, the subject grows in opposition to the object and is defined by his or her differentiation from the object. Within the intersubjective framework, however, the self "grows in and through the relationship to other subjects," in which the self recognizes the other subjects as selves in their own right, and in which those other subjects also recognize and affirm the subjectivity of the original self (Bonds 19-20). Maintaining the tension between one's own need for independence, one's need for recognition, and one's need to recognize the independence of the other individual results in a creative tension in which neither subjectivity is dominated by the other.

I have chosen Benjamin's theory because it provides an alternative to the subject-object polarity which dominates poetry and criticism. Love sonnet sequences often revolve around the lover-poet's response to the beloved; indeed, one could argue that the love sonnet sequence is predicated upon this exploration of the poet's psyche reacting to his beloved. Critical responses to these sequences have often focused accordingly on the development of the poet's internal state, and have often drawn, deliberately or not, on literary adaptations of Freudian concepts, particularly about the development of the self and its reaction to the other. However, when the sonnet sequence is less about the poet's reaction to the beloved than about her interaction with the beloved, the usual critical approaches are no longer as useful. It seems appropriate to turn back to psychoanalysis for another way of talking about human relations discuss interrelational and intersubjective poetry.

The second half of Chapter 2 provides a more detailed introduction to the intersubjective mother-daughter relationship as it appears in the sequence. The chapter will look at several poems scattered throughout Mother and Daughter, many from the innocent phase of Sonnets 1-5, to explore the basic nature of the mother-daughter relationship as well as to illustrate how the application of Benjamin's theory allows a deeper understanding of Webster's sonnet sequence. This section will also set out some of the techniques Webster uses throughout the sequence, techniques which emphasize the duality of the interaction as well as the rifts which occur when connectivity fails.

While this intersubjective, mutually-supportive relationship may underpin the sequence, it is not univocally expressed throughout. Chapter 3, "The Breakdown and Re-Establishment of the Mother-Daughter Relationship," explores Sonnets 6-12 in which the breakdown of intersubjectivity occurs. This breakdown is caused, as in much motherhood poetry, by the mother's desire to idealize the child and to deny the child's maturation and growing individuality. The mother must come to terms with the daughter's independent mind before she is able to return to the connectivity of their earlier relationship. This breakdown is further complicated by the dialectic nature of the relationship; the mother-poet must also confront the possibility that the daughter's budding independence means that she may reject the relationship which the mother offers. The resolution of this second (potential) breakdown occurs in Sonnet 12 -- a subtle, highly effective poem which shows the daughter, even in her absence, to be vested in maintaining this intersubjective relationship.

The final chapter, "Linguistic Mutuality and the Completion of the Sequence," will examine the ramifications of this intersubjective relationship for the mother as an older woman and as a poet in Sonnets 13-23. The first subsection, covering Sonnets 13-20, examines the

mother-poet's aging and the accompanying waning of her poetic voice, as broached in Sonnet 1. As the mother gradually allows the daughter's subjectivity to penetrate further into her consciousness and her poetry in these sonnets, she finds herself rejuvenated by the youthful voice of the daughter. The daughter's voice may be distinctly different from the mother's, but that difference also makes it the complementary equal of the mother's. The ramifications of that equal power of voices and the depth of the connectivity between mother and daughter are displayed in Sonnets 21-23. In these sonnets, the ineffability of the love and trust between mother and daughter is given full play, in that language is no longer able, and no longer attempts, to signify the mother-daughter love. The understanding and trust resulting from the intersubjective relationship does not require the imperfect mediation of language, so the sequence's examination of the mother-daughter relationship ends with the end of the necessity of the poetry itself.

The final four sonnets provide a coda to the body of the sequence, in which the mother-poet looks at her relationship with the world and its expectations of mothering in light of her own role as a mother of one and her intimate relationship with the daughter. These final sonnets will be discussed in the Conclusion, "My heart gives all youth fostering': Taking the Sequence Into the World"; just as the sequence ends by looking out to the world's reactions, so will the thesis end by looking at Mother and Daughter's role in the larger picture of Victorian poetry. Although it had little, if any, direct influence on the poetic world before the modernists broke with the Victorian traditions, Mother and Daughter does resonate with various contemporary works, such as the poetic vision of Michael Field. It also broadens contemporary critics' understanding of the ways in which Victorian women used the sonnet sequence tradition to question many of the assumptions about relationships expressed in Petrarchism, and to expand the range of poetic options open for the expression of women's voices. This exploration of

Webster's sequence also helps to open for future critics a way of reading motherhood poetry which can examine the mother-child relationship, a relationship often difficult to understand with the usual range of literary tools. Mother and Daughter plays many important roles in the larger range of Victorian poetry, not the least of which is bringing into the poetic mainstream, through the use of the sonnet sequence genre, an exploration of a form of human love all but universal, but rarely acknowledged by either critics or poets. Parent-child love can be as problematic and as ennobling as romantic love, and the poetic depiction of that love can shed as much light on the human condition as the most intricately wrought of love sonnets.

A final word must be said on textual matters of authoritativeness and edition. Mother and Daughter was printed in 1895 with an introduction by William Michael Rossetti. Critics have often assumed that, because he wrote the introduction, Rossetti also edited the volume (Armstrong 322; Sutphin Portraits 11). As Rossetti is known to amend or alter in his editing projects, the proposition that he edited Mother and Daughter casts a slur upon its authoritativeness, especially as there are no autograph copies available for comparison and authentication. In his introduction, however, Rossetti states that it was his "privilege to have been invited" to introduce the sequence (11), and in Some Reminiscences claims that "I was invited by Mr. Webster to write some prefatory words for her [Webster's] touching little volume of verse, Mother and Daughter" (2:503). Furthermore, the fact that he spends most of his introduction praising Webster's drama rather than her sonnets suggests not that the sequence "was published posthumously . . . by William Michael Rossetti," but that he only wrote the introduction because he was requested to, not because he was taken with the sonnets themselves (Sutphin Portraits 11). Someone else, then, appears to have been in charge of the editing. Webster's husband Thomas was the one in correspondence with Macmillan, the publisher, during the publishing process for

Mother and Daughter as well as the earlier volumes Selections from the Verse of Augusta Webster (1893) and the new 1893 edition of Portraits.²⁵ Although we cannot be sure that Thomas edited Mother and Daughter, there is no reason to assume that Rossetti did. Finally, Webster had been in a long decline before her death, and certainly had time to edit and arrange her own poetry; given the cohesiveness of the sequence, it seems likely that the sonnets are in the order in which she last arranged them. Although the authority of the 1895 edition cannot be authenticated before Webster's personal papers are unearthed, there seems to be no reason to suspect, in the light of available evidence, that the sonnets are other than as Webster intended.

Finally, I have chosen to use the original 1895 edition throughout this thesis rather than Christine Sutphin's 1999 collection of Webster's work. Sutphin has done an admirable job of selecting and editing Webster's work, and she does include Mother and Daughter, with W. M. Rossetti's introduction, in its entirety. While Sutphin's edition is a respectable scholarly compilation of Webster's poems and prose, I have chosen to cite the original for three reasons. First, neither is more authoritative than the other, as Sutphin's is a direct transcription of the 1895 edition, and Sutphin's footnotes do not add significantly to my reading of the sequence. Second, the 1895 edition includes seven sonnets which are not part of Mother and Daughter, and although I do not directly address the interplay of those sonnets with the larger sequence, they have nevertheless informed my understanding of Webster's use of the sonnet genre and her exploration of intervocal poetry. The first two of the extra seven sonnets, "Old Love" I and II, are a question and answer pairing between a wife and husband about the extent of his love. The responding voices in these two sonnets echo the general tenor of the interaction of the mother and daughter's voices, and Webster uses similar techniques in some of the Mother and Daughter sonnets to portray the interplay of voices. Finally, I am using the 1895 edition for aesthetic reasons. It

prints one sonnet per page, while Sutphin, like all anthologizers, places as many sonnets and half-sonnets per page as will gracefully fit. It is much more pleasing to the eye to read one sonnet per page, and it makes it easier to visualize each as a whole. However useful modern annotated editions may be, the format and layout of the original volume of verse does affect my understanding of the poetry, and holding in my hand the original book of poetry takes me one small step closer to the time in which the words were composed, however ephemeral and subjective my reaction to that physical artifact may be.

Chapter 1:
Poet and Beloved in Sonnet Sequences and Motherhood Poetry

Nothing certainly could be more genuine than these Sonnets. A Mother is expressing her love for a Daughter -- her reminiscences, anxieties, and hopeful anticipations. The theme is as beautiful and natural a one as any poetess could select, uniting, in the warm clasp of the domestic affections, something of those olden favourites, The Pleasures of Memory and The Pleasures of Hope.²⁶ It seems a little surprising that Mrs. Webster had not been forestalled -- and to the best of my knowledge she never was forestalled -- in such a treatment. But some of the poetesses have not been Mothers. (Mother and Daughter 11-12)

This section of William Michael Rossetti's introduction to Webster's Mother and Daughter summarizes the key surface elements of the sequence: these are sonnets, and these sonnets are about a mother's love for her daughter. As such, she is melding two independent poetical traditions, the amatory sonnet sequence dating back to Petrarch and Dante, and the less codified but nevertheless popular Victorian convention of motherhood poetry. Furthermore, as W.M. Rossetti observes, Webster's melding of traditions is unprecedented (to the best of our current knowledge). While sonnets had been written about children before, they had not been gathered into a sequence which deals, in the tradition of Petrarch, with the speaker's interiority as understood through the speaker's relationship with the child. In combining two very different, perhaps even antithetical traditions, Webster changes both, making each separate tradition extend beyond its usual limits and objectives. Before examining the innovativeness of Webster's treatment of each tradition, however, it is important to understand the role of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence²⁷ and the motherhood theme in late Victorian poetry, and understand how contemporary criticism has interpreted each tradition, crystallizing certain preconceptions about the role of the poet and the poetic object in these genres.

I

The Petrarchan sonnet sequence is more than courtly praise of a distanced and unobtainable beloved; it is the poet's exploration of his or her own subjectivity. Working out of the highly codified courtly tradition of the troubadours, the stilnovisti school's interpretations of those courtly codes, and Dante's spiritual focus, Petrarch amalgamated in his 366-poem Rime Sparse a new poetic style, melding worship of a beloved with personal introspection. This new poetry was revered and highly imitated throughout the continental and English renaissances, then revived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Augusta Webster's sonnet sequence borrows from Petrarch, particularly as he was understood by the Victorians, in its formal elements and introspective focus. It also reacts in part against Petrarchism as the sonnets utilize Petrarchan conceits only to problematize them. However, Webster's largest deviation from the Petrarchan tradition, as it was portrayed by Petrarch himself and later enforced by Victorian critics and sonnet writers, is from the notion that the development of the poetic self in the sequence is dependent upon the distance from and unobtainability of the beloved. Instead, Webster's sequence shows the poetic self developing within the relationship and interaction with the beloved. A brief survey of Petrarchism's treatment of the beloved, and how that understanding of the interaction between poet and beloved was understood and interpreted in Victorian sonnet sequences and criticism, will help to position Webster's sequence within the larger context of Petrarchism.

Michael R.G. Spiller has done much of the recent work on sonnets and sonnet sequences, focusing on them as conducive to the exploration of the development of an individual self, and that self's relationship with the other, the object of the amatory Petrarchan sonnet sequence.²⁸

Both “love, or worship of a loved one,” and “some sort of struggle to know or understand the self” provide the foundation for sonnet sequences from Petrarch and Dante into the twentieth century (Sequence 2). In the amatory lyric sequence, the personality, identity, and desires of the speaker become the subject matter of the sonnet rather than the interaction between speaker and beloved:

When poets write to their loves, they write as much about themselves desiring as about the desired one. The love experienced, or hoped for, rather than the persona who can gratify it, is usually the focus of attention, and the work of the sequence lies often in the gap between desire and the Other. Thus the speaker who stands for the poet, the /I/ of the sequence, is the real object/subject of his or her own discourse. (79)

Within this tradition, the beloved of the sequence becomes the vehicle for an exploration of the speaker’s mental and emotional state(s) of being. The beloved is a sounding board for the speaker’s self-exploration, an occasion to examine the details and development of the poet’s desires. Spiller’s categorization of the beloved as “Other” emphasizes this distance between the poet’s perception and poetic depiction of her and the beloved’s own subjective existence (if she indeed existed at all) outside the realm of the poet’s imagination.

Petrarch’s idealization and distancing of Laura and the intense focus on his own subjectivity have become part of the “Petrarchan” sonnet tradition, and its characteristics of blazon, violent mood-swings of the lover, and the courtly relationship between lover and beloved are familiar to all readers of Italian and English Renaissance poetry.²⁹ The result of these accretions of formality is a distancing of the poet from his poetic object and a focus on the internality of the poet. Robert M. Durling identifies this intrasubjective theme in Petrarch’s Rime Sparse: “Laura herself is not the central focus of the poetry. Her psychology remains transcendent, mysterious Rather it is the psychology of the lover that is the central theme of the book” (7). The speaker’s intent focus on his own mental states, sliding at times into a

narcissistic self-contemplation, provides the poetic center of the sequence. While the reader comes to be familiar with the speaker's internality, Laura is never more than anatomical descriptions or a rarely-heard rejecting voice, such that "her very body is evoked through absence and emptiness, through a footprint rather than a foot" (Dubrow 41).³⁰ Petrarch's treatment of Laura has been emulated by his followers just as they have emulated his self-contemplation within their own sequences.

The nineteenth century saw a renaissance of sonnets and the sonnet sequence, rejuvenated in part by Wordsworth's vision of the sonnet as a "scanty plot of ground" and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's popular Sonnets from the Portuguese (Wagner 11). By the 1870s and 1880s, sonnet sequences, anthologies, and translations were becoming popular, and Webster's sonnet sequence is clearly the product of this intense interest in the genre. As such, it takes part in the contemporary discussions about sonnet writing, sonnet subject matter, and the role of the sonneteer which were appearing in critical works on the sonnet and sonneteers, published in book form and in the periodicals.³¹ Although much was written about English sonnets, the Italian sonnets, particularly those in Dante's La Vita Nuova³² and Petrarch's Rime Sparse, were generally considered to be the ultimate examples of the genre.³³ Victorian commentators were generally concerned with formal and aesthetic qualities, judging sonnets on grace, genuineness, and coherency of thought.³⁴ However, they also focus, albeit with less regularity, on the issue of the poet's subjectivity (Wagner 12). In their discussions of individual poets, particularly when discussing Petrarch and Shakespeare, their interest in the "preoccupation with the self" is often directly linked with their interest in attaining a biographical understanding of the poet and his beloved ("Petrarch [review]" 386). For example, an 1886 Athenaeum review of Shakespeare's sonnets attacks head-on the issues surrounding subjectivity and the revelation of the individual

psyche raised by Wordsworth's "With this same key Shakespeare unlocked his heart" and Browning's reply "If so, the less Shakespeare he" ("Shakespeare's Sonnets [review]" 257). The reviewer treats the subject at length, spending almost all of the six-column review (a lengthy article for the Athenaeum) weighing the various merits of both schools of thought as a prologue to a discussion of possible identities of Shakespeare's "Dark Lady." A similar pairing of discussions of the poet's subjectivity and the identity of his beloved occur in a 1878 Quarterly Review discussion of a biography of Petrarch ("Petrarch" [review]).

That this interest in the poet's subjectivity accompanies an interest in the biographies of Laura, Beatrice, and the "Dark Lady" of Shakespeare's sonnets is telling; while the commentators appear fascinated by the subjectivity of Petrarch, they also seek to link a historical Laura to the fragmented image provided by the Rime Sparse.³⁵ Even as they lament the paucity of detail about the "real" Laura, however, the critics praise the Petrarchan spirit and subjectivity which distances Laura and creates this lack of insight into the "real" beloved. The Quarterly Review article praises Petrarch's portrayal of Laura as "not so much a woman with a character and personality, as a woman in the general, la femme, personified and made the object of a poet's reveries" ("Petrarch [review]" 408). William Davis finds Dante's spiritualization of Beatrice, "whose image became to him the symbol of all virtue, the soul's central kingdom of moral light and elevation united with the highest form of aesthetic perfection," to be the preferred approach of the poet toward his beloved (194). Only A.H. Simpson finds this emphasis on the poet's own subjectivity to the exclusion of the beloved's, if not problematic, then at least foreign to Victorian concepts of love: "The greater number of the sonnets are occupied with descriptions of Petrarch's own emotions; there is none of the interaction of thought and emotion, none of the subtle influences of one character upon another, which constitute the interest of a modern tale of love" (274-5).

Running throughout these discussions of Laura is the assumption, questioned by Webster in her sequence, that it is normal, even desirable, for the poet to idealize his beloved, making her merely a symbol in the greater poetic exploration of the speaker's subjectivity.

This Victorian acceptance of the distance between the poet and his beloved was current not only in critical circles, but in poetic ones as well, as is exemplified by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translations and sonnets. D.G. Rossetti's engagement with the Italian, particularly Dantean, tradition is well established,³⁶ and he is at the center of at least one branch of the Victorian sonnet revival. His sonnets from The House of Life (1881) were published to great acclaim at different times, both in periodicals and in earlier volumes of his poetry, before their final collection into the full sequence; his friends included Hall Caine, whose sonnet anthology Sonnets of Three Centuries (1882) Rossetti helped envision, and Theodore Watts-Dunton, a sonneteer himself and highly respected critic whose views on sonnets and poetry were influential throughout the later Victorian era. Additionally, Rossetti reintroduced the term "sonnet sequence" to the Victorians, and the term became commonly used -- including by the editor for Webster's own sequence -- after The House of Life was published with that subtitle (Wagner 220 n. 30; Going 34). Rossetti's translations of Dante and the stilnovisti poets in The Early Italian Poets (1861) were some of the first collected translations of Italian sonnets available, and these translations were highly respected and influential, coming from the son of an Italian scholar and a well-known poet and artist in his own right.

Some of Rossetti's translation choices reflect his own approach to the poet-beloved dichotomy, choices which undoubtedly colored English readers' conceptions of the stilnovisti's approach to the beloved. Rossetti inevitably, of course, altered the sense and connotations of the lines, sacrificing literality in his striving to recreate a "good poem" (Early Italian Poets 2).³⁷ His

word choices reflect Victorian, and specifically Rossettian, rather than Italian duocento and trecento values. As such the personification of the beloveds takes on a distinctly Victorian slant, so that the courtly idealization of the woman in the Italian poets becomes in Rossetti's translation his own personal version of the "Angel in the House," as Roxana Preda and Elisabeth Gitter both point out in their discussions of Rossetti's translations of Guido Cavalcanti. Where Cavalcanti portrays the beloved as noble and powerful, Rossetti tends to reduce Cavalcanti's beloved to a quintessentially pure and modest Victorian maiden. While Cavalcanti's own attribution of traits to the beloved may have objectified her in typical stilnovisti ways and within his own poetics of philosophical abstractions, Rossetti's translations heighten this objectification and bring it into a distinctly Victorian focus, enabling the Victorian reader to identify with, and potentially emulate (or reject, as do Webster and the women sonnet writers discussed below) in poetry, this distance between poet and beloved.

This distancing appears again in Rossetti's The House of Life, as the beloved women in this sonnet sequence, like their predecessors Laura and Beatrice, are idealized, objectified, and fragmented.³⁸ Rossetti's poetry, as Stephen J. Spector observes, exemplifies the poet's self-absorption as distancing him from his beloved/poetic object:

To say that Rossetti's problem describes the self locked in subjective isolation does not mean that the beloved is not present in his poetry. However, the lover never enters into the beloved's consciousness; indeed, the beloved exists, not as another mind, but as a beautiful object. The relationship between the lover and the beloved is not a relationship between subject and subject, rather, it is a relationship between subject and object. The lover is first attracted by the physical attributes of the beloved; the real basis of attraction, therefore, seems to be either sexual or aesthetic or a combination of the two. (437)

Spector's language, that of "a relationship between subject and subject" or "subject and object," mirrors the language and concepts that Jessica Benjamin uses, as we shall see in the next chapter. The "relationship between subject and subject," the relationship unenvisioned by Rossetti, is

exactly the relationship which Webster does portray in her sequence. Rossetti, on the other hand refuses to grant the beloved a subjectivity or a voice as he reduces her to an object in the poetry. The entirety of The House of Life is focused firmly on the speaker's subjectivity and self-development -- so firmly that the beloved(s) are perhaps even more ephemeral than Laura. Although Rossetti's beloveds pervade the first half of the sequence, the reader is never given any insight into their consciousnesses, nor can the reader tell one beloved from another, should individual sonnets be removed from the context of the sequence.

The control which the poet maintains over the portrayal of the beloved of the sequence governs many of the sonnets in Part I, "Youth and Change," and is displayed most concretely in Sonnet 57, "True Woman: Her Love," and Sonnet 10, "The Portrait." The poet appears to grant individuality to the woman in each sonnet, in "Her Love" by attributing agency to the woman the first phrase "She loves him" (150 line 1) and in "The Portrait" by claiming to portray "of her inner self the perfect whole" (80 line 4). In each sonnet, however, the woman's individuality is fragmented through the poet's guiding hand. The beloved in "Her Love" is denied the ability to generate her own passion, but instead can only be a "glass facing his fire" (150 line 3). Furthermore, she is not able to choose whose passion to reflect, but must reflect, the poet determines, "a stranger's amorous flame" with "[i]ce" (151 lines 5, 7; Danahay 42). The poet in "The Portrait" fragments the beloved into throat, mouth, and eyes -- the "face [which] is made her shrine" -- as her physical beauty rather than the "sky and sea-line of her soul" are the locus of worship (80 lines 12, 8). In both poems, the beloved becomes a mirror for the poet -- literally in "Her Love" as her passion becomes a "glass facing his fire," figuratively in "The Portrait" as the painting is an image of his talents -- as the poems depict the poet's own skills and self-absorption in love and art rather than returning a clear image of the beloved herself.

This kind of objectification and absolute control over the beloved's presence in the poem is just what Webster's mother-poet rejects in her sequence. Webster is not alone in her questioning of the sharp split between the poet and the idealized beloved which dominates much Victorian sonnet criticism as well as sonnets like D. G. Rossetti's. Christina Rossetti certainly saw the problems that this idealization of the beloved held for the woman's subjectivity; her sonnet "In an Artist's Studio" addresses the issues of the painter's idealization and objectification of his beloved model, in a genre often devoted to objectification of the woman.³⁹ The painter's obsessive reproduction of her "[o]ne face" in all his paintings, all idealized as "queen," "nameless girl," "saint," or "angel" produces a monolithic vision in which "every canvass means / The same one meaning, neither more nor less" (3.264 lines 1, 5, 6, 7, 7-8). The repetition of the beloved's face in the canvasses does not create multiple impressions of the same woman, each rendering a different insight into her subjectivity, but rather the paintings portray the beloved "[n]ot as she is, but as she fills his dream" (lines 13, 14). The sitter is not portrayed "as she is" (as Rossetti repeats in the final two lines), sympathetically representing the beloved, but rather as the painter perceives her through his obsessive and possessive "feed[ing] upon her face by day and night" (line 9). Rossetti's image of the multiple portraits which inevitably portray the same image, that of the painter's obsession, echoes the episodic nature of her brother's sonnet sequence, in which each sonnet provides a repetition of the speaker's narcissism instead of nuanced portrayals of the beloved.⁴⁰

Rossetti addresses more specifically the problems raised for the consciousness of the beloved in Italian sonnet sequences -- as well as problems raised for poetic models for women -- in her preface to Monna Innominata, her own commentary on the Italianate sonnet sequence.

Although lengthy, her preface is so insightful on the issues surrounding the objectification of the beloved in the stilnovisti and Petrarchan sonnet sequences that it is worth quoting in full:

Beatrice, immortalized by “altissimo poeta . . . contanto amante”; Laura, celebrated by a great tho’ an inferior bard, -- have alike paid the exceptional penalty of exceptional honour, and have come down to us resplendent with charms, but (at least, to my apprehension) scant of attractiveness.

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

Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend. Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the “Portuguese Sonnets,” an inimitable “*donna innominata*” drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura. (2.86)

Several critics have explicated admirably Rossetti’s undermining, rewriting, and reshaping of Petrarchan sonnet conventions in both this preface and in Monna Innominata as a whole.⁴¹ She suggests that the outward “charms” praised by Petrarch and Dante do not, particularly to a woman reader (who is herself a poet) add up to “attractiveness.” The implication is that these idealized visions -- showing externals only -- are unattractive, and that “[h]ad such a lady spoken for herself,” her own subjective portrayal would have been “more tender, if less dignified”-- more “attractive,” if less “charming.” Moreover, the hypothetical stance of the long clause beginning “one can imagine” in the second paragraph, with its repetition of conditional markers (“imagine,” “might”), suggests that a state of affairs in which “mutual love [is not] incompatible with mutual honour” is merely theoretical, a fancy of the imagination. Conversely, the “actual” state of affairs in stilnovisti poetry is one in which “mutual honour” is not possible; the poetry of the stilnovisti creates a climate in which the beloved could not honour the poet in return. By appropriating the

traditionally male voice of the poet, the speaker in Monna Innominata is able to draw her own portrait, producing a more “attractive” or “tender” image, one which does portray the woman’s interiority.⁴² And, as both William Whitla and Marjorie Stone have observed, Rossetti creates a sequence in which both the speaker and beloved are poets, and in which “reciprocation rather than dominance” governs the relationship of the two poets (Whitla 110). Not only does she render the woman more “attractive,” but Rossetti also creates a sequence of “mutual love” and “mutual honour,” further questioning the efficacy of the Petrarchan model.

In many ways, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) is the beginning point, not the end, of a survey of Victorian sonnet sequences, as it preceded the other sonnet sequences and sonnet criticism addressed here and spearheaded the Victorian sonnet sequence revival (Mermin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning 129). As many critics have observed, Barrett Browning, like Christina Rossetti, questions the typical tropes of the Petrarchan sonnet convention even as she utilizes them in her search for a meaningful female sonnet-writing voice. Also like Rossetti, Barrett Browning’s “project is the utopian one of replacing hierarchy with equality” (Mermin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning 130).⁴³ Her negotiations within the Petrarchan conventions are foundational for the women sonnet-writers who come after her, as she establishes a woman as the poet-lover of a sonnet sequence, and suggests ways of bringing mutuality into the commonly polarized relationship in a sonnet sequence.⁴⁴

In order to attain this equality, Barrett Browning’s speaker⁴⁵ must tackle two formidable tasks: she must come to terms with her role as the object of another poet’s love, and she must carve a niche for herself as a woman sonnet-writer. In one sense, the latter task is the more audacious, for to take on the traditionally male role of the poet is to turn the tradition on its ear. In another sense, however, it is the simpler of the two tasks, for she has at her disposal the garb of

the Petrarchan speaker, which she fully uses. In order to bring about this “utopian” project, then, Barrett Browning must first replicate the subject-object split characteristic of Petrarchan poetry in order to authorize herself as a sonnet writer. Furthermore, this task must be accomplished before she is able to concede to being a love-object. The centrality of the speaker’s poetic voice to her capacity to love can be seen in the early sonnets of the sequence. The speaker’s insistence on her lowly status as “A poor, tired, wandering singer” does indeed enable her to enter into the sonnet sequence as a conventional speaker who views himself as lower than the beloved, as Glennis Stephenson, Mermin, and Leighton rightly observe. However, the speaker repeatedly emphasizes their opposing roles as poets, making the significance of the iteration of the distance between the two poets more than merely a Petrarchan mask (Sonnet 3, 3:228). The apparent lowliness of the poetry of Barrett Browning’s speaker is also, early in the sequence, a symptom of her learning to write love sonnets; as the sequence progresses, and as the speaker portrays her increasing skill in the genre, the speaker’s references to herself as a “poor . . . singer” decrease. The progression of the speaker’s poetic skill in love-verse throughout the sequence (in Sonnet 13 she cannot “fashion into speech / The love I bear thee,” and in Sonnet 17 her songs may be available for the male poet’s use, but none are of love [3:233 lines 1-2; 3:235]) and the progression of her gifts in return for his love (tears in Sonnets 8 and 9, hair in Sonnet 18 [3:230, 231, 235-6]) both culminate in the final sonnet, in which her love-sonnets are finally worthy of being gifted to the male poet. That is, she has finally attained mastery of the genre. Her confidence as a lover and a poet can be identified by the midpoint of the sequence (Elmore 97), but this final sonnet connects and resolves these two early themes.

The second task of Barrett Browning’s speaker, being the object of the other poet’s love, proves to be the more potentially problematic, and arguably more revolutionary, of the two. For

in taking on the garb of the Petrarchan lover, Barrett Browning's speaker has the opportunity to merely reverse roles, to engage in a kind of poetic cross-dressing, through which she would wrest the impetus of the relationship from the other poet (who, the sequence clearly states, has initiated the association) and thereby objectify the other poet, in the mode of Petrarchan sonnets everywhere. She refuses, however, to objectify the male poet.⁴⁶ The "two souls stand[ing] up erect and strong, / Face to face" in Sonnet 22 (3:237 lines 1-2), the contrast between the speaker's previous "visions" and the reality of the male poet in Sonnet 26 (3:239 line 1), and the interplay of tree and vine images in Sonnet 29 along with the refusal "not [to] have my thoughts instead of thee" (3:241 line 6), all counter the Petrarchan and courtly love conventions where, the reader senses, the poet's contemplation of his own desiring -- his own thoughts about the beloved -- are more important to him than the presence of the beloved herself. In granting the male poet his own right to "[r]ustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare" of the speaker's vine-like thoughts in Sonnet 29 (3:241 line 9), to exist apart from the speaker's conception of him and thus be able to love, the speaker agrees to be the object of his desire, just as he is now (by the midpoint of the sequence) the object of her confidently-voiced love-sonnets. This process of becoming simultaneously subject and object is a complex one for the woman poet, one which takes the majority of the sequence, but its outcome revolutionizes the genre and its capacity for depicting relationships, a change on which Webster will later capitalize.

The non-objectification of the male poet does not, of course, govern every sonnet in the sequence. The male poet is certainly still objectified within the realm of the Petrarchan tradition as the speaker exalts him in her early bid for the "lowest place" and therefore the place of the Petrarchan lover-poet. Even beyond the speaker's adoption of this tradition, he is repeatedly ennobled as the superior lover and the source of her love (see, for example, Sonnets 12, 16, and

25). The bulk of this objectification falls early in the sequence, however, as the speaker is learning to be a sonnet-writer and a lover. While there is still some sense of this remaining in the later sonnets, the male poet is not the distanced and haughty beloved of the Petrarchan tradition but rather is physically near and, if still more noble than the female speaker, sympathetic to her.⁴⁷

The characterization of the male poet as sympathetic not only runs counter to the Petrarchan tradition, it also enables reciprocity in the sequence. Furthermore, the sympathy of the male poet is central to the speaker's acceptance of his love; she has agreed to become the object of the other poet's love not just because he came courting, but because he is capable of entering into a reciprocal relationship. The male poet's ability to see and see into the female poet, especially as described in Sonnet 39, as a result of his sympathetic character is as necessary to the reciprocal arrangement of the sequence as is the female poet's discovery of a poetic sonnet-writing voice. The necessity of both parties' investment in a reciprocal relationship is also central to Webster's sequence, as the mother-poet struggles in the central part of the sequence with the possibility that the daughter might reject the relationship the mother offers. Even if Barrett Browning's sequence as a whole does not support equality to the extent that a twenty-first-century critic might wish, it has nevertheless significantly restructured the possibilities for future sonnet writers' portrayals of romantic relationships.

For as revolutionary as both Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti's sonnet sequences are, both remain wrapped up in many ways with the conventions which they are questioning and rewriting. The central question for Barrett Browning is the issue of the distance between the two lovers. Even though the sequence portrays the lovers as equals, the language she uses is still that of the lowly poet and the noble beloved. For Rossetti, the question is the silence which governs the ending of the sequence, and which returns the speaker to anonymity (Whitla 131). While such

a conclusion is fitting for a poem in which God provides the third, and ultimately central, term, it does not perhaps provide a complete model for other women poets seeking to write less religious sonnets.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, both break important ground for Webster. While she too focuses on the voice of the female poet, she does not deem it necessary to focus on the fact that she is a woman entering a typically male genre; instead, she builds upon the achievements of her predecessors. These predecessors also provide versions of reciprocal relationships, a central element to their revisioning of the sonnet sequence. From these foundational revisions to the genre, Webster is able to take more steps into uncharted territory, first by refocusing the amatory sonnet sequence from the male-female relationship to the parent-child one, and then by broadening the reciprocity of Barrett Browning and Rossetti into a central theme, not just of the relationship, but of writing poetry.

II

Unlike the sonnet tradition, which has centuries of examination and criticism behind it, the convention of motherhood poetry has fostered interest in only a limited number of contemporary critics, and even fewer critics of Victorian poetry.⁴⁹ Isobel Armstrong's recent and acclaimed book Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics provides a typical treatment of the motherhood theme. Her overarching arguments, which reflect many of the immediate poetic and political concerns of the academy, do not easily make room for the more intimate concerns of the nursery. Of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's many poems about motherhood, only "A Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is mentioned, and then it is mentioned in terms of race and class, not femininity and maternity (369); none of Alice Meynell's motherhood poetry or prose, for which she is best known, are discussed (482-3); Mother and Daughter is mentioned as a sonnet

sequence, not as an expression of mothering (372). One line, buried in a discussion of Christina Rossetti's lyric songs, perfectly sums up the academy's general attitude toward poems about motherhood and childhood: "... childhood is one of the times when a play with limit is permissible. (Perhaps that is why so many Victorian women turned to children's literature)" (366). Critics conclude that Victorian women wrote for children, or wrote about children, because the theme fell acceptably within their domestic realm; although critics acknowledge that this "appropriate" genre might have been used transgressively, the discussion rarely continues past this brief acknowledgment to examine the extent and nature of these transgressions.

The dismissal of much childhood or motherhood poetry is understandable, if too broadly applied. That the theme was popular in the nineteenth century is evidenced by its common inclusion in broader poetry anthologies and by more focused anthologies such as Mrs. Alfred Gatty's The Mother's Book of Poetry (1872).⁵⁰ A quick perusal of Mrs. Gatty's collection provides salient examples of the major themes of motherhood poetry, and the sentimental or romanticized treatment which was common to these poems. Poetry about dead children is the most typical of these themes; although the topic itself is understandable, given the high infant mortality rate during the Victorian era, the treatment of this theme usually ranges from maudlin, such as Caroline Southey's "To A Dying Infant," to overtly religious, as in Letitia Elizabeth Landon's "The Little Shroud." Although these treatments were popular at the time, they are difficult for modern readers to appreciate. Religiosity is often coupled with didacticism in motherhood poetry. Emily Taylor's sonnet "Mother, revere God's image in thy child" speaks to the mother rather than the child, while in Felicia Heman's catechistic "The Better Land" the mother's is the voice of spiritual wisdom, while the child is intent on the material world. This didacticism can also be purely secular, as in Charles Kingsley's "The Farewell," in which the

speaker imparts, Polonious-like, wisdom for living. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the child in need of instruction is the romanticized vision of the child blessed with innate, innocent wisdom, such as Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" (which is not printed by Mrs. Gatty). Another, less abstract example is Archbishop Trent's "A Walk in the Churchyard." The innocently wise child is closely related to the romanticized child; many poems romanticize childhood in ways similar to the overall tone of Robert Louis Stevenson's A Child's Garden of Verses, in which childhood is portrayed as almost prelapsarian, and the child as innocently in tune with nature and imagination. Mrs. Gatty's inclusions along these lines include Charles Lamb's "Childhood" and "Stanzas" by Thomas Hood. These common variations on the motherhood poetry themes lend themselves to sentimentalized or romanticized visions of children in which the children are often not believable portrayals of rounded individuals, but are instead flat, static examples of adults' perception of childhood. This sentimentalizing and petrifying of childhood go hand-in-hand, and while these traits may have ensured Victorian popularity, they have not been considered interesting topics for most contemporary critics to examine.

For these reasons, Victorian motherhood poetry has received little serious academic scrutiny. While some feminist critics are beginning to examine the motherhood poetry of individual women poets, and while these works provide important and useful places to begin examining the role of the mother in poetry, only Angela Leighton and Dorothy Mermin have theorized more generally on the nature of motherhood poetry and the ways in which the poet, speaking as a mother, may relate to children. Angela Leighton, in her discussion of Alice Meynell's motherhood poetry in Writing Against the Heart, provides an overview of women's poetry about children similar in tone to Armstrong's observation: "Motherhood . . . inspires a poetry of 'sing-song' obviousness and unqualified, unrelieved sincerity of feeling. It is as if the

subject is the last to get free of that sentimentalism of the heart which weighs heavily on women's poetry as a whole" (259). While this broad statement is generally true, as Mrs. Gatty's selections substantiate,⁵¹ its tendency is to close off any critical discussion of the poetry as a result of its "obvious" and therefore uninteresting nature. Leighton's statement also fails to take into consideration those poems, including Mother and Daughter, in which "unqualified, unrelieved sincerity of feeling" do not characterize the tone, and in which the fundamental human emotion of parental love is sensitively and insightfully portrayed.

Dorothy Mermin, in Godiva's Ride, introduces a way of discussing poetry about children and mothers which acknowledges the tendency toward sentimentalism but provides an entry into the poetry without dismissing it. She identifies the role of children (and animals) in women's poetry as the role of the other, just as the beloved woman provides an other for the enamored male poet: "When a woman looked for something to take the same relation to her within a poem that female figures take for male poets, the equation often reads: a male poet is to a woman as a female poet is to a child or animal" (74). As the woman poet assumes the relative position of the man to write poetry, she must find a new "other" to take the woman's old position in the poetic schema. As a result, just as women are often distanced and objectified in male-voiced poetry, so children in women's poetry are "beautiful, innocent, made only for love, and seem most poetical when they are strange, alien, and silent: dying, that is, or dead" (74). This objectification of the child, combined with the underlying belief held by both Victorian and contemporary readers that children are not an appropriate theme for "serious poetry," results in the "obviousness" that Leighton sees, even as this objectification provides "a kind of solution, if not a very good one, to the women's difficulty in situating themselves within poems" (Mermin, Godiva 75).

Mermin's account of the causes and results of this objectification of children in motherhood poetry is broadly applicable, and not just to women's poetry (children are distanced in men's poetry also, although the reasons for the distancing may be different). Of course, not every poem written about children in the nineteenth century objectifies and distances the child. Wordsworth's "We Are Seven" provides just one example of a poem where the subjectivity of the child is foregrounded and allowed to govern the movement of the poem with minimal obtrusive intervention on the part of the poet.⁵² The very experience of interacting with the believable portrayal of a child's subjectivity is one of the factors which renders "We Are Seven" popular still today, while much of the poetry in Mrs. Gatty's anthology is not commonly read or discussed, even in academic circles. Yet, as the following discussion of the motherhood poetry of three significant women poets will show, Leighton and Mermin's generalities are not far wrong for much nineteenth-century childhood and motherhood poetry.

To illustrate the prevalence of this objectification of children in women's poetry, let us examine a few of the motherhood poems of Alice Meynell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti, three poets whose poems about mothers and motherhood have received recent critical attention. Looking at some of these poems will help to establish a specific context for Webster's sonnet sequence and will facilitate through comparison an understanding of the significance of Webster's deviations from and alterations of these common tropes. Additionally, an examination of the current criticism surrounding these three figures will help display the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary approaches to examining motherhood poetry.

Alice Meynell has come to be considered an important transitional figure between sentimental Victorian motherhood poems and the darker maternal poetry of twentieth-century poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, as she "helped to establish what might be thought of

as the discourse of modern maternity, one characterized by a refusal of the sentimental and a corollary attention to the anxieties of motherhood" (Frawley 32).⁵³ Meynell's motherhood poetry foregrounds maternal subjectivity, complete with its ambivalence toward the child, which Meynell portrays through her "unobtrusively suggestive scepticism" toward the often-idealized mother-child relationship (Leighton, Heart 257). Meynell's "Maternity" illustrates this focus on the mother's subjectivity:

One wept whose only child was dead,
New-born, ten years ago.
"Weep not; he is in bliss," they said.
She answered, "Even so,

"Ten years ago was born in pain
A child, not now forlorn.
But oh, ten years ago, in vain,
A mother, a mother was born." (p. 33)

The poem's emphasis shifts "away from the child towards the suffering mother," unlike many dead-child poems which highlight the physical and spiritual qualities of the child (Leighton, Heart 257). Focusing on the maternal pain, however, moves the reader's perception one step farther away from the child than typical dead-child poems. In highlighting the maternal subjectivity to this extent, the subjectivity of the child is lost or forgotten.

"Cradle-Song at Twilight" provides one of Meynell's more complex portrayals of maternal ambivalence:

The child not yet is lulled to rest.
Too young a nurse, the slender Night
So laxly holds him to her breast
That throbs with flight.

He plays with her, and will not sleep.
For other playfellows she sighs;
An unmaternal fondness keep
Her alien eyes. (p. 32)

Leighton identifies the multiple points of reference in the poem, “[n]ight,” “nurse,” “playfellows,” through which “the attention of the reader is not focused on the child, but goes outwards” from the nursery (*Heart* 260). The movement of the poem away from the child echoes the caregiver’s movement away from the child as well, portraying “that other, darker side of motherhood, whose real thoughts, contrary to all the conventions, are ‘unmaternal’ and ‘alien’” (260). Maria Frawley, similarly focusing on the last line, links the caregiver in the poem and the “Cradle Song” itself to the African and Asian *au pairs* and their foreign lullabies to whom Meynell refers in her essay “Under the Early Stars” (39). Both critics emphasize the foreignness and “unnaturalness” or unmotherliness of the caregiver. The effect of the poem, however, is not to alienate the reader from the caregiver, but to elicit sympathy for the “[t]oo young . . . nurse” and her desire for flight. The reader’s sympathy for the caregiver, then, combined with the tension between caregiver and child, renders the sleepless child the “alien” force who impinges upon the caregiver’s desires. The nurse may be “unmotherly,” but it is the child who is distanced and made strange within the poem. “Cradle-Song at Twilight” takes the distancing of the child to the opposite pole from sentimental motherhood poetry; the child here is not idealized or romanticized, but is instead made alien and threatening. The resulting distance is similar, however, for both romanticized and threatening children are not accorded their own subjectivity within the poem.

Like Alice Meynell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the few nineteenth-century women poets who was also a mother. Her motherhood poetry has been examined from a biographical perspective in several articles, but the articles rarely move beyond biography into discussions of mother-child interaction within the poem itself.⁵⁴ In spite of her own experience as a mother, most of Barrett Browning’s motherhood poetry is sadly stereotypical.⁵⁵ However

important her own son might have been for her personally, the children in her poetry always stand in opposition to the subjectivity of the speaker, either by being dead or by being a symbol rather than an individual.

This distance between speaker and child becomes more pronounced when the speaker is also a poet. "Mother and Poet" is an obvious place to begin a discussion of the interaction between a mother-poet and a child. In spite of the linked nouns in the title, "Mother and Poet" is ultimately more about politics than it is about poetry; the poem's focus is on the intersection of maternity and politics, while poetry is only discussed in the beginning stanzas and the last one. The poem is more concerned with the political ramifications for motherhood ("And, when Italy's made, for what end is it done / If we have not a son?" [6.74, lines 74-5]) than it is in the poetical ones, or else it focuses on social issues as motherhood is portrayed as incompatible with poetry. The poetical art ("Yet I was a poetess only last year / And good at my art, for a woman, men said" [6.71, lines 6-7]) is contrasted with the womanly "art" of mothering ("What art is she good at, but hurting her breast / With the milk-teeth of babes, and a smile at the pain?" [6.71, lines 12-13]), setting up a dichotomy in which mother and poet seem to be opposed terms. The woman can either be a political mother, sending off or mourning sons, or a political poet, as the first and last stanzas imply by their inverse ("When you sit at the feast / And are wanting a great song for Italy free, / Let none look at me!" [6.71, lines 3-5]), but it seems difficult to be both a mother and a poet simultaneously. In spite of the apparent incompatibility of motherhood and poetry-writing, however, the death of her sons does not free her to write; rather, it prohibits her from writing. Or rather, the speaker claims that because her sons are dead, she will no longer write -- unless, as the poem's existence itself implies, it is to write about their death. As such, the

poem degenerates into another dead-child poem, albeit a more subtly complex one, and the relationship between poetry and motherhood is left confused and ambivalent.

Even more than "Mother and Poet," Aurora Leigh⁵⁶ provides a look at the difficulties the poet faces in granting space to the subjectivity of the child. As the central Victorian text by a woman about being a woman and a poet, Aurora Leigh's treatment of the poet-child relationship signals the problems which a woman must negotiate within that relationship, and as such provides a point of contrast for Webster's later treatment of similar issues. The intense focus on the developing poetic abilities and subjectivity of Aurora herself leaves no room for the development of other subjectivities within the poem, including the subjectivity of Marian's nameless son. That he is nameless is significant, for throughout the poem he "is hardly ever characterized as a real child might be" and acts only as a redemptive son to the Virgin-like Marian and the adoptive mother Aurora, a symbol of their maturation and independence from male-dominated England (Gilbert 42). For Aurora, children are characterized as possessions; they are "that crown of prosperous wives" or "that woman's toy," and Aurora takes possession of Marian and her child in her desire to save them, "if she [Marian] will or will not -- child / Or no child, -- if a child, then one to save!" (6.349, 616, 388-9). The role of the child in the poem as a whole is that of a foil to Aurora; his existence enables her to become a symbolic mother, but as a mother she is no caregiver and does not evidence any concrete responsibilities toward the boy. Instead, the child exists to confirm Aurora's own subjectivity:

... Such [flowers] I find
 At early morning laid across my bed,
 And wake up pelted with a childish laugh

 While I, with shut eyes, smile and motion for
 The dewy kiss that's very sure to come
 From mouth and cheeks, ...

.....

The little creature almost loves me now.
And calls my name, "Alola," stripping off
The rs like thorns, to make it smooth enough
To take between his dainty, milk-fed lips. (7.942-956)

The boy only responds to Aurora's desires, bringing her flowers and kissing her on command. He speaks her name, the most powerful way of confirming her existence and subjectivity, while he never receives in kind the identity which accompanies having a name, let alone having Aurora speak it and confirm her recognition of him as an independent being.

Sandra M. Gilbert's article "From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento" reinforces the poem's focus on the person and subjectivity of the poet by examining Aurora-as-child, along with her mother-figures, and Aurora-as-mother, as she "adopts" Marian and her son in Book 7. The language and critical stances which Gilbert adopts throughout the article illustrate the ways in which contemporary critics value that exclusive focus on the subjectivity of the poet, whether the poet be male or female. This value system is, in the case of Gilbert's criticism, explicitly traced back to Freudian concepts. Her language throughout the article is heavily dependent on Freudian concepts, while Freudian language as well as direct references to Freud's work itself pepper her article, foregrounding her reliance on Freudian thought for the development of her argument. Gilbert is not involved in a specifically psychoanalytic reading of the poem, however; she invokes Freud not as a psychoanalyst per se, but rather as an authority who can usefully illuminate the character and position of the poet within her construction of herself and her poem. By accepting and incorporating Freud as an authority, Gilbert is valuing his concepts. She consciously appropriates these concepts, as do other critics, consciously or not: the need for the poet to differentiate herself from, or even kill, her parental figures; the struggle to identify herself sexually; the "othering" and objectifying of outside

individuals. This adoption of the Freudian Oedipal drama is doubly significant for Gilbert's reading of Aurora Leigh, for not only must Aurora differentiate herself from and come to terms with the patriarchal mother-figures and her "motherland" and "fatherland," as she stands in the traditional Oedipal position of the child, but she must also stand in the position of the mother to another child. Gilbert, however, attempts to change the terms of this family drama, as she aligns herself with contemporary feminist critics who have engaged in the recuperation of the mother's voice from her silenced position in the Oedipal family by examining the surrogate-mother Aurora also as a poet, with a poet's voice. Gilbert addresses that voicing of the mother as she links Aurora's new role as mother with her shift from "crying her inchoate 'mother-want'" to her ability to "not only weep but word her desire" (41). Both the psychoanalytic Freudian model and the revisionary mother-centric psychoanalysis, however, necessarily leave the "other" still in the silenced and objectified position, as Gilbert unintentionally displays.

Gilbert's critique also indicates the polarizing of options for the critics' discussion which has been exacerbated by this dependency on Freudian concepts. In Gilbert's discussion, Aurora has only two options. One is for her to be a daughter to a personified motherland and distanced/dead human mothers against whom Aurora must act in order to be realized as a poet. The other option is for Aurora to be a mother to an unnamed, symbolic child who exists solely to confirm Aurora as an individual and, implicitly, as a poet. Never can a mother and child be portrayed mutually or with any sense of the other's subjective viewpoint, for the poem is so vested in the development of the consciousness of the poet, Aurora Leigh, that all other consciousnesses, even those of Marian and Romney, are necessarily of secondary importance at best, only important as the poet reacts to them to strengthen her own blossoming subjectivity. Significantly, Aurora makes an attempt, by the end of the poem, to recognize Romney as another

individual being and to see worth in his viewpoint; Marian's son never receives similar acknowledgment. The romantic relationship may be allowed reciprocity in the poem, but the maternal one is not.

Gilbert's conscious use of Freud where other critics make unconscious use of him, and the resulting implication that parent and child must always act in opposition to one another, help to broaden and complement Mermin's theory that the child fills the role of the other for the woman poet. Additionally, Gilbert's language and approbation of this state of affairs help us to understand why contemporary critics continue to value this polarization of poet-subject. Much poetry about the development of the self focuses on this polarity; the critics follow this majority in their focus on the dichotomy. As the poetry which chooses to question the poet-subject polarization is in the minority (suggesting, among other things, that it is difficult to write about reciprocity), there has understandably been little critical attention paid to relationships of connectivity. The critics' and poets' focus on the poet-object split thus creates a cycle in which the poetry of reciprocity is marginalized or ignored.

Christina Rossetti's book of children's verse Sing-Song provides the avenue for one of the only examinations of reciprocity in the poetic depiction of a mother-child relationship.⁵⁷ Virginia Sickbert has used psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity to argue that the mother in Sing-Song "retains her authority and agency without becoming authoritarian" (387).⁵⁸ The mother's voice accomplishes this balance by giving the child space within the text to act, make choices, or enter into active dialogue with the mother. For example, Sickbert argues, "My baby has a mottled fist" portrays an equal exchange between adult speaker and child:

My baby has a mottled fist,
 My baby has a neck in creases;
 My baby kisses and is kissed,
 For he's the very thing for kisses. (23)⁵⁹

Here, the baby is the actor before he is the acted-upon, giving the kisses first. The final line leaves the child still in the position of doer and done-to, as he is "the 'thing' that gives as well as receives kisses" (Sickbert 393). In this way, the mother is leaving room for the child to act, not directly or manipulatively forcing the child into accord with the mother's desire. Additionally, in "What is pink?", Sickbert continues, the mother's and child's voices are balanced equally in dialogue.

Unlike other "catechism" childhood poems, however, in which "the mother [is] coercively and firmly in control" and each voice is clearly distinguishable as a mother's or a child's, the questions in Rossetti's poem "could be asked either by the child, eager to be instructed, or by the mother eager to examine the child or allow her to display her knowledge" (390). By making the questioning voices interchangeable, Rossetti is according value, and some sort of authority, to both the mother's and the child's voices.

These poems, however, do not univocally display the mother-child intersubjectivity that Sickbert observes. Lila Hanft's readings of these same poems uncover "maternal ambivalence and infanticidal urges," suggesting discomfort or antagonism between mother and child rather than the attunement which Sickbert identifies (216). A brief comparison of Sickbert and Hanft's readings of "Love me, -- I love you" will help illuminate the complexity and tension inherent in even those poems which suggest intersubjective readings.

Love me, -- I love you,
 Love me, my baby;
 Sing it high, sing it low,
 Sing it as may be.

Mother's arms under you,
 Her eyes above you
 Sing it high, sing it low,
 Love me, -- I love you. (2)

The mother's imperative asking the child to sing, Sickbert argues, "[offers] the child the freedom to make choices," to "sing it as may be" (389). Sickbert also sees mutuality in the first and last lines, the mother "matching what she asks for with what she offers" (389). On the other hand, Hanft finds in it the imperative to love "the possibility that the baby does not spontaneously desire the mother" (217). Hanft interpolates a causal "because" in the place of the dash ("Love me [because] I love you"), through which she reads "the fear that one side might love without reciprocity: in order for the mother to be confirmed in her role as a mother, an exchange must take place that completes the circle" (217). Interestingly, both Hanft's and Sickbert's language engages with the concepts of reciprocity, affirmation, and mutuality, but where Sickbert sees that mutuality taking place in the line, Hanft sees instead the potential lack thereof. Nevertheless, issues of mutual recognition are clearly what are at stake in these discussions of motherhood poetry, moving the field of discussion into a realm significant to mother-child interaction.

Beyond exploring the multivalent meanings provided for by Rossetti's spare wording, this comparison of critical readings also illuminates the difficulties of pursuing a reciprocal relationship. Even as the relationship between equals is established, it holds inherent in itself, as Benjamin clearly examines in the fullness of her theoretical discussion of intersubjectivity and domination, the potential for breakdown. Furthermore, when one of the parties of a relationship is a poet expressing the state of that relationship, the balance will almost inevitably sway toward the mother-poet's subjectivity and away from the child's. Webster's mother-poet deals almost constantly throughout the sequence with this tension between her own desires and those of the

daughter. Nevertheless, what Sickbert correctly identifies throughout Rossetti's book of poems is the desire on the part of the speaker to enter into a reciprocal relationship. Even if the establishment of that relationship is questionable, as in "Love me, -- I love you," the desire to accord independent subjectivity to the child is itself a radical shift from the locus of desire in many other motherhood poems. The caregiver's wish for flight in "Cradle-Song" or Aurora Leigh's need to establish her own independent subjectivity as a poet align themselves with typical motherhood poems, in that the desires of the mother either are out of tune with the needs of the child or fail to recognize that those needs exist. Webster's Mother and Daughter is characterized by the desire, found also in Sing-Song, to recognize the daughter as an independent subject and to admit the further influence of that independent subjectivity on the mother's poetry.

As we have seen, few of the poems considered, whether sonnets or maternity poems, have taken the subjectivity of the other into account in the development of the poetic self and the creation of the poetry. The critics, however, reinforce this focus on the self-other split to the point that, even in those poems in which a reading of a reciprocally-focused poetic development is possible, the self-other split is often emphasized to the detriment of the alternative reading. This critical investment in furthering the distancing between poet and object in both sonnet sequences and motherhood poetry has created an enclosed space in which it is difficult to discuss any sort of poetic development which is based on mutuality and consideration of the other's subjectivity. However, as poems dealing with connectivity undoubtedly do exist, as Mother and Daughter illustrates, the range of critical approaches to poetry dealing with the development of the self needs to be broadened.

Chapter 2: The Establishment of Mother-Daughter Intersubjectivity

The predominance of the polarization of the poet-self and the poetic object in both sonnet sequences and motherhood poetry has been commented upon in the previous chapter, as has the critical response which often focuses on the nuances of this self-other polarity. Both the critics who have theorized about sonnet sequences, including Michael Spiller and Stephen J. Spector, and the critics examining motherhood poetry, particularly Dorothy Mermin and Sandra Gilbert, have based their arguments around this split between the self and the other. There are, however, other approaches available for examining the self-development in a poetic work, approaches which may be more useful when examining poetry centered on the development of a relationship, such as the sonnet sequences of Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Not only does some poetry lend itself to discussion in terms of connectivity and mutuality rather than objectification and idealization, but some of that poetry, including Augusta Webster's Mother and Daughter, simply cannot be discussed solely in terms of self/other polarization without ignoring an important facet, in Webster's case the central one, of the work. If the critical discussion of the dichotomy between the self and the other originated, at least in part, in psychoanalysis, it seems only logical to look again to psychoanalysis to find an alternative to the self-other polarity. By deliberately borrowing language from another aspect of psychoanalysis which seems more appropriate to the poem at hand, I hope to refocus my discussion of Mother and Daughter away from the subject/object split as a normative concept and toward a conception of mutuality as the foundational principle appropriate for Webster's sequence.

To this end, the approach which I have chosen involves adapting psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's⁶⁰ formulation of intersubjectivity theory to illuminate my discussion of Webster's Mother and Daughter and to provide an entrance into a discussion of the growth of the mother-daughter relationship throughout the sequence. The concept of intersubjectivity, particularly as it has been expressed and developed by Benjamin, provides an alternative way of looking at relationships, one which does not replicate these opposing binaries, and which provides a useful framework for examining the development of the relationship in Mother and Daughter.⁶¹ After laying forth the basic principles of Benjamin's theory, as they are pertinent to Webster's sequence, this chapter examines some distinct "intersubjective moments" in the sequence to establish both the usefulness of intersubjectivity theory and the core nature of the mother-daughter relationship in the sonnets.

Benjamin has arrived at her theory of intersubjectivity⁶² from infant psychology and clinical research into the mother-infant bond. She sets out her theory primarily in the first chapter of her book The Bonds of Love (1988), further refining and explicating it in other books and articles, particularly "An Outline of Intersubjectivity: The Development of Recognition" (1990). Intersubjectivity explains how an individual develops through social interaction with other individuals; it refers not simply to any relationship involving two people, but rather to a relationship in which each party reacts to the other party as a separate subject rather than merely an object (Benjamin Shadow 80). It therefore makes an important distinction between the other as the object of the ego's need, and the other as an independent subject who is not defined by the individual's desires and needs. Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity

maintains that the individual grows in and through the relationship to other subjects. Most important, this perspective observes that the other whom the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her own right. It assumes that we are able and need to recognize that

other subject as different and yet alike, as an other who is capable of sharing similar mental experience. Thus the idea of intersubjectivity reorients the conception of the psychic world from a subject's relation to its object toward a subject meeting another subject. (Bonds 19-20)

This definition highlights three important points about intersubjectivity. First, intersubjectivity differs from classical psychology's theories of child development in that, instead of concerning itself with "a subject's relation to its object," the child learning to differentiate himself from his parents as his ego develops, intersubjectivity focuses on "a subject meeting another subject," the infant learning to identify his mother's face as she is talking to, recognizing, her child. It assumes that the child is innately social, that he will enjoy interacting with other individuals, not (as classical theories have assumed) that the child is innately solipsistic and must be forcibly taught that persons and situations are separate from himself and beyond his control.

Second, providing a corollary to the first point, is "that the other whom the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her own right." The mother is never merely the object of the infant's desires, but is instead recognized and identified by the child as a separate entity.⁶³ The mother's individuality, her self-ness, is important to the interaction of the mother and the child, for she must have an independent identity of her own, separate from her child and caregiving role. She must have a solid sense of her own self in order to provide the recognition which her child needs, for recognition can only occur between two selves. If the mother does not define herself as an entity separate from her child (or husband), she is denying herself the selfhood necessary to entering into an equitable relationship with her child, one in which she neither overpowers, nor is overpowered by, her child (Bonds 24). This concept is central for a mother who is also trying to be a writer; the mother-writer necessarily distinguishes herself as an individual being. Her struggle then is not primarily to avoid being effaced by the child, but rather not to efface the child in her writings

about the child, as we have seen happen in the poetry of Alice Meynell and, to a lesser extent, Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

This second point leads into the final relevant aspect of intersubjectivity, the concept that “we are able and need to recognize that other subject as different and yet alike, as an other who is capable of sharing similar mental experience.” The manifestation of this recognition of the similarities and differences between one’s own self and the other self is termed “mutual recognition” by Benjamin. Recognition involves perceiving that the other is an independent entity with the ability to affect his or her surroundings. The other affirms the individual’s existence and selfhood by acknowledging that ability. Recognition is often one-sided, as in Aurora Leigh when Marion’s son acknowledges Aurora as an independent being by saying her name, while Aurora never accords the boy the same recognition in return. Mutual recognition occurs when each member of the relationship acknowledges and affirms the other’s selfhood and power to act. When mutual recognition occurs, the self recognizes that this other self is both alike and different. The other self is different in that she is clearly separate from the individual, yet the other self is similar in that she is able to enjoy comparable experiences. The infant, for example, is excited over the discovery of a toy, and sees his mother also being excited over his discovery. The infant sees the similarities (both are excited) as well as the differences (he is excited for his discovery, and she is excited for his excitement) (Bonds 30). In short, mutual recognition involves the ways in which one self recognizes that another self is recognizing his or her selfhood, and the ways in which this process of reciprocal recognition influences the attitudes toward and perception of each self by the other.

Mutual recognition, however, involves a paradox. The individual needs an other to recognize him or her as an independent entity. As the other recognizes the individual as an

independent self, however, the self is then dependent on the other for that recognition, negating the independence which was being recognized in the first place. Within this interaction of two selves, each striving to assert his or her independence yet dependent on the other to recognize that independence, the tension between assertion and recognition usually breaks down into a relationship of domination. As Benjamin points out, however, the disintegration of the tension of recognition into a state of domination is not a necessary outcome of the need for recognition; ideally, the tension between full independence and mutual recognition is maintained or restored when the tension does break down (Bonds 32). Nevertheless, the specter of domination is ever-present in the striving to attain an intersubjective relationship. As a result of the possibility of domination, mutual recognition is not a developmental stage or a state to be attained. Rather, it is a constant negotiation with the other and within one's own perception of the other to maintain the tension that prevents domination from occurring.

In its focus on the relational aspects of the development of the self, the theory of intersubjectivity provides a language and a framework for discussing poetry which is not primarily about the development of a self in isolation from or in opposition to the world, but rather is about a self developing in conjunction with another self. As the overview of sonnet sequences and Victorian motherhood poetry in Chapter 1 demonstrated, such poetry is atypical in these genres. Nevertheless, such poems do exist, and they may exist in greater numbers than previously thought, if critics had the tools with which to unearth and discuss them. Because of its atypicality, Webster's Mother and Daughter becomes more significant in its ingenuity, revealing a realm of self-development which is not commonly explored. Webster's mother-poet, like most of the speakers in the poems discussed in Chapter 1 and especially those who, like Aurora Leigh, are

also poets, is involved in tracking the development of her self. She, however, is a self growing in conjunction with, not in opposition to, her daughter, who is also her muse and inspiration.

Before delving into the intricate and sometimes complex development of the mother-daughter interaction in the next two chapters, it may be profitable first to establish the nature of the relationship. This introductory examination of some poems through the lens of intersubjectivity will be the best way to see some of the techniques the poet uses to display this bond, and to develop an understanding of the way intersubjectivity theory can enhance a reading of this relationship. Many of these purely intersubjective poems, including Sonnet 1 discussed in the introduction, fall in the beginning of the sequence, establishing early one of the main themes and setting the tone for the sonnets which follow them. Accordingly, the intersubjective theme is emphasized at various points through the course of the sequence, and the sonnets I shall discuss here are drawn from different points in the development of the mother-daughter relationship. These recurring moments of reciprocity establish a connecting sense of connection and mutual recognition which provides a solid, secure foundation for the mother-poet from which she may explore more difficult aspects of the relationship.

Sonnet 20 provides one of the most clear-cut, almost textbook, demonstrations of this intersubjective interaction. In this sonnet, the mother-poet looks back on her daughter's youth as a "little questioning maid" while comparing it to her current relationship with her adult daughter. The mother remembers her role when the daughter was young:

There's one I miss. A little questioning maid
 That held my finger, trotting by my side,
 And smiled out of her pleased eyes open wide,
 Wondering and wiser at each word I said.
 And I must help her frolics if she played,
 And I must feel her trouble if she cried;
 My lap was hers past right to be denied;
 She did my bidding, but I more obeyed. (34)

Here, the daughter requires her mother's recognition of all her actions, both her "frolics" and her "trouble." The mother provides this affirmation as she "obey[s]" her daughter, validating the daughter's subjectivity and her agency in both actions and emotions. The mother, in turn, needs the recognition of her young daughter. Looking back on her daughter's youth in the sestet, the mother-poet remembers, and misses, the unique acknowledgment which her child provided:

Dearer she is to-day, dearer and more;
 Closer to me, since sister womanhoods meet;
 Yet, like poor mothers some long while bereft,
 I dwell on toward ways, quaint memories left,
 I miss the approaching sound of pit-pat feet,
 The eager baby voice outside my door. (34)

That "eager baby voice" which questioned and learned from her mother in the octave verifies the mother's subjective viewpoint, her own knowledge and ideas. Furthermore, the recognition of the child as a child is valuable to the mother. Even though she and her adult daughter are "Closer . . . since sister womanhoods meet," suggesting that this connective relationship has continued into their adult relationship, the mother misses the manner in which the child provided such recognition, through childhood questions and wonder.

Sonnet 4 provides another portrayal of the intersubjective relationship between the mother-poet and the daughter.

'Tis but a child. The quiet Juno gaze
 Breaks at a trifle into mirth and glow,
 Changed as a folded bud bursts into blow,

And she springs, buoyant, on some busy craze,
 Or, in the rhythm of her girlish plays,
 Like light upon swift waves floats to and fro,
 And, whatso'er's her mirth, needs me to know,
 And keeps me young by her young innocent ways.

Just now she and her kitten raced and sprang
 To catch the daisy ball she tossed about;
 Then they grew grave, and found a shady tree,
 And kitty tried to see the notes she sang:
 Now she flies hitherward – “Mother! Quick! Come see!
 Two hyacinths in my garden almost out!” (18)

The mother's reflection on her own role in her daughter's games -- “whatso'er's her mirth, needs me to know” -- is reminiscent of Benjamin's description of the child sharing with his mother his excitement over the discovery of a toy. In the poem, the daughter's “girlish plays” require the acknowledgment of the mother to complete her experiences. The mother, in turn, also requires her daughter's recognition, for the daughter's antics, shared with the mother, “[keep] me young by her young innocent ways.” Just as the mother's recognition of the daughter's plays completes her game, the daughter's need for the mother's participation in those games is also necessary to the mother as it rejuvenates her.

This reciprocal recognition pattern is revealed more concretely in the sestet of Sonnet 4. The last two lines -- “Now she flies hitherward – ‘Mother! Quick! Come see! / Two hyacinths in my garden almost out!’” -- provide another instance of the daughter sharing her experiences with the mother. Putting the request for her mother's recognition in the daughter's own words portrays, on the one hand, the immediacy and naturalness of the request. Not only is this short, choppy speech precisely the type of language a child would call out to her mother as she runs across the lawn, striving to get her mother's attention, but it also shows how important the daughter's own words are to the mother-poet. By giving the daughter a voice in the poem, the

mother acknowledges the daughter's own subjectivity, her right to have and express her own words within the poem.⁶⁴

This inclusion of the daughter's words in the poem is the single most significant concession which Webster's mother-poet makes toward acknowledging the daughter's subjectivity. Throughout the sequence, the mother-poet highlights her own preoccupations and immediate concerns through her choice of voices to include in the poem -- her own only, her daughter's, or a third party's. Although the daughter's words are filtered through the consciousness of the speaker, this filtering does not significantly undermine the power or importance of the daughter's voice. Instead of simply speaking for the daughter, providing a synopsis or a paraphrase of the daughter's speech, or simply speaking about the daughter, describing her actions as the poet does in the sonnet's octave, the mother-poet shows the importance of the daughter's subjectivity by recording the daughter's own voice. The fact that the mother-poet is vested in giving space to the daughter's words is the important factor, for the desire to recognize within the text of the poem the child as an independent entity is a significant alteration in the attitude of the poet toward her poetic object.

By including the daughter's voice in the poetry, the mother-poet is responding to the same issues which Christina Rossetti addresses in the preface to Monna Innominata, the problem of the silenced and objectified beloved. Where Rossetti has the historically silenced "lady" speak "for herself," but in the process silences the once-vocal male (2.86), Webster's mother-poet resolves the problem by including the beloved's voice in the poem itself, making space for the daughter to express her own view of the relationship, as she does in Sonnets 8 and 13. By allowing the daughter's voice to penetrate the poem, the mother-poet decenters her own subjectivity; she recognizes that the sequence is not as much about her own self as it is about herself in relation

with another, her daughter. Webster's mother-poet questions Spiller's notion that the traditional sequence is composed by "the persona of someone who stood slightly outside or above the society that he [or she] commented on" (Sequence 28). Rather than only standing outside and commenting on her intimate relationship with the daughter, the mother-poet writes intersubjectivity into her sequence by including the daughter's own voice.

The way in which the mother-poet chooses to portray her daughter also shows the importance of the daughter's individual voice and expression to the mother. Sonnet 13 provides a lengthy speech in the daughter's own words which illustrates the mother's balancing of her own and her daughter's voices:

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

Oh voice of mine that in some day not far
 Time, the strong creditor, will call his debt,
 Will dull – and even to her – will rasp and mar,
 Sing Time asleep because of her regret,
 Be twice thy life the thing her fancies are,
 Thou echo to the self she knows not yet. (27)

In this octave, the daughter's words provide a contradictory voice to that of the mother-poet. The mother gets four lines in which to express her opinion of the daughter's reaction to the mother's music, that "she does but love me more than hear," while the daughter receives equal space to reply, in her own words, to the mother's assessment. Each is, in essence, commenting on the other's subjective viewpoint. Each believes the other to misunderstand the topic at hand, the mother's voice or poetry, but the poet does not attempt to resolve this clash of opposing

opinions. Instead, the sestet maintains the tension between these two viewpoints. The mother's belief that her daughter's opinions are merely "her fancies" seems to disallow the daughter's subjectivity, but the mother's desire for her voice to live on, and to not be subject to Time, instead appears to support the daughter's beliefs. At the same time, the mother's conviction that her music is mutable and weakening, that it "[w]ill dull . . . and mar," is contradicted by its ability to "[s]ing Time asleep," which presumably only a strong and skillful voice could do. The two opinions on the mother's voice are allowed to stand in a tension of point-counterpoint, as the sestet seems to confirm and deny each subjective view in turn. By acknowledging the veracity of each viewpoint, the poet acknowledges the importance of each subjectivity, as well as the importance of maintaining the tension between contradicting viewpoints so that neither subjectivity dominates the other.

This dyadic relationship is further nuanced in Sonnet 5. In the octave, the mother and the father both show concern for the daughter as they respond to her sleeping cries in the nighttime thunderstorm. In spite of this atypical inclusion of the father in a piece of Victorian motherhood poetry, the sestet reaffirms the importance of the mother-daughter relationship:

Oh lily face upon the whiteness blent!
 How calm she lay in her unconscious grace!
 A peal crashed on the silence ere we went;
 She stirred in sleep, a little changed her place,
 "Mother," she breathed, a smile grew on her face:
 "Mother," my darling breathed, and slept content. (19)

The daughter displays her valuing of the mother through her repetition of the mother's name, again affirming the mother's subjectivity, and the pleasure she takes, even in sleep, while saying it. Furthermore, her "breath[ing]" of the mother's name indicates the centrality of the mother to the daughter's nature, that the mother is integral to the daughter's life-breath and voice. The mother

displays the centrality of the daughter by again leaving space for the daughter's voice in her poem. The rhyme scheme of the sestet further emphasizes the importance of this dyadic relationship to the mother-poet, as two rhymes, instead of the typical three, create a tightly interlacing rhyming sound that mirrors the mother and daughter's intertwined and mutually supporting subjectivities. This two-rhyme scheme, coupled with the repeated "Mother[s]," all but remove the father from the figure; his presence is reduced to the "we" in line 11 instead of playing a major role as he did in the octave. The sestet, however, works less to exclude the father, as his importance is well established in the octave, than to emphasize the importance of the mother-daughter dyad even in face of other important relationships in the mother's and daughter's lives.

This choice of two rhymes instead of three in the sestet is not limited to Sonnet 5. Indeed, eight of the twenty-seven sonnets, almost one-third, have only two rhymes in the sestet. Furthermore, all eight of these poems (Sonnets 3, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, 21, and 23) deal specifically with the mother-daughter relationship. Those poems which deal more generally with motherhood, such as Sonnets 10 and 11, or those which discuss aging, such as Sonnets 18 and 19, have the usual three-rhyme sestet. Webster's frequent and strategically placed use of the two-rhyme sestet creates a formal and aural indication of the pairing around which this sequence is centered.

Although the sonnets discussed above are drawn from various points in the sequence, the bulk of the purely intersubjective poems come in the first five sonnets. These sonnets, as I suggested in my discussion of Sonnet 1 in the introduction, present the original, innocent intersubjective relationship which is questioned, tested, and renewed throughout the sequence. Sonnet 1's introduction of connectivity is followed by the snapshots in Sonnets 4 and 5 of the mother and daughter's relationship of mutual recognition, both of which are discussed above.

Sonnet 3 may not provide an image of pure intersubjectivity like Sonnets 1, 4, and 5, but it does show the mother's intense concern for the daughter's emotional maturation, a concern which is a necessary element of a reciprocal relationship. Sonnet 3's sestet also has a two-rhyme scheme, reinforcing the mother-poet's focus on her daughter's growth. Only Sonnet 2's tendency to objectify the daughter, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, mars the cohesiveness of these first five sonnets' emphasis on the foundational role which intersubjectivity plays in this mother-daughter relationship. That four of these five sonnets focus on the reciprocal relationship establishes structurally as well as thematically the centrality of mutuality to the sonnet sequence, laying out the terms which will govern the poems which follow. Sonnet 2's seemingly anomalous placement, however, does not truly distract from the intersubjective theme of these first sonnets. Rather, its placement foreshadows the rifts in the relationship which will appear in Sonnets 6-8, and which will be discussed in the following chapter, as Sonnet 2 acts as a reminder that every intersubjective relationship carries with it the potential to become a relationship of domination.

In spite of the specter of domination which appears throughout the first half of the sequence, the sonnets examined here do emphasize the reciprocity which is the mainstay of the mother-daughter relationship. The techniques which the poet uses to highlight the dyadic nature of the sequence will reappear throughout later discussions of more complex aspects of the sequence. For now, however, they have served to introduce the intersubjective nature of the sequence as a whole, and to provide a preliminary glimpse into the nature of the relationship. The relationship is characterized by a desire on the part of the mother as well as the daughter to enter into a reciprocal bond. The mother-poet does more than just state this desire; she enacts it by allowing the daughter's voice to be heard in the poems. For a poet, speaking (or writing) is the primary form of self-expression, of proclaiming the validity of one's own subjective viewpoint.

Allowing the beloved's voice in the poems is an admission of the other's selfhood and ability to speak. The beloved's voice may ultimately be mediated through the consciousness of the speaker, but the presence of the beloved's voice in the poem nevertheless indicates that the poet has acknowledged the independent subjectivity of the beloved. Webster's mother-poet does more than simply recognize the daughter's subjective viewpoint, as we shall see in Chapter 4; she accepts the daughter's support and allows the daughter's voice to assist her, even in her poetic ventures. But before she may incorporate this reciprocal relationship in her poetry, she must fully come to terms with the daughter's subjectivity, and the potential ramifications of it for her relationship with the daughter, to avoid the ever-present problem of domination.

Chapter 3: The Breakdown and Re-Establishment of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

While the examples of intersubjectivity in Mother and Daughter seen in the previous chapter do typify the relationship between the mother-poet and daughter, this intense connectivity is not constant throughout the sequence. Rather, the mother-poet presents scenarios identifying two potential avenues through which the relationship may break down into subjugation and domination. In Sonnets 2 and 6-8, she encounters her desire to objectify her daughter, to view her daughter as a perfect child, resulting in an inability to acknowledge the daughter's independent subjectivity. In Sonnets 8-11, the mother-poet examines another scenario, one in which the mother's subjectivity may not be acknowledged by the child. Her dual identity as woman, specifically mother, and poet places the speaker in the unique position of being both marginalizer and marginalized. If the mother's voice in motherhood poetry often objectifies or distances the child, and if the woman is often the objectified in male-voiced love sonnets, then Webster's melding of these traditions provides a unique venue for juxtaposing these two facets of the problem of domination. Because she is able to portray the internal state of both an objectifier and an objectified in these relationships of domination and subjugation, the mother-poet offers a distinct picture of the internal drama of motherhood, the struggle to come to terms with the independence of the child, even though that independence may someday push the mother herself to the fringes of the child's life. Yet the mother-poet -- with the aid of the daughter -- also offers a method of resolution for each aspect of the mother-child domination issue. Just as the two domination scenarios depend on each subjectivity refusing to acknowledge the other, the resolutions rely on each independent subjectivity's willingness to enter into a mutually

acknowledging relationship; the daughter's interest in maintaining this intersubjective relationship is as necessary as the mother's.

The speaker's first step toward intersubjectivity must be accepting her daughter as an independent entity instead of viewing her as merely an extension of the mother's will. This desire to objectify her daughter is first voiced in Sonnet 2, in which the mother-poet struggles with the pitfalls encountered by other maternal poetic voices and the male-voiced lovers in traditional sonnet sequences. Here, early in the sequence, the mother-poet appears to have only these two available modes of relating to her daughter:

That she is beautiful is not delight,
 As some think mothers joy, by pride of her,
 To witness questing eyes caught prisoner
 And hear her praised the livelong dancing night;
 But the glad impulse that makes painters sight
 Bids me note her and grow the happier;
 And love that finds me as her worshipper
 Reveals me each best loveliness aright.

Oh goddess head! Oh innocent brave eyes!
 Oh curved and parted lips where smiles are rare
 And sweetness ever! Oh smooth shadowy hair
 Gathered around the silence of her brow!
 Child, I'd needs love thy beauty stranger-wise:
 And oh the beauty of it, being thou! (16)

The first half of the octave provides the mother-poet's critique of the social perception of mothers' pride in their children. The phrase "by pride of her" suggests an ownership or possession of children by their mothers, in which the glory of a daughter is a reflection on a mother's worth, not unlike the way a Victorian husband takes pride in his wife as a charming hostess because her entertaining skills reflect positively on him socially. Aurora Leigh displays a similar attitude in her possessiveness of Marion and her son, as they become redemptive figures for her and act as symbols of Aurora's rejection of society (AL 7.117-132). Thus, a mother's

pride, some believe, is more a self-congratulatory pride in her own ability to have shaped and created such a charming creature than an enjoyment of the child's own individual qualities. The mother-poet's phrase "As some think mothers joy" renders ambiguous the nature of the mothers' rejoicing in their daughters' beauty. The phrase leaves open the question whether the belief that mothers take pride in their daughters in this way is erroneous, or whether this belief is founded in some fact. In either case, the mother-poet rejects this possessive pride, claiming a more impersonal appreciation of her daughter's attractiveness, appraising her charms as the painter's trained and critical eye assesses and enjoys beauty.

Yet this kind of enjoyment of her daughter's beauty, a "stranger-wise" distancing, holds its own problems. Instead of reducing the daughter to a possessed object, a subset of the mother's abilities, as is suggested by the first half of the octave, this painterly appreciation of the daughter's charms distances and objectifies her in the manner of many masculine sonnets. The mother's love, in this sonnet, turns the mother into a "worshipper," one who views the daughter as a "goddess," a perfect divinity rather than a human individual. She also uses traditional sonnet convention by cataloging the beloved's physical charms in the sestet, again objectifying the daughter by focusing solely on her outward traits. The mother-poet may reject the problems of possession which motherhood poetry often encounters, but in the rejection she finds herself acting as a Petrarchan sonneteer. Yet the use of the two intimate second person pronouns in the last two lines suggests a way for the mother to avoid this distancing, Petrarchan attitude. By focusing on the daughter as a "[t]hou," an individual with whom the mother interacts on an informal and personal level, rather than on her as a "goddess," the mother-poet will be able to explore a new mode of expressing her relationship with her child/beloved, one which does not depend solely on diametric conventions and which thus allows the mother to view her daughter as an independent subjectivity.

Sonnets 6, 7, and 8 provide the clearest instances of the mother's struggle to admit the independence and subjectivity of the daughter; through these sonnets the mother releases her desire to objectify or idealize the daughter, and the two are then able to enjoy a relationship characterized by mutual recognition. In Sonnet 6, the mother struggles with the basic problem which leads to domination, the inevitable clash of the desires of two independent subjects:

Sometimes, as young things will, she vexes me,
 Wayward, or too unheeding, or too blind.
 Like aimless birds that, flying on a wind,
 Strike slant against their own familiar tree;
 Like venturous children pacing with the sea,
 That turn but when the breaker spurts behind
 Outreaching them with spray: she in such kind
 Is borne against some fault, or does not flee.

And so, may be, I blame her for her wrong,
 And she will frown and lightly plead her part,
 And then I bid her go. But 'tis not long:
 Then comes she lip to ear and heart to heart.
 And thus forgiven her love seems newly strong,
 And, oh my penitent, how dear thou art! (20)

Here, the mother is "vexe[d]" with her daughter because the actions of the daughter run counter to the desires of the mother to have an obedient or perceptive child. Significantly, she recognizes the agency of the daughter in this first line through the grammatically active phrasing of "she vexes me;" this recognition is an important first step, because many motherhood poems do not admit agency to the child. Meynell's "Cradle-Song at Twilight" illustrates this trend, in which the infant is the passive catalyst for the caregiver's active frustrations. By according agency to the daughter, the mother-poet is forced to recognize the daughter's subjectivity even as she is resisting the complications which are entailed by interacting with the independence of the daughter. In the first simile, the daughter strikes out against her mother's will and desires just as the bird accidentally "strike[s]" its safe haven. And, just as the children at the seaside refuse to

respect the unconquerable power of the sea, so does the daughter refuse to “flee” her faults; both these similes emphasize both grammatically and contextually the active and deliberate choices of the daughter. The mother recognizes the daughter’s agency again, as she re-centers the last lines of the octave from a view of the daughter’s passive acceptance of her faults (“[i]s borne against”) to an active attribution (“does not flee”). The mother acknowledges, and even emphasizes, the daughter’s independent subjectivity, even as that subjectivity clashes with the mother’s will and provides a potential setting for domination.

The mother/daughter conflict continues in the first part of the sestet, where the exchange between the mother and daughter is not one between equals but is clearly a hierarchical conversation; the mother “blames” the child who is in the wrong, and sets herself up as the authority. The daughter can only “plead,” begging her mother to understand her point of view before the mother, having the final word, dismisses both the daughter’s perspective and her physical presence. Yet in the last three lines of the sestet, some kind of reconciliation, if not a complete understanding born of mutual recognition, is possible. Significantly, it is the daughter’s voice which enables the reconciliation to come about, as she comes to her mother “lip to ear.” This phrase is echoed by “heart to heart,” suggesting that only when the mother listens to her daughter’s voice, instead of taking the upper hand as she did in the first half of the sestet, can the mother and daughter enjoy a reciprocal, understanding relationship. Furthermore, the mother-poet shifts her pronouns referring to the daughter; instead of the third person, distanced “she,” the daughter is spoken to in direct address with the intimate second person “thou,” echoing the use of intimate pronouns in Sonnet 2. This pronoun shift reflects poetically the “heart to heart” interaction of mother and daughter, as the daughter’s words enable the mother to regard the daughter as a personal “thou” rather than a distanced “she.” The possibility of enjoying such a

reciprocal relationship is further emphasized by the use of only two rhymes throughout the sestet, creating an intertwining rhyme scheme that Webster consistently uses to reflect the dyadic pairing of the mother and daughter's hearts.

If the mother has come to a partial understanding of ways to reconcile this clash of subjectivities in Sonnet 6, she still must deal in Sonnet 7 with her desire, first voiced in Sonnet 2, to objectify and idealize her daughter:

Her father lessons me I at times am hard,
 Chiding a moment's fault as too grave ill,
 And let some little blot my vision fill,
 Scanning her with a narrow near regard.
 True. Love's unresting gaze is self-debarred
 From all sweet ignorance, and learns a skill,
 Not painless, of such signs as hurt love's will,
 That would not have its prize one tittle marred.

Alas! Who rears and loves a dawning rose
 Starts at a speck upon one petal's rim:
 Who sees a dusk creep in the shrined pearl's glows,
 Is ruined at once: "My jewel growing dim!"
 I watch one bud that on my bosom blows,
 I watch one treasured pearl for me and him. (21)

Here, the mother attempts to justify her actions of the preceding poem, explaining that she chooses to "[c]hid[e] a moment's fault" or "blame [the daughter] for her wrong" in Sonnet 6 because she desires perfection in her daughter. The language used by the mother, the language of looking or gazing, is reminiscent of the male sonneteer's gazing and dwelling on the beloved's physical perfections. Here, the mother's "vision" is filled with her "narrow near regard" of her daughter, with which she is able to discern every fault. Like the painterly gaze of Sonnet 2, through which the mother may enjoy her daughter's charms, the mother's "unresting gaze," while it may be fueled by love, nevertheless examines the daughter too closely as it discerns the "speck[s]" and "dust" where the daughter is unable to live up to the mother's high desires and

expectations. The mother's gaze, like the "male gaze" often decried by feminist critics, wishes to objectify the daughter in an attempt to find her perfect, and therefore static.

The mother also uses language of possession in this poem to describe her relationship with the daughter, and her desire to idealize her daughter. The daughter becomes the "prize" and the "shrined pearl" for the mother. The mother-poet's choice to put her own words in quotation, "My jewel growing dim!" further emphasizes the possessive nature of her attitude toward the daughter at this point. Of these four words, the first is a possessive and the second is another treasure-like synonym the mother uses for the daughter. The words also highlight the mother's desire for the daughter to remain static, or at least to change according to the mother's idealized specifications, as she laments the daughter's "growing" differently than the mother desires, therefore becoming a "dim[med]" jewel in the mother's eyes. By refusing to admit to change in her daughter in her desire to keep the daughter static, the mother-poet is in effect refusing to admit to the daughter's independent subjectivity, her agency to do and be other than the mother wishes. The quoted words of the mother focus the reader on the mother's subjectivity and her desires to the exclusion of her daughter. Although the desire for this perfect prize is, the mother claims, "love's will," the "will" is essentially that of the mother, without regard for the daughter's own desires. Throughout this sonnet, the mother's will, her own perspective and objectification of her daughter, dominates.

The last two lines of the sonnet, however, do suggest that the mother may be breaking out of her objectifying desires. Here, the mother is still "watch[ing]" her daughter "on my bosom," in the mother's possession, and the daughter is still a "treasured pearl," but the mother no longer laments the changing and growing of the daughter like the "blow[ing]" of the rose bud. Neither does she vocally accept the inevitability of the daughter's growth. Rather, the two simple

statements of watching, without qualification or complaint, seem to indicate a resignation to or realization of her inability to keep her daughter static. Although this resignation does not provide a satisfactory resolution to the poem in terms of intersubjectivity or mutual recognition, it does indicate that the mother is able to admit to the impossibility of keeping her daughter from changing and that she is therefore willing at least to watch the changes take place.

A more satisfactory resolution is offered in the next sonnet. The octave of Sonnet 8 provides the mother's realization, acceptance, and appreciation of her daughter's own subjectivity and independent personality:

A little child she, half defiant came
Reasoning her case – 'twas not so long ago –
"I cannot mind your scolding, for I know
However bad I were you'd love the same."
And I, what countering answer could I frame?
'Twas true, and true, and God's self told her so.
One does but ask one's child to smile and grow,
And each rebuke has love for its right name. (22)

As in Sonnet 6, the daughter comes to the mother to "plead her part," to explain her own position to the mother. Unlike Sonnet 6, however, where the mother first takes the upper hand with the daughter, then the reconciliation occurs only as it is told by the mother, in Sonnet 8 the daughter is allowed to present her case in her own words. This recording of the daughter's words indicates that the mother has finally allowed the daughter's own voice to penetrate the mother's subjectivity, and that the mother is acknowledging the daughter's right to an independent voice of her own. Also unlike Sonnet 6, in which the daughter's unrecorded argument is followed by the mother's "bid[ding] her go," rejecting the validity of the daughter's point of view, the mother is here unable to provide a "countering answer" to her daughter's words. She recognizes the truth of the daughter's statement, both by recording those words themselves and also by refusing to

insist that her own adult status accords her the ability to state what is true and what is not. Now that the mother has acknowledged the daughter's subjectivity, she is able to accord authority to the daughter's voice, recognizing the value and veracity of the daughter's point of view and her unique expression of it. As the last line of the octave shows, the daughter as well as the mother has the ability to "rebuke" the other; the unspecified "rebuke" can apply either to the mother's right as an adult to chastise her child, or to the daughter's rebuke to her mother in lines 2-3.

The daughter's voice also enables the mother to stop objectifying her. Once the mother allows the daughter's voice to be heard in the poem, instead of focusing so intently on her own voice and will as she does in Sonnet 7, the mother is able to relinquish her desire to objectify her daughter and keep her static. The mother realizes the worth of her daughter's change and growth, admitting that "[o]ne does but ask one's child to smile and grow," that the daughter's maturing and growth is more important than the mother's desire to see no fault or change in her daughter. Furthermore, the daughter's words, "[h]owever bad I were you'd love the same," emphasize the reality of the mother-daughter relationship, that the "pearl" would be valued not for its perfection, as Sonnet 7 suggests, but rather that the daughter would be valued for her own self, bad or not. Instead of her concerns about the daughter "growing dim" through her supposed faults in Sonnet 7, the mother's desire is now for the daughter "to smile and grow" by expressing her individual viewpoint.

The octave of Sonnet 8 provides a pleasing and satisfactory resolution to the mother-poet's difficulty in recognizing the subjectivity of the daughter, in the transition from the mother's voice alone -- or the mother's voice doubled, as in her self-quotation in Sonnet 7 -- to the addition of the daughter's voice. This addition, and her portrayal of the process in Sonnets 6-8 through which she recognizes the daughter's voice, marks the mother's acknowledgment and

appreciation of the daughter's subjectivity. Yet these changes, as the mother shows through these three sonnets, occur as a result of the daughter's repeated efforts, expressed in Sonnets 6 and 8 (in addition to Sonnets 4, 13, 16, and 21), to enter into dialogue with the mother. The daughter's desire to attain a reciprocal relationship with the mother is an integral part of the mother's coming to terms with the daughter's subjectivity. By integrating the daughter's voice into the depiction of the mother's change, Webster's mother-poet devises her own solution to the tendency to marginalize the other, allowing the daughter's voice to penetrate the poetry itself in acceptance of the power of the daughter's voice and subjectivity.

However, this recognition of the daughter's voice and subjectivity brings with it potential problems for the mother's own subjectivity. The volta of Sonnet 8 is the most jarring of the sequence, as the tone of the octave, in which the mother is pleased to recognize an independent consciousness in her daughter, contrasts startlingly with the despair of the lone and apparently abandoned mother of the sestet. The violence of this shift in tone and subject mimics the suddenness of the mother's realization of the threat which the daughter's independence holds for her. As the daughter has a voice of her own, she may choose to use that voice to distance or marginalize the mother herself, threatening again the intersubjective relationship which was re-established in the octave of Sonnet 8. Even as Webster's mother-poet is in the process of exercising her maternal voice, that voice is threatened by her daughter's, which may refuse to recognize the person-hood of the mother and the value of her voice in the daughter's need to "smile and grow" into her own person.⁶⁵

The sestet of Sonnet 8 moves into a discussion of these problems on a universal and emotional level rather than a personal and poetic one:

And yet, methinks, sad mothers who for years,
 Watching the child pass forth that was their boast,
 Have counted all the footsteps by new fears
 Till even lost fears seem hopes whereof they're reft
 And of all mother's good love sole is left --
 Is their Love, Love, or some remembered ghost? (22)

The mother-poet removes herself from this sestet; she speaks of "sad mothers" generally, not specifically of herself and her relationship with her daughter, framing the sestet's concern as a potential state of affairs, not as a current or inevitable one. By admitting that the daughter has an independent mind, the mother has admitted to the possibility of the daughter becoming completely independent of her, as the mother-poet realizes that mothers must "[watch] the child pass forth" from the mothers' lives. At the very least, this "pass[ing] forth" is the physical growth and maturation of the child who will eventually become an adult and leave home. In leaving home, however, and possibly even before, the child may choose to "pass forth" emotionally, declaring his or her independence from the mother by refusing to acknowledge her as an independent subject. This rejection of the mother as a subject extends beyond the usual maturation and separation process which occurs in every parent-child relationship, as it involves refusing to admit the mother as a subject in her own right, in the same fashion that the mother-poet, in Sonnets 6-8, struggled with her own desire not to recognize the daughter's subjectivity. Because the intersubjective relationship needs the full involvement of both parties, this interpersonal abandoning of the mother by the child is just as debilitating for the mother as was the mother's idealizing of the child for the child. Without the other's acknowledgment of one's existence as an independent subject, one is objectified and marginalized. For these mothers bereft of their children's recognition, even the existence of the mother's love is called into question: "Is their Love, Love, or some remembered ghost?" The mother's love, thought by society to be the

constant element of a mother-child relationship, is threatened by the independent subjectivity of the child. The delicate balancing of recognition of a healthy intersubjective relationship breaks down again into an interplay of domination and subjugation, as the child's newly-acknowledged subjectivity may refuse to accord necessary recognition to the mother, effectively dominating the mother's subjectivity by denying its existence.

Sonnet 9 continues in the vein of Sonnet 8, examining the clash of the mothers' need for recognition and the children's independence. While Sonnet 9, like the sestet of Sonnet 8, begins as a broad generalization about motherhood, distanced from the mother herself, the mother-poet slowly brings herself back into the scenario. This tension within the mother-poet concerning her own position in this discussion of the marginalization of mothers, as she tentatively associates herself with them, indicates that, while she does not conclusively consider herself an outcast, neither does she conclusively deem herself to be different from these mothers. She is uncertain about the possible future of her relationship with her daughter, so is not able to either connect or disconnect herself from the abandoned mothers. The most apparent way the mother-poet tentatively aligns herself with the outcast mothers is through pronoun references. The "[p]oor mothers" of line 1 are referred to as "they" in lines 2-4; by lines 7 and 8, however, the mother-poet associates herself with the "[p]oor mothers" through the use of the pronoun "[w]e" (page 23). She calls attention to this pronoun shift further by prominently beginning line 7 with the new pronoun: "We are not yet forgetful of the morn." The mother-poet also associates herself with these outcast mothers and their plight through internal allusions to other aspects of the sequence. As the outcast mothers mourn "the frank childhood, . . . the lovable ways" of the departed children, these "frank" children recall the daughter's forthright reprimand to the mother in Sonnet 8, while the phrasing of "lovable ways" brings to mind the daughter's romps and

“young innocent ways” of Sonnet 4, the sonnet which most clearly foregrounds the young daughter’s subjectivity while downplaying the mother’s. The phrasing “not yet forgetful of the morn” hints at the association later in the sequence of the daughter with sunlight and dawn, as does “[s]tirring the ashes of remembered days / For yet some sparks to warm the livelong gloom.” These general laments for memory also become specific laments for memories associated with the daughter’s presence throughout the sequence. Not only do these poetic echoes in Sonnet 9’s lament for the departed children bring the mother-daughter relationship into the sonnet, they also more clearly cement the independence of the children’s subjectivities to their ultimate expression of that independence in rejecting the mother.

The two conclusions of Sonnets 8 and 9, that a mother’s love may not be immutable and that “outcast” mothers have only memories, are combined in the paired and titled Sonnets 10 (“Love’s Counterfeit”) and 11 (“Love’s Mourner”). These two sonnets deal less specifically with the mother-child relationship and more generally with misconceptions about love, but their placement immediately after the troubled Sonnets 8 and 9 suggests ways in which these sonnets relate to the larger question of mutual recognition in the sequence. In “Love’s Counterfeit,” Memory is personified as Love’s twin, Love’s “shadow that now stands for him in all” (page 24). Love is replaced by Memory, once “Love is asleep and smiling in his pall,” because Memory, unlike Love, “will not die.” Memory can counterfeit the dead love so well that a person can mistake her ““dim followers”” for a ““Love [that] pursues,”” not realizing that what she believes to be love is merely the memory of that love.

The reasons for this death of Love become clear in “Love’s Mourner”:

’Tis men who say that through all hurt and pain
 The woman’s love, wife’s, mother’s, still will hold,
 And breathes the sweeter and will more unfold

For winds that tear it, and the sorrowful rain.
 So in a thousand voices has the strain
 Of this dear patient madness been retold,
 That men call women's love. Ah! they are bold,
 Naming for love that grief which does remain.

Love faints that looks on baseness face to face:
 Love pardons all; but by the pardonings dies,
 With a fresh wound of each pierced through the breast.
 And there stand pityingly in Love's void place
 Kindness of household wont familiar-wise,
 And faith to Love -- faith to our dead at rest. (25)

The poem questions assumptions about love -- particularly a woman's love -- commonly held in the Victorian era (and in other ages as well),⁶⁶ challenging the validity of male knowledge of women's true emotions and questioning even the applicability of I Corinthians 13 to the batterings which a woman's love often undergoes. First, by debunking the notion of the immutability of women's love and the ability of their love to grow under adversity, the poem paves the way for accepting the notion, already suggested in Sonnet 8 and "Love's Counterfeit," that love is not unchanging, that love can die. Having established the falsity of idealized notions of women's love, the poem then examines the reasons for love's death. Love will die if it is only constantly giving out and never receiving in return, if it must weather storms without aid and "[look] on baseness face to face" without mediation, and if it "pardons all" unconditionally, without repentance in return. In essence, love cannot exist in an unequal relationship, a relationship of domination. Such constant giving results in the replacement of love by respect for the memory of that departed love, as the last line of the octave establishes. By examining the inevitable, if sometimes unrecognizable, results of unreciprocated love, these two poems establish the necessity of mutuality for love to continue to exist.

Looking back on Sonnets 8 and 9 from the vantage point of Sonnets 10 and 11, the relationship between the mother's fears of departed love and her potential dependency on memories become more clear. If the daughter exercises her newly-acquired subjectivity to its fullest extent, she may refuse to return the mother's love and recognition. This breakdown in the intersubjective relationship will ultimately lead to the death of the mother's love, leaving the mother with nothing but memories which themselves, "Love's Counterfeit" suggests, painfully refuse to die. More importantly, the mother would be unable to delude herself into thinking her love still existed; this knowledge is as devastating as the possible loss of love itself. The breakdown of intersubjectivity will also leave the mother with no one to recognize her as a mother. For the writer, her status as a mother is clearly as important to her as her role as a poet (as the existence of the sequence indicates), so being unaffirmed as a mother would be as devastating as the death of maternal love.

These fears, in spite of the mother-poet's hesitant inclusion of herself with the "outcast mothers" in Sonnet 9, are couched in conditional terms; they are what might be, not what is. As fears, they are legitimate in the abstract, but within the context of this specific relationship, the fears turn out to be groundless. The groundlessness of these fears of the daughter's rejection is established in the octave of Sonnet 8, through the daughter's words and actions. The daughter comes to the mother, claiming "However bad I were you'd love the same," and the mother acknowledges the veracity of her observation of the constancy of the mother's love. This affirmation of the mother's unchanging love, however, is not a contradiction of the conclusion of Sonnets 10 and 11, that love can die. The context of the affirmation is significant; it is the daughter's coming to the mother (for the second time in the sequence), her own seeking for a reciprocal relationship, which enables the mother's love to remain constant. It is not a love

required to be constantly giving, as in Sonnet 11, but it is a love receiving affirmation and recognition from the daughter in return. This pattern of exchange and interaction is repeated throughout earlier, and later, sonnets, establishing it rather than marginalization as the characteristic trait of this relationship. The daughter's own interest in maintaining the intersubjective relationship enables the fears of Sonnets 8-11 to be unwarranted and for the intensity of the intersubjective relationship, as seen in the sonnets examined in the previous chapter, to be maintained throughout the sequence.

If Sonnet 8 foreshadows the larger reasons for dismissing these fears, Sonnet 12 provides the immediate response to the issues voiced in Sonnets 8-11. Rather than allaying the fears of the preceding sonnets with a poem foregrounding the daughter's presence, however, Sonnet 12 replies in a much more subtle fashion. The daughter is conspicuous by her absence; through her own efforts, her own displays of love for the mother, however, the daughter's presence pervades the poem even through her absence. By positing that the daughter's affection is present even when she is inevitably physically distant, the mother-poet bridges the gap created between the daughter's need to exercise her own individuality, to be apart from the mother at times, and the mother's need for affirmation from the daughter.

She has made me wayside posies: here they stand,
 Bringing fresh memories of where they grew.
 As new-come travellers from a world we knew
 Wake every while some image of their land,
 So these whose buds our woodland breezes fanned
 Bring to my room the meadow where they blew,
 The brook-side cliff, the elms where wood-doves coo --
 And every flower is dearer for her hand.

Oh blossoms of the paths she loves to tread,
 Some grace of her is in all thoughts you bear:
 For in my memories of your homes that were
 The old sweet loneliness they kept is fled,

And would I think it back I find instead
 A presence of my darling mingling there. (26)

Although the daughter is physically absent, she has given the mother a nosegay; not only does this gift signify the daughter's thoughtfulness for the mother, but it also acts as a reminder of the daughter's investment in her relationship with her mother. The "wayside posies" then act as a stand-in for the absent daughter throughout the poem. They are personified as "travellers," imitating the daughter's own travels from house to woodland, and the speaker apostrophizes the flowers in the sestet in lieu of speaking to the daughter directly. The flowers also bring "some grace of her" with the memories they recall, so that the daughter's grace is present even in her absence. The final line of the octave, "[a]nd every flower is dearer for her hand," suggest not only the mother's affection for her daughter, as the mother finds the flowers "dear" or precious because the daughter gathered them, but also the daughter's affection for the mother, as the daughter has exerted effort to collect the "dear" or expensive (in terms of time and energy) flowers for her mother. The daughter's growing independence may take her away, physically, from the mother but she nevertheless returns, and makes an effort to remind the mother of her affection in her absence. And as the mother-poet ponders "some grace of her" in the daughter's absence, so does the daughter remember the mother when she is away, showing this remembrance through the act of gathering and presenting the nosegay. Although the flowers do replace the daughter, they signify the presence, not the absence, of the daughter in the mother's daily routine.

Even as the posies invoke the daughter's presence through association and memory, they also provide a way for the daughter not just to be in the mother's memory, but to infuse the mother's older memories with new life and associations. These "wayside posies" bring "fresh memories" of a spot already endeared to the mother, as she indicates by calling the place "a world

we knew” and referring to the breezes as “our woodland breezes” (emphasis added).

Significantly, the flowers do not recall past woodland romps, but instead they bring “fresh memories” (emphasis added). The mother-daughter relationship alters memory for the mother, so that it is no longer connected solely with the past and with absence, as is the case in Sonnets 9-10. The wooded spot, and the flowers therein, once invoked an “old sweet loneliness.” Now, because these “blossoms” now bear “some grace of [the daughter],” those memories of “old sweet loneliness . . . [have] fled;” no longer is memory the domain of loss and absence. Instead, memory is now infused with companionship and presence, as the “old sweet loneliness” of the mother’s memories is exchanged for the “presence of my daughter mingling there.” The daughter has not entirely replaced the mother’s memories, and thereby annihilated the mother’s past, but instead the two are “mingl[ed].” Just as the daughter’s voice and the mother’s poetry merge in Sonnet 1, without annihilating either, so does the presence of the daughter, even in absence, cause the mother to reframe the way she views memory. Not only does the daughter’s presence in the sequence enable the mother to view her love as constant, unlike the alternative voiced in Sonnet 11, but the daughter also helps the mother recuperate memory from the problems of Sonnet 10, and replaces its bittersweetness with new, fresh memories of the daughter’s presence and affection.

This group of sonnets exemplifies one of the strongest and most fascinating aspects of Webster’s sequence: a rich, introspective glimpse into the internal drama, the conflicting desires and tensions of motherhood, as the mother-poet explores the various modes of reacting to and interacting with the daughter. As compelling as this insight would be on its own, Webster’s mother-poet adds another layer of depth to her poetry by not simply presenting the problems of motherhood, but by also presenting some possible resolutions. By capitalizing on her ability to

juxtapose the experiences of objectifier and the objectified, and by examining methods of rectifying both unequal relationships, Webster's mother-poet introduces two novel ideas into the poetry of poet and object (whether the object be child or romantic beloved). The first is the inclusion of the daughter's words as a way to acknowledge her subjectivity, as already discussed in the previous chapter. Other poets have similarly included the other's words to allow other consciousnesses to penetrate their poems, so the second idea is perhaps even more novel than the first: acknowledging that the other must take an active role for the relationship, and as a result the poetry, to continue. The existence of most romantic sonnet sequences is dependent upon the beloved not taking action in the relationship (in extreme cases, such as with Laura and Beatrice, she cannot because she is dead), and much motherhood poetry posits, in contradiction to Webster's Sonnets 10 and 11, that the mother's love is capable of continuing long after the relationship has ended. To include the child/beloved as an active participant in the relationship and the poetry also problematizes the not-uncommon image of the lone poet inspired by Genius, an image both Letitia Elizabeth Landon, in her creation of her public persona, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in her creation of Aurora Leigh, capitalize on to legitimize their poetic endeavors. By positing poetry which is dependent not only on a relationship, but on the involvement of another self in the relationship, Webster's mother-poet distances herself from the concept of the poet as channel for inspiration, and instead posits an almost cooperative poetic endeavor.⁶⁷

Chapter 4: Linguistic Mutuality and the Completion of the Sequence

The sonnets discussed in the previous chapter suggest that both parties, mother-poet and daughter, must be actively involved in maintaining the relationship for the relationship to continue. The remainder of the sequence, particularly Sonnets 13-23, expands this mutuality to include the mother's poetic endeavors as well. The mutual recognition developed and displayed throughout the early poems of the sequence provides the foundation for the mother and daughter's linguistic interaction in the later sonnets. Just as the mother has gradually come to terms with the daughter's individual subjectivity, she must now accept the daughter's linguistic individuality as she deals with her own aging and the effect which aging has on her poetry. This complex interrelation of the mother's voice and aging with the daughter's voice and maturation was originally introduced in Sonnet 1; Sonnets 13-23 return to and expand upon these themes.

Sonnets 13-19 deal primarily with the issue of aging. The fact that this concern receives treatment in Sonnets 18 and 19 outside the direct realm of the mother-daughter relationship signals the centrality of age to the mother-poet, and further heightens the importance of the daughter's ability to help the mother revisualize her own maturation. In the rest of these aging sonnets, the mother's concern about her aging focuses less on issues of personal pride or physical appearance, but rather on the ramifications that her aging has on her relationship with her daughter and her own poetic voice. The inextricable intertwining of physical aging and the decline of the mother-poet's voice may best be explained from a biographical perspective, although the connection also makes certain poetic points. Webster's letter of September 1881, as she was leaving London for Italy, illustrates the strain which her respiratory illness placed on her

physically and how dealing with the illness interfered with her poetic responsibilities -- it took her a month to answer a simple request to anthologize some of Webster's poetry. The sharp decline in the number of reviews she wrote for the Athenaeum in the 1890s, when her illness was presumably at its peak, also suggests that her illness interrupted her literary career; more biographical information concerning Webster's illness may further illuminate the significance of this association. Webster may also be adapting the image frequently used by earlier nineteenth century women poets, that of the female poet's body being her instrument of song, best illustrated in Letitia Elizabeth Landon's "The Improvisatrice" and "A History of the Lyre," and extrapolating from that trope to its implications for an older woman-poet (a subject not broached by Landon). Of course, for Landon, this image was bound to the concept that a woman's poetry was an unmediated outpouring, and Webster's (and her mother-poet's) poetry is far from a gush of sensibility. That the woman poet's "song" or "breath" would be diminished by age would have been a particularly poignant concept for Webster, as she was fighting a respiratory disease herself which would have literally interfered with her breathing. In any case, the mother-poet certainly believes that her voice is negatively affected by her increasing age.

The daughter's voice in these aging sonnets enables the mother to move beyond her debilitating concern with her weakening poetic skills into a stronger, more productive voice. Sonnets 16, 17, and 20 move beyond discussions of the mother's aging to a more specific examination of the interaction between the mother's and daughter's voices. The youthful and innovative perspective of the daughter, valued for its freshness, is posited as the equal of the mother's own poetic voice because of its unlikeness to, and its influence upon, that of the mother. As the mother and daughter become linguistic equals in the world of the sequence, the sonnet sequence itself becomes no longer necessary. The strength of love felt within this relationship is

greater than can be expressed through poetry, as Sonnets 21-23 elaborate, so the sequence finds its end in the maturation of the linguistic relationship. The movement of Sonnets 13-23 serves to respond to the discontent with aging expressed in Sonnet 1 by positing a relationship of mutuality in language which proves more complete than the lamented youthful love-songs.

The interplay of voices in Sonnet 13 has already been treated in Chapter 2. Not only does this counterpoint highlight the importance of the daughter's individual voice to the mother, but it also emphasizes the mother's fears and concerns about her own poetic voice. The mother believes that her voice is "merely measure to the note and line" to the ear of an unbiased listener, that her voice is but prosaically common. The sestet reaffirms and details her fears for her aging voice:

Oh voice of mine that in some day not far
 Time, the strong creditor, will call his debt,
 Will dull – and even to her – will rasp and mar,
 Sing Time asleep because of her regret,
 Be twice thy life the thing her fancies are,
 Thou echo to the self she knows not yet. (27)

Although the daughter's belief in the power of the mother's voice helps the mother seek a higher goal for her voice, that goal is unattainable. The mother's desire to "[s]ing Time asleep" is clearly impossible, while the final line, "[t]hou echo to the self she knows not yet," posits another impossibility, for an echo cannot precede the sound. Although the mother's attitude toward her voice has shifted somewhat, in that she now presents an empowered voice rather than a weak one, the self-empowerment of her voice is undercut by the impossibility of the tasks she sets for it. While the mother's desire for her voice to attain new heights may stem from the daughter's opinions, the fulfillment of that desire is unlikely.

Sonnet 15 deals with the mother's perception of her own aging in more detail than Sonnet 13, as the mother continues to seek physical impossibilities for her daughter's sake. In the octave of Sonnet 15, the mother becomes reconciled to the hold which Death has over her, as it has over all people; her own death "seems no strangeness, but Death's natural hest."⁶⁸ Additionally, Death will specifically deprive the mother of her poetry, both her living, poetry-creating voice and her renown, as he "[s]hall hide me in the dark and voiceless mould" (emphasis mine), and as he "[s]hall make us nought where we are known the best." This demise of her voice is the natural extension of Sonnet 13's concern about the mediocrity of the mother's poetry, as Time causes her voice to "dull . . . [and] rasp and mar." The mother seems not to be bothered by the inevitability of death and the passing of her poetry; unlike Sonnet 13's reversal in the face of the ravages of Time, in Sonnet 15 death is "natural" and universal, as it "has us all for jest."

This resignation to death, however, does not extend past her own life and poetry. In the sestet, the mother cannot admit this "natural hest" for her daughter:

But looking on the dawn that is her face
 To know that she too is Death's seems misbelief;
 She should not find decay, but, as the sun
 Moves mightier from the veil that hides his place,
 Keep ceaseless radiance. Life is Death begun:
 But Death and her! That's strangeness passing grief. (29)

Although the mother had reconciled herself to the universal nature of death, she cannot include her daughter in that group of mortals. Indeed, the mother wishes immortality for her daughter; she ought not to belong to Death, as the rest of the world does in the octave, and her death seems "misbelief," heresy of an undefined creed. The daughter is linked with the rising sun, both by equating her visage with the dawn in the first line of the sestet and through the simile in the following lines.⁶⁹ Just as the simile does not admit to the possibility of the setting sun, essentially

positing an astronomical impossibility, so does the mother wish for a biological impossibility for her daughter, that “[s]he should not find decay,” but that she (and the never-setting sun) should “[k]eep ceaseless radiance.”

This desire to immortalize the daughter, almost to make her a goddess worthy of worship, looks suspiciously like another form of objectification by the mother, similar to that of Sonnets 6-8. In some ways, it is. The mother is attempting to live on vicariously through her daughter, to attain her own immortality through her offspring.⁷⁰ Although sonnets have a long association with immortality -- the closing couplet of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 and D.G. Rossetti's "A Moment's Monument" providing two salient examples -- Webster's mother-poet does not associate her own sonnets anywhere in the sequence with their ability to extend her fame beyond her death. Rather, Sonnet 15's lines "[f]orgotten things that leave their track untold / As in the August night the sky's dropped gold" suggests rather that the mother and her "things," all of her life's work (not just her poetry), will fade away with the sunset of her own life.⁷¹ As she does not foresee immortality coming to her through her poetry, this biological form of immortality is doubly important for the mother-poet. To have the evidence of her maternity live on proves a tantalizing substitute for the death of her poetic voice. In any case, the mother's wish for her daughter's immortality is not in the daughter's best interests. Instead, it betrays a self-centeredness on the part of the mother as she again neglects to consider her daughter as an independent being.

The structural and thematic similarities between Sonnets 13 and 15 may also help to elucidate the cause of this new form of objectification. Both sonnets begin, in the octave, with the mother discussing her own waning life, either poetic or physical, and finish in the sestet with a desire to somehow turn the physical world upside-down for the daughter's sake. Yet the need to

invert the natural order comes from different sources in each sonnet and ends in differing results. In Sonnet 13, the daughter's own voice takes up half of the octave, while the entirety of the octave of Sonnet 15 deals solely with the mother's introspective concerns over her own aging, with no mention of the daughter. Although in both sestet the mother desires change because of the daughter, in Sonnet 13 the desired change is to her voice -- on one level, the mother's poetry -- which becomes (theoretically) more powerful as the result of the daughter's voiced beliefs in the previous octave, as discussed in Chapter 2. Both mother, as the poet, and daughter, as the one affected by the poetry, could benefit from the empowerment of the mother's voice, were that empowerment able to be realized. The mother benefits through the strengthening of her poetic powers, receiving that which she wishes for; the daughter benefits as the strengthened mother's voice will better be able to penetrate and "divine" the daughter. If the mother's voice can be "echo to the self she knows not yet," it can be so attuned to the daughter's development that it can prefigure the mature woman embedded in the youthful girl. In Sonnet 15, however, the desired change does not better either the daughter or the mother; the mother may feel comforted by the thought of her daughter's immortality, but that thought betters neither the mother nor the daughter, nor their relationship.

The recurring address to impossibilities in these two sonnets implies a hopelessness on the part of the mother; the only solutions she can find for her weakening poetic voice and aging self are impossible ones, suggesting that she sees no viable resolution for these issues. The reasons for this seeming hopelessness, working still in the intersubjective framework, are more readily apparent in Sonnet 15. For Sonnet 15, the continual self-centeredness of the mother and her desires would almost necessarily result in dissatisfaction. In Sonnet 13, on the other hand, the interplay of voices in the octave and the balancing of tensions between these two opposing

viewpoints would seem to indicate a mutual interplay which would result in some sort of hope for the mother. In spite of the mother's dedication in this sonnet to recognizing the daughter's independent subjectivity, however, the mother still takes the burden of the action upon herself. She calls upon her voice alone, not a combination of her own and her daughter's voices, to negate the effects of aging and time. Although the mother in Sonnet 13 admits to the importance of the daughter's subjectivity and voice in their relationship, she has not yet taken the next step in admitting the necessity of the daughter's voice to her own poetic endeavors. So, while Sonnet 13's inclusion of the daughter's voice provides for a potentially more satisfactory outcome than Sonnet 15, that potential cannot be realized as the daughter's voice is not included in the rejuvenating agenda. As the following poems will show, only when the mother moves beyond allowing the daughter's voice into her poetry and allows the daughter to influence the rejuvenation and recreation of the mother's poetic voice itself, will these hopelessly impossible visions be replaced by workable poetic strategies.

The mother first allows the daughter's voice to assist her poetry in Sonnet 16. This sonnet continues the sun imagery of Sonnet 15, as the aging mother is associated with the setting sun, while the daughter is the sun at its zenith:

She will not have it that my day wanes low,
 Poor of the fire its drooping sun denies,
 That on my brow the thin lines write good-byes
 Which soon may be read plain for all to know,
 Telling that I have done with youth's brave show;
 Alas! and done with youth in heart and eyes,
 With wonder and with far expectancies,
 Save but to say "I knew such long ago."

She will not have it. Loverlike to me,
 She with her happy gaze finds all that's best,
 She sees this fair and that unfretted still,
 And her own sunshine over all the rest:

So she half keeps me as she'd have me be,
And I forget to age, through her sweet will. (30)

The “drooping sun” and “day wan[ing] low” as descriptions of the aging mother recall the image in Sonnet 15 comparing the fading away of the mother to “the August night[’s] sky’s dropped gold,” while both of these sunset images contrast with Sonnet 15’s description of “the dawn that is [the daughter’s] face” and Sonnet 16’s description of the daughter’s “own sunshine” that she sees shining over the aging mother. These images securely link Sonnet 16 to the self-centered intersubjective lapse of Sonnet 15, as does the similarity in tone of the octave: Sonnet 16’s octave also intones a lament, if less resigned than that of Sonnet 15, to the mother’s passing youth and pending death. The linking of these sonnets expands upon the connection, hinted at in Sonnet 15, between the mother and the poetry, and also shows the importance of the role of the daughter for rejuvenating the mother, keeping the mother from the self-centeredness of Sonnet 15, and by extension reinvigorating the mother’s poetic voice.

The image following that of the sunset, the “thin lines writ[ing] good-byes,” suggests that, as the lines of age crease the mother-poet’s brow, they are writing on her, or even writing (creating) her, recasting both the physical appearance and the written, poetical self-expression of the mother-poet. The woman poet’s body and her poetic abilities are often described as being linked or interconnected.⁷² As these age lines refigure or rewrite the mother-poet’s physical body in ways beyond her control, they also prevent her from writing herself, from creating herself through words and poetry by taking control of her poetic self-expression. Finally, the mother-poet foregrounds this over-writing of her self by age through directly quoting the words of the “thin lines” in the last line of the octave, “I knew such long ago.”” Instead of emphasizing either the daughter’s subjectivity or the mother’s own personal concerns with the quotation, the

mother highlights the words of the “thin lines” of age. The mother’s own subjectivity and poetic voice are thus actively replaced by the voice which the thin lines impose upon her; the mother does not merely claim that her voice is impeded by age, but also shows age’s voice impinging upon her poetry.

The age which threatens the mother’s poetic autonomy is seemingly neutralized by the presence of the daughter in the poem. The poet repeats “She will not have it” at the beginnings of the octave and the sestet, foregrounding the daughter’s desires rather than just those of the mother. The daughter’s “happy gaze,” her desire to keep the mother “as she’d have me be,” takes an active role in rejuvenating the mother. This rejuvenation process occurs in stages, for the initial neutralization of age occurs only in the daughter’s perspective; she “sees” only the “fair” and “unfretted” aspects of the mother which she wishes to see. Nevertheless, the daughter’s gaze does more than just reflect her own viewpoint. By “find[ing] all that’s best,” the daughter redirects the mother’s attention toward her “fair” attributes. Additionally, the daughter sees “her own sunshine over all the rest;” those aging aspects which the daughter cannot overlook, those “thin lines [that] write good-byes,” are obliterated by the brilliancy of the daughter’s own youth. The image is striking, and indicative of the interplay between mother and daughter. Generally, sunshine does not hide, but rather illuminates. Instead of obliterating the signs of the mother’s aging by casting a shadow over her and hiding the lines in semi-darkness, essentially effacing the mother and her lines of age with the daughter’s youth, the daughter illuminates the lines of age. But this illuminating, at least in the daughter’s eyes, does hide the lines that attempt to overwrite the mother. By laying her own youth over the mother’s signs of age, the daughter does not enshadow the mother by supplanting the mother’s subjectivity with her own, but rather, the sunshine seem to fill in the creases in the mother’s face. Both the light of the daughter’s

subjectivity and the mother's own wrinkle-less self coexist, and while the daughter's age-defying sunshine is necessary to the mother, it does not efface the mother's own subjectivity.

This viewpoint of the daughter, which refuses to recognize the aging lines which attempt to re-write the mother, actively prevents the mother from aging: "she half keeps me as [she would] have me be, / and I forget to age, through her sweet will" (emphasis mine). The daughter's perspective on the mother becomes more than just her opinion; it becomes reality as the daughter "keeps" the mother "fair" and "unfretted." By refusing to believe that her mother is aging, and by reorienting the mother's perspective toward her "unfretted" aspects, the daughter enables the mother to ignore the aging lines, to "forget to age." By seeing the mother "as she'd have me be," the daughter effectively alters reality. Active as the daughter's role is, however, she does not play the lone role in rejuvenating the mother; the daughter "half keeps" the mother young, while the other half of the effort is the mother's, as she "forget[s] to age." The balancing of desires and effort here is maintained, and neither overpowers the other; nevertheless, the daughter still plays the most prominent role, as it is the daughter's "sweet will" which enables the mother to forget her aging. Furthermore, as the daughter helps rejuvenate the mother, she is also enabling the mother's poetry. If the mother's poetry is threatened by the aging process, and the daughter helps to forestall that process, then the daughter has, by extension, helped to remove the threat and enable the mother's voice once again.

This combination of actions is the greatest difference from Sonnet 13, and it illustrates how the daughter enables the mother to bypass those "impossible" solutions which were the mother's only hope before. There are superficial similarities between Sonnets 16 and 13; the mother and daughter's opinions are set in opposition in the octaves of both sonnets, and both sonnets differentiate between the mother's and daughter's viewpoints. Although this

differentiation provides the structure for Sonnet 13, it is emphasized more strongly in Sonnet 16, as it is the daughter's actual "happy gaze," her literal sight or view, which "sees this fair and that unfretted still." In Sonnet 13, the daughter does not actively assist the mother's changing of her poetry. The daughter's desires are a catalyst, but it is the mother who attempts to do all the changing for the daughter's sake. In Sonnet 16, on the other hand, the daughter now takes an active role. By giving the daughter space within the poem, not just to voice her opposing opinion, but to affect the mother, the mother does not merely accord authority the daughter. Instead, she is empowered herself, able to find (through the daughter's assistance) feasible solutions to the issues of age and decline.

The daughter's ability to infuse the mother's poetry with new life is further explained in Sonnet 17. Here, the ways in which the daughter's youth and individual perspective can aid the mother's poetic endeavors are clearly laid out:

And how could I grow old while she's so young?
 Methinks her heart sets time for mine to beat,
 We are so near; her new thoughts, incomplete,
 Find their shaped wording happen on my tongue;
 Like bloom on last year's winterings newly sprung
 My youth upflowers with hers, and must repeat
 Old joyaunces in me nigh obsolete.
 Could I grow older while my child's so young?

And there are tales how youthful blood instilled
 Thawing frore Age's veins gave life new course,
 And quavering limbs and eyes made indolent
 Grew freshly eager with beginning force:
 She so breathes impulse. Were my years twice spent,
 Not burdening Age, with her, could make me chilled. (31)

The daughter can influence the very rhythm of the mother's poetry ("her heart sets time for mine to beat") in addition to the mother-poet's words and ideas. The daughter's thoughts are characterized as "new" and "incomplete." As a child or young woman, the daughter's initial

responses to life's experiences result in the fresh and new ideas of youth. Furthermore, the daughter's ideas are also "new" to the mother in that the daughter approaches a situation differently than the mother, so that as the daughter explains her perspective, as she has done in Sonnets 13 and 16, the mother finds those ideas "new" to her. Yet the daughter's thoughts are also "incomplete." As a child, she still does not have the experience to be able to fully express or develop her "new thoughts."

In spite of, or perhaps because of, this inability to articulate, the mother still finds the daughter's unique viewpoint to be inspirational, as the mother takes her daughter's "new thoughts" and shapes them in her own words. This adoption may appear as though the mother is appropriating the daughter's ideas because of the daughter's inexperience. However, the simile in the following line, "[l]ike bloom on last year's winterings," explains more precisely how this mother-daughter interaction occurs.⁷³ The mother provides "last year's winterings," the mature wood needed to support full articulation, while the daughter's new and fresh thoughts, like the spring which encourages the shrub to bloom, provides the impetus for the mother to "repeat / Old joyaunces," to blossom again from her old and worn perspective. The mother "repeats" these joyful experiences in that she experiences them again through the daughter, and in that she can now "repeat" or re-articulate those experiences. Her lament in Sonnet 1, that "[t]oo soon the spring bird learns the later song," is belied by Sonnet 17, as the daughter enables the mother to move beyond singing her "later song" of experience and to re-sing springtime "joyaunces." This combination of the freshness of her daughter's youthful viewpoint and the maturity of the mother-poet's own experience is necessary to achieve this poetic blooming. The mother's linguistic maturity, her ability to express her ideas more completely than her daughter, does not lead her merely to appropriate unilaterally her daughter's ideas. Rather, by writing the poem

itself, the mother is giving credit to her daughter for the influence which the daughter's own subjective viewpoint has had on the mother's poetry.

The influence of the daughter on the mother's poetry is more clearly explored in the sestet. The initial lines of the sestet keep a sharp distance between the actual experience of the mother and far-off, amorphous "tales" in which these biologically questionable practices occur. Nevertheless, the images of "youthful blood" quickening "frore Age's veins" and reversing the aging process recall the springtime quickening of the blossoming simile of the octave. Significantly, this time the metaphor concerns written stories of such an occurrence, linking these tales subtly to the mother's own telling of youth's influence over age in her sonnet sequence.

Line 13 brings these past, perhaps dubious tales into the present sharply and suddenly: "She so breathes impulse." The daughter's breath -- her voice -- becomes the central revivifying element in the mother's "tale," where the life-giving force in the old stories was "youthful blood." The link between the old stories and the present one is further strengthened in the last line, where the inability of "burdening Age" to make the mother "chilled" recalls the "frore Age's veins" of earlier in the sestet. As the daughter's breath rather than her blood, however, is the significant change from the old tales, it also proves to be more powerful than the "youthful blood," since the mother could not be chilled now even if her "years [were] twice spent." The daughter's voice, her "new thoughts" and unique perspective, provide even more revivifying power for the mother than mere biological youthfulness could offer.

Like Sonnet 17, Sonnet 20 uses the daughter's voice as a central image, focusing on its fresh influence over the mother's poetry. Sonnet 20, however, shifts its emphasis to the social and poetical innovation suggested by this kind of influence, as it begins by setting up the traditional dichotomy between an authoritative mother and a submissive child:

There's one I miss. A little questioning maid
 That held my finger, trotting by my side,
 And smiled out of her pleased eyes open wide,
 Wondering and wiser at each word I said.
 And I must help her frolics if she played,
 And I must feel her trouble if she cried;
 My lap was hers past right to be denied;
 She did my bidding, but I more obeyed.

Dearer she is to-day, dearer and more;
 Closer to me, since sister womanhoods meet;
 Yet, like poor mothers some long while bereft,
 I dwell on toward ways, quaint memories left,
 I miss the approaching sound of pit-pat feet,
 The eager baby voice outside my door. (34)

The inexperience of the daughter is shown as she seeks the knowledge which the mother can give her. The images of the little girl “trotting by [the mother's] side,” holding her mother’s finger and looking at the world with wide-eyed curiosity, provide a quintessential image of a young child. Furthermore, the characterization of the daughter as a “little questioning maid” with an “eager baby voice” recalls the “incomplete” thoughts of the daughter in Sonnet 17, suggesting a linguistic immaturity on the part of the young daughter which accompanies her lack of knowledge. The mother appears as an authority figure here, whose words make the daughter “[w]ondering and wiser” and who possesses the knowledge which the daughter lacks. These traditional parent-child roles, as seen in the didactic poems mentioned in Chapter 2, are common in motherhood poetry, as the mother-poet consciously places herself within a specific tradition.

Yet the sestet problematizes these traditional roles, as the mother’s return to her memories of her daughter’s childhood in the last three lines alters the reading suggested by the octave. The sestet’s phrase “approaching sound of pit-pat feet” recalls the “[w]ondering and wiser” daughter of the octave, for the daughter is not only coming closer to her mother in a physical or spatial sense, but as a child she is also approaching the mother in knowledge and wisdom. Additionally,

the “eager baby voice” suggests the “questioning” daughter of the first line who is eager for the answers to her queries. It is this “approaching” “baby voice,” the child not yet fully formed intellectually or linguistically, whom the mother misses, as is shown by bracketing the sonnet with “[t]here’s one I miss” in the first line and “I miss the . . . sound” in the thirteenth line. The mother values this child’s perspective because it is “outside my door.” In one sense, the child is outside the door of a Woolf-like “Room of One’s Own,” the woman poet’s private working area. To put it more figuratively, and less anachronistically, the daughter is beyond the realm of the mother-poet’s experiences and thought patterns; the child’s voice and subjectivity exist outside the space in which the poet thinks and writes. In either case, the child’s voice, with its unformed and thus unconventional perspective, provides the mother with a fresh viewpoint, one which she cannot access within herself.

Not only does the mother miss her young daughter’s unique perspective, but the poem also suggests that the mother integrates this perspective into her poetry, in contrast to traditional sonnet sequences in which the beloved’s individuality is shown to have little direct influence over the creation of the poem. The mother “dwell[s]” on these memories, not merely remembering them in passing; this contemplation of her daughter’s childhood and youthful voice has resulted in the composition of the current sequence. The daughter, even in childhood, is therefore presented as the mother’s linguistic counterpart; her unique perspective, although her “new thoughts [are] incomplete” as Sonnet 17 states, provides a needed antidote to the entropy which accompanies the mother’s linguistic maturity. While the mother may have traditional, authoritative answers to the daughter’s questions, the daughter’s voice and viewpoint provide a fresh alternative to the mother’s standard thought patterns, so the daughter is able to provide a revivifying influence for the mother’s poetry.

This valuing of the daughter's youthful perspective was also prefigured in Sonnet 14; although this sonnet echoes the tendency toward objectification that occurs in Sonnets 6-8, 13, and 15, the focus of that objectification recalls the preference for the daughter's youth which governs later sonnets such as Sonnet 20.

To love her as to-day is so great bliss
 I needs must think of morrows almost loth,
 Morrows wherein the flower's unclosing growth
 Shall make my darling other than she is.
 The breathing rose excels the bud I wis,
 Yet bud that will be rose is sweet for both;
 And by-and-by seems like some later troth
 Named in the moment of a lover's kiss.

Yes, I am jealous, as of one now strange
 That shall instead of her possess my thought,
 Of her own self made new by any change,
 Of her to be by ripening morrows brought.
 My rose of women under later skies!
 Yet, ah! my child with the child's trustful eyes! (28)

The image of the unfolding rose bud in the octave links this poem back to Sonnet 7 and its desire to keep the daughter static. This link is continued in the sestet through two of the three given loci for the mother's jealousy of the mature daughter-to-be: she is jealous of the daughter's "self made new by any change" and the daughter's maturing "by ripening morrows brought." The first of the three causes for jealousy, and the most thoroughly treated, differs significantly from this theme, and links instead to Sonnet 20 and 13. The mother is jealous of the mature, future daughter ("one now strange") who shall, instead of the youthful, current daughter, "possess my thought," receive and understand the mother's ideas and poetry. That the mother should prefer her youthful daughter to a mature daughter as an auditor and interpreter suggests Sonnet 20's appreciation of the difference and distance of youth. Additionally, the phrase "possess my thought" implies more than just a hearing of or familiarity with the mother's poetry; it indicates

that the daughter embraces the mother's voice in a fuller manner. Sonnet 13 provides an example of the daughter's adoption of the mother's poetry, as the daughter claims that the mother's poetry "could search me and divine." If the daughter in Sonnet 13 is an ideal auditor, one who is completely in tune with the mother's poetic expression, Sonnet 14 suggests that the youthful daughter, not the mature one, fills this role as the mother-poet's perfect audience. Although the mature daughter will certainly be valued for her linguistic abilities in the later sonnets, Sonnet 14's leaning toward objectification shows just how valuable the younger daughter's perspective is for the mother-poet.

Several of the recurring themes of the sequence have been thoroughly addressed by this point in the progression of sonnets. The mother-poet no longer worries about her aging and its subsequent effects on her poetry; the daughter's subjective viewpoint and her accompanying youthfulness and immaturity have been embraced by the mother. The following poems, Sonnets 21-23, take the next logical step for both the mother-daughter relationship and the mother's poetic development: the linguistic mutuality of mother and daughter, and what that mutuality means for the progression of the sequence itself, end simultaneously in a bowing to the limitations of language.

Sonnet 21 picks up on the linguistic maturation of the daughter in Sonnet 20 and develops the implications of that maturation, and of the mutual recognition between mother and daughter, for the relationship. As linguistic peers and equals within the relationship, the mother and daughter are able to communicate on a new level:

Hardly in any common tender-wise,
 With petting talk, light lips on her dear cheek,
 The love I mean my child will bear to speak,
 Loth of its own less image for disguise;
 But liefer will it floutingly devise,

Using a favourite jester's mimic pique,
 Prompt, idle, by-names with their sense to seek,
 And takes for language laughing ironies.

But she, as when some foreign tongue is heard,
 Familiar on our lips and closely known,
 We feel the every purport of each word
 When ignorant ears reach empty sound alone,
 So knows the core within each merry gird,
 So gives back such a meaning in her own.

The mother rejects "common," "petting talk" love-expressions in speaking of her love to her daughter, for those common expressions can be but love's "own less image," a pale imitation of the thing itself. The love felt between mother and daughter is greater than words are able to

express, and any attempt to signify this love with the usual range of love-words will diminish the greatness of the mother-daughter affection, for the use of those usual love-words will suggest (as Sonnet 23 will explain in greater detail) that the mother-daughter love reaches but to the limited extent that those words can signify. So, in order to bypass the problems of signification inherent in language, the mother chooses instead words which are not, in common parlance, supposed to signify love: "Prompt, idle, by-names with their sense to seek." If these "by-names" do not immediately suggest a love relationship, as "petting talk" does, then the daughter must "seek" to discover or decode the meaning which the mother has "floutingly devise[d]" in these words.

Through the effort expended in the decoding process, the daughter must ponder more deeply the intended meaning of the words, and the threat to the expression of the enormity of the mother-daughter love posed by the simplistic associations of "petting talk" with love is avoided.

The sestet broadens the scope of the sonnet's examination of language games. The intricacy of this game the mother and daughter play is indicated by the simile comparing the mother-poet's "by-names" with "some foreign tongue." The foreignness of the private

love-language further emphasizes the unconventionality of this approach to affectionate expression. Although this language is “[f]amiliar on our lips and closely known,” it renders only “empty sound” to “ignorant ears” unversed in the mother and daughter’s private love-speak. The use of only two rhymes in this sestet further emphasizes the closed dyadic nature of this aspect of the mother and daughter’s linguistically-based relationship, which in its intimacy has no need of a third party. Furthermore, the mother and daughter do not simply understand the general meaning indicated by the other’s encoding; they both understand “the every purport of each word,” comprehending the intricacies and nuances of the levels of meaning imbedded in their language.

Both the mother and daughter are linguistically adept, skilled in this private jesting code which is too complex to be casually deciphered by “ignorant ears.”

The daughter’s ability to play these language games proficiently is also indicated in the sestet. Not only does the mother create these “laughing ironies” to represent her love for her daughter, but the daughter is also able to decode and encode this love-language. The very fact that the mother is able to encode so elaborately her love, and expect the daughter to grasp the meaning therein, suggests that the mother and daughter must be linguistic peers. The daughter “knows the core within each merry gird,” picking out the substance from the jesting exterior language which masks the mother’s true meaning. Additionally, the daughter can also encode in this private and complex language herself. She can “[give] back such a meaning,” the pithy center of an expression of love, inside “her own” “merry gird[s],” her own formulation of this masking language. Not only can the daughter decode and encode, but her encodings are “her own”; they are not imitations or derivations of the mother’s own linguistic endeavors, but they are uniquely and representatively the daughter’s. The daughter who, in Sonnets 17 and 20, was valued for her

difference in immaturity, is now valued for her difference in linguistic equality with the mother.

Each are possessed of equal skill, but each can encode her "merry gird" in "her own" fashion.

The concerns about the expression of love voiced in Sonnet 21 are continued in Sonnet 23, but ultimately with a different outcome. Both open with a distrust of "petting talk," but while Sonnet 21 proposes to replace "petting talk" with a complex linguistic game in which the distance between the signifier and the signified is intentionally large, Sonnet 23 proposes to do away with language and its inabilities altogether:

Birds sing "I love you, love" the whole day through,
 And not another song can they sing right;
 But, singing done with, loving's done with quite,
 The autumn sunders every twittering two,
 And I'd not have love make too much ado
 With sweet parades of fondness and delight,
 Less iterant wont should make caresses trite,
 Love-names mere cuckoo ousters of the true.

Oh heart can hear heart's sense in senseless nought,
 And heart that's sure of heart has little speech.
 What shall it tell? The other knows its thought.
 What shall one doubt or question or beseech
 Who is assured and knows and, unbesought,
 Possesses the dear trust that each gives each. (37)

The opening image, of birds singing their love to each other, hearkens back to the first sonnet, in which the "dear voice" of both the daughter's and mother's poetry are equated to the trilling birds who sing "because the spring is here." Where the first sonnet praises the spring song of the birds and laments its passing, and the passing of the youthful song of the poet's voice, Sonnet 23 questions the value of this song. The line, "[b]ut, singing done with, loving's done with quite," reverses the expected order; one might expect that the end of love would result in the end of the love-song, not the other way around.⁷⁴ This reversal of expectations suggests that, for those whose love must be expressed through song, the love cannot extend past the end of the song

itself, criticizing love which is dependent upon the verbal expression of that love in order to maintain its existence. This problematizes the value system expressed in the first sonnet, and the value system which has implicitly governed the entirety of the sonnet sequence to this point.

The sequence, and even the poet herself, is implicitly criticized in this image, for she, like the birds, has been singing a love song throughout the sequence. The poet who can write only of the spring and of love, the poet who can “not another song . . . sing right,” is limited by this love-obsession. The poetry of love, sung to excess, keeps the poet from expressing herself in other areas. Yet the poet also subtly defends herself in this image, for she has not sung merely of love, but also of age, maturity, and poetry, suggesting that she is able to sing “another song” right, and therefore is capable of criticizing the narrowly-focused love song. Nevertheless, the overriding criticism of the love song suggests that the problems inherent in the birds’ love song are also inherent in the sequence; the sonnet’s sestet will amplify the nature of these issues and their relationship to the sequence as a whole.

The second quatrain of the octave continues in the same vein as Sonnet 21. The poet fears “sweet parades of fondness and delight,” the “petting talk” of Sonnet 21, for the same reasons; words can only be love’s “less image,” and the repetition of those words can but “make caresses trite.” Ultimately, the naming of an ineffable love with lesser, insufficient words has the same result as a cuckoo’s nesting habits;⁷⁵ the original, the true, is replaced with a lesser imitation. And, as a cuckoo’s offspring are raised alongside the original chicks and eventually completely displace the parents’ own fledglings, so may this lesser, imitation love not be differentiated from the real thing, just as Memory is mistaken for Love in Sonnet 10 and “[k]indness of household” replaces Love entirely in Sonnet 11.

Sonnet 23 is also engaged in a response to Sonnets from the Portuguese 21. Webster's mother-poet repeats both the overall theme of the signifying power of love-language and the more precise image of the cuckoo, but comes to a different conclusion, for Barrett Browning's speaker needs the "sweet parades of fondness and delight":

Say over again, and yet once over again,
 That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
 Should seem "a cuckoo-song," as thou dost treat it,
 Remember, never to the hill or plain,
 Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain
 Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.
 Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted
 By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt's pain
 Cry, "Speak once more -- thou lovest!" Who can fear
 Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,
 Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?
 Say thou dost love me, love me, love me -- toll
 The silver iterance! -- only minding, Dear,
 To love me also in silence with thy soul. (3:237)

Barrett Browning's speaker praises, even needs, an influx of love-language; her five-time repetition of "love me," plus the echo "thou lovest," provides just such an image of over-expression that Webster's mother-poet distrusts as "iterant wont." Barrett Browning's speaker, too, recognizes the potential problems with such a "cuckoo-song." By considering the cuckoo a necessary part of the Spring which stands in contrast to the darkness of "doubt's pain," the cuckoo-song here stands as an answer to that doubt, by associating the cuckoo with its song rather than its nesting habits. Although the speaker also asks the beloved "[t]o love me also in silence with thy soul," as Webster's mother-poet echoes, this silence stands in addition to the repetition of love-language. For Barrett Browning's speaker, the silent love and the over-expressed love are two aspects, both necessary, for the relationship which she describes.

The sestet of Mother and Daughter 23, however, counters Barrett Browning's formulation and also swerves from the resolution found by Mother and Daughter 21. Instead of advocating a deliberate attempt to re-create signification through unexpected means as in Sonnet 21, or pairing prolixity with reserve as Barrett Browning does, Sonnet 23 advocates silence, stating that language, in a relationship as stable as that of the mother and daughter, is unnecessary. Silence as a means of expressing love was already explored in Sonnet 22; while new lovers are compared to the "stream's jubilant gush," just the overflowing of the expression of love which Barrett Browning's speaker requests, the love shared between mother and child is likened to a mountain lake's "[s]ilence of waters" (page 36). Because a mother and child can "[learn] not nor forget" their love, because their love is preexistent at the moment of birth and cannot therefore be forgotten (even if their love can die, as Sonnets 10-11 show), they find "the tarn's strong hush" to be more representative of their love than the brook's "triumphing sound." The sestet of Sonnet 23 expands upon this metaphor, explaining how the mother-child relationship works in such a fashion that speech is unnecessary, even detrimental. Two persons in a truly stable relationship, in which "heart [is] sure of heart," have no need of speech, for "the other knows its thought." This intertwining of two individuals is again suggested structurally through the two-rhyme sestet, as the dyadic rhyme scheme echoes the dyadic, intimate relationship.

Significantly, however, there are qualifications to the unnecessary nature of words. Only one who "is assured and knows and, unbesought, / Possesses the dear trust that each gives each," is able to "hear heart's sense in senseless nought." Stability and trust in a relationship are necessary for this speechless communication to work. This stability in a relationship is the point at which Webster's sonnet differs from Barrett Browning; for Barrett Browning's speaker, the repeated love-language replies to the doubt to which the speaker refers in line 8, while for

Webster's mother-poet, the doubt surrounding the relationship had been dealt with earlier in the sequence. Looking back to Sonnet 1 from the vantage point of Sonnet 23 and Sonnets from the Portuguese 21, the interdependency of Spring with bird-song -- for Barrett Browning, specifically the cuckoo-song -- and the doubt which seems to accompany that springtime youth suggest that, within a young relationship which is still characterized at points by doubt and questioning, the repetition of love-words, the poetic projects which both Barrett Browning and Webster have undertaken, are a necessary and appropriate response to the questions which accompany a not yet fully mature relationship. The relationship of mutual recognition that has now been established in Webster's sequence, however, precludes the kind of questioning and doubt which make necessary the expression of love through language.

In this way, then, the endpoint of Webster's sequence and the maturation of the relationship are achieved through this poem. The sequence has been the mother-poet's working out of the relationship, as she comes to terms with the daughter's growing independence and maturing subjectivity, and the ramifications which the daughter's developments have for her and for her poetry. Many of the poems have been ones in which the mother has "doubt[ed] or question[ed] or beseech[ed]" as she has struggled with the recognition of her daughter's independent subjectivity and her own aging self and declining poetic voice. As the relationship between the mother and daughter achieves the level of mutual recognition which results in a stable understanding of "dear trust," however, the need for these poems as a working-through process has passed. If the proper place of poetry, particularly love-poetry, is in those relationships where the love and trust is not assured, as both Barrett Browning and Webster suggest, then this sequence, with its mutual recognition and mutual trust, is completed. The four sonnets that follow Sonnet 23 deal with the world's perception of this mother-daughter dyad, and the mother's

reaction to that perception, rather than with the relationship itself. While these sonnets display a mother who is confident in her motherhood and her relationship with her daughter, and will be discussed in the conclusion as the completion of the sequence, they stem from, rather than culminate, the mutuality of the mother-daughter relationship. In many ways, then, Sonnet 23 and its silencing of the bird-song provides a fitting resolution to the aspects of sequence begun by the springtime song in Sonnet 1, particularly those aspects which examine the interplay of the voices and subjectivities of the mother and daughter.

Conclusion

“My heart gives all youth fostering”: Taking the Sequence Into the World

The mother and daughter interaction may be wrapped up in the conclusion of Sonnet 23, but the sequence does continue for another four sonnets. These sonnets provide a coda to the main thrust of the sequence, acknowledging that the mother-daughter relationship does not exist in a vacuum but rather, as has already been hinted in Sonnet 21, occurs within a larger context of social expectations of parenting. Specifically, the mother-poet addresses the assumptions that a woman ought to be a mother of a large brood, and that having only one child could not be fulfilling. This social contextualization, even in a lyric sequence, should not be surprising for Webster's readers, as her dramatic monologues, dramas, and journalistic essays focus on the kinds of social assumptions explored in these last sonnets. By placing her relationship with the daughter in its larger Victorian social context, the mother-poet reaffirms, in the face of social pressure, the mutuality which has been so painstakingly developed in the course of the sequence.

The final four sonnets act as a coda in that they address the ramifications of this mother-daughter relationship for the mother's interaction with society at large. Although the mother does address the child directly in Sonnet 26, the sonnets are all concerned with the world's understanding of the mother-poet as a mother (more so than as a poet), and her reaction to, and coming to terms with, those external pressures. As she deals with those pressures and elaborates on the significance of the one-to-one relationship between the mother and daughter, the mother-poet exemplifies the strength and firmness of this intersubjective relationship in her complete security with her role as a mother of one.

The first of these four sonnets, Sonnet 24, repeats the technique often used by the mother-poet, of giving as direct address the words of another speaker, to indicate the focus of the poem. Throughout the body of the sequence, the quoted material indicates the subjectivities or ideas which have entered into the mother-poet's consciousness and with which she must then deal; for example, the voice of the "thin lines" in Sonnet 16 dominates the mother's voice in the octave, and the voice of the daughter appears in those sonnets in which the daughter's subjectivity penetrates the mother's consciousness. In the above sonnets, the mother-poet grapples with the outside voice, and these sonnets exemplify her coming to terms (or failure to do so) with the viewpoint expressed by the outside voice. In Sonnet 24, however, the mother-poet does not display any insufficiency in the face of the other mother's pity:

"You scarcely are a mother, at that rate.
 Only one child!" The blithe soul pitied loud.
 And doubtless she, amid her household crowd,
 When one brings care in another's fortunate;
 When one fares forth another's at her gate.
 Yea, were her first-born folded in his shroud,
 Not with a whole despair would she be bowed,
 She has more sons to make her heart elate.

Many to love her singly, mother theirs,
 To give her the dear love of being their need,
 To storm her lap by turns and claim their kiss,
 To kneel around her at their bed-time prayers;
 Many to grow her comrades! Some have this.
 Yet I, I do not envy them indeed. (38)

The mother-poet responds to the condescending statement of the brood-mother by laying out simply the benefits of mothering many children, then states, without the defensiveness that one might expect, that all the joys of multiple children are not necessary to the mother-poet herself. The syntax of the clauses in the sestet, in which the many children are always the subject while the mother's role is always the grammatical object, further reinforces that which the mother-poet does

not need, for in their reciprocal one-to-one relationship, the mother and daughter are both able, at various times, to take the role of subject. Within the security of a relationship as described by Sonnet 23, in which each member “[p]ossesses the dear trust that each gives each,” the mother-poet is able to respond assuredly to the penetration of the outside voice which would have discomfited her earlier in the sequence.

The mother-poet may not lay out her lines of defense explicitly in Sonnet 24, but she does present them in no uncertain terms in Sonnet 25:

You think that you love each as much as one,
 Mothers with many nestlings ‘neath your wings.
 Nay, but you know not. Love’s most priceless things
 Have unity that cannot be undone.
 You give the rays, I the englobed full sun;
 I give the river, you the separate springs:
 My motherhood’s all my child’s with all it brings --
 None takes the strong entireness from her: none.

You know not. You love yours with various stress;
 This with a graver trust, this with more pride;
 This maybe with more needed tenderness:
 I by each uttermost passion of my soul
 Am turned to mine; she is one, she has the whole:
 How should you know who appraise love and divide? (39)

The single-mindedness with which the mother-poet is able to focus on the daughter enables the mother and daughter to achieve the connectivity which has been sought throughout the sequence. Note also that this poem can only be spoken after the relationship has been assured in Sonnets 21-23. The mother is now “the englobed full sun,” no longer the setting sun of Sonnets 15-16, and the sureness and confidence with which the mother is able to speak of her attunement with the daughter could not be envisioned within the doubts of Sonnets 6-11. The confident voice of the mother here and in Sonnet 24 support the claim of Sonnet 23 that this relationship is now one of assurance and mutual trust.

The image of divided love is further pursued in the octave of Sonnet 26, in which the mother-poet compares her joy in her daughter alone to the love of a single-minded lover:

Of my one pearl so much more joy I gain
 As he that to his sole desire is sworn,
 Indifferent what women more were born,
 And if she loved him not all love were vain,
 Gains more, because of her -- yea, through all pain,
 All love and sorrows, were they two forlorn --
 Than whoso happiest in the lands of morn
 Mingles his heart amid a wifely train. (40)

The simile in line 2 and the comparative in line 7 set up an elaborate and deliberately incomplete analogy. The mother-poet's love is to the brood-mother's love as the monogamous lover is to the polygamous eastern -- presumably Muslim -- husband. The analogy is not fully completed in the poem, as the brood-mother portion is absent, but what is suggested ever so subtly in this absent portion of the analogy is that the mother with multiple children can love them only as partially as the Muslim (and, to the Victorian empire-centric mind, heathen) man can love his multiple wives. The analogy, when carried to the full, is shocking; but the mother-poet breaks from the implied condemnation of other mothers and turns instead in the sestet to a lyric passage praising the unity of the mother-daughter relationship.

Oh! Child and mother, darling! Mother and child!
 And who but we? We, darling, paired alone?
 Thou hast all thy mother; thou art all my own.
 That passion of maternity which sweeps
 Tideless 'neath where the heaven of thee hath smiled
 Has but one channel, therefore infinite deeps. (40)

This passage is one of the few points where the sonnet addresses the daughter directly (the sestets of Sonnets 1 and 2 being the others), and it is one of the only sections where sentimentality dominates the tone. Nevertheless, the "[t]ideless" "infinite deeps" of the maternal love recall the potent imagery of the "unthirsty tarn" in Sonnet 22, as both are deep and still bodies of water, and

the daughter as a "heaven" broadens the recurring noontime sun metaphor. By carefully linking this emotional and sentimental passage to the earlier sonnets, the mother-poet shows the sentiment to be included deliberately and thoughtfully. Now that the mother-poet has defended the validity of their dyadic relationship, this sentiment can be included for (as Sonnets 21 and 23 emphasized), the emotionally wrought love-songs can detract from, or even replace, the true depth of the relationship.

If Sonnets 24-26 respond to the world's expectations about motherhood, Sonnet 27 explores the implications of the mutually supportive mother-daughter relationship for the mother's interaction with the world:

Since first my little one lay on my breast
 I never needed such a second good,
 Nor felt a void left in my motherhood
 She filled not always to the utterest.
 The summer linnet, by glad yearnings pressed,
 Builds room enough to house a callow brood:
 I prayed not for another child -- nor could;
 My solitary bird had my heart's nest.

But she is cause that any baby thing
 If it but smile, is one of mine in truth,
 And every child becomes my natural joy:
 And, if my heart gives all youth fostering,
 Her sister, brother, seems the girl or boy:
 My darling makes me mother to their youth. (41)

The octave continues in the vein of the previous three sonnets, affirming the sufficiency of the daughter alone to fulfill the speaker as a mother. The bird imagery of Sonnets 1 and 23 returns, as the singing springtime bird of Sonnet 1 here becomes the mature mother-bird of summer. The efficacy of both images, however, is questioned by Sonnet 23, as the "autumn sunders every twittering two," implying that the spring and summer birds cannot withstand the trials of the autumn. That which the birds represent for the mother-poet, the carefree springtime song and the

summer bird's brood, do not prove adequate for the mother in the autumn of her life, as she distances herself from both options.

The sufficiency which the mother-poet finds in her daughter, however, does not mean that she has cut herself off from society, as the sestet makes clear. Indeed, the mutually supportive relationship which the mother-poet has with the daughter enables her to interact as a mother with the world. Previously in the sequence, individuals from outside the mother-daughter dyad did penetrate the poetry, the "questing eyes" of Sonnet 2, the father in Sonnets 5 and 7, and the ignorant auditor of the "merry gird[s]" in Sonnet 21, but the poetry always worked to exclude those external persons from the relationship (in three of the four sonnets, using the two-rhyme sestet to reinforce the mother-daughter enclosure). Now that the mother and daughter have attained the stable relationship described in Sonnet 23, and the mother is confident enough to calmly counter outside criticisms of her motherhood, she is able, and well-equipped, to turn out to and interact with the world. The supportive nature of the dyad helps the mother-poet's "heart [to give] all youth fostering," enabling her to move forward from her relationship with the daughter to a relationship with all young people. The presence and voice of the daughter have encouraged the mother-poet socially as well as poetically, such that the mother-poet is able to use the relationship with her daughter as a springboard for a more complete engagement with the world.

The mother-poet's move from focusing on the daughter to looking out at her new interactions with the world draws our eyes from the sequence itself to looking at its life "out in the world." In some ways, Mother and Daughter had a very short life. Webster had apparently faded from the literary scene; the Athenaeum review of Mother and Daughter indicates that "her name was rarely mentioned -- scarcely known, indeed -- in that curious domain called the 'contemporary literary world,'" and the limited number of reviews of Mother and Daughter

suggests that interest in Webster's poetry had waned.⁷⁶ That Webster was no longer in the literary limelight in the last years of her life is likely due to her poor health. Furthermore, while the Athenaeum reviewer cannot lavish enough praise on the "expression of maternal love as an absorbing passion" in Mother and Daughter, he or she critiques the realism and contractions which Webster employs in the sequence.⁷⁷ Webster's strength has always been, the reviewer states, "prosaic locutions and familiar movements rather than . . . that perfect beauty of diction and sound which the sonnet especially demands." While these "prosaic locutions" are acceptable in certain forms of poetry, and are desirable in drama, "if there is a form of poetry in which they cannot be introduced it is the sonnet," and the sonnets therefore fall short in the reviewer's mind ("Mother and Daughter [review]" 346). While the Athenaeum review may admire the poetry, a sonnet sequence for a child may have been seen as an oddity rather than a trendsetter.

Coming as, in many ways, a late Victorian poem in a fin de siècle world that would soon make way for modernism and its dislike for its Victorian predecessors, Mother and Daughter had no one to influence. Many women writers at the end of the nineteenth-century, like Webster, Amy Levy, and Mathilde Blind, were arguably more forgotten than the earlier writers like Felicia Hemans and Joanna Baillie, who at least had the Victorians to anthologize and reprint their poetry before falling into disrepute in the early years of the twentieth century. Webster's disappearance from poetic anthologies after 1900 may be regrettable, but is not surprising; Watts-Dunton foresaw a similar fate not only for Webster's works but also for most late Victorian poetry ("Mrs. Augusta Webster [obituary]" 355). Writing in the late 1920s, Vita Sackville-West, herself a novelist associated with the Bloomsbury circle, had little good to say about the women poets flourishing in the 1870s; she concedes that Webster's poetry contains "downright speaking," if it is not "poetry" that the modernists would deem as such (123).⁷⁸ Sackville-West, not surprisingly,

does not mention Mother and Daughter in her article; for all that the modernist women authors were engaged with the new political and social abilities of women, they wrote more from the perspective of daughters rather than from the viewpoint of the mother.⁷⁹

One of Webster's contemporaries with whom she does resound, if not necessarily directly influence, is Michael Field, the pseudonym used by the lesbian couple Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece Edith Cooper (1862-1913) to publish their cowritten poetry and dramas from 1889 through Bradley's death. Although the unity of Bradley and Cooper's collaboration has been contested by critics,⁸⁰ the two women did view their poetic endeavors to a large extent as cooperative. Bradley wrote, in their copious and cowritten journals, comparing their relationship to that of the Brownings, that "those two poets, man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another at their work; we are closer married" (Field 16). Cooper, in a letter to Robert Browning, stated that "This happy union of two in work and aspiration is sheltered and expressed by 'Michael Field.' Please regard him as the author," echoing Bradley's marriage metaphor to describe their poetic production (3). Kathryn Prince observes the importance of the pseudonym to the couple, used even after their true identities were known, and suggests that one might "consider the name less as a pseudonym than as a kind of corporate identity, a symbol of creative as well as romantic partnership" (9).⁸¹ Bradley and Cooper's vision of poets who "bless or quicken one another at their work" can be seen as taking Webster's description of the mother and daughter's equally powerful voices to its logical conclusion. Although the actual creation of individual poems may not have been quite the "perfect mosaic" that Bradley and Cooper sometimes portray, their vision and proclaimed intent nevertheless attempt something quite new in its vision of the poet, poetic inspiration, and poetic creation, and each woman undoubtedly did greatly influence the poetry of the other. Their aims

are a more radical extension of Webster's vision of a mother and daughter whose subjectivities and voices are equal and interrelated, as each's voice influences and "quicken" the other subjectivity.

To assume, on the basis of two reviews and the later modernist reaction to the Victorians, that Mother and Daughter was unable to influence other poets may be more a commentary on our limited knowledge of turn-of-the-century women's poetry than an accurate depiction. One volume of verse evidences at the very least interests and concerns parallel with Mother and Daughter. Hand in Hand: Verses by a Mother and Daughter was published anonymously in 1902, and contains two divisions, the first being dedicated "To My Daughter," and the second "To My Mother."⁸² The sections are unequal in both length and skill (the daughter evidently being the more prolific and adept of the two), and none of the lyric verse in either section appears to comment on the poetry in the other. Only one poem, "Love or Fancy" by the daughter, addresses a mother-daughter relationship, but the dialogue between mother and daughter consists of the daughter seeking the mother's advice on affairs of the heart. Even if the poetry does not show readily apparent parallels with Webster, the volume as a whole does. Beyond the title and the dedications is the frontispiece, a bas-relief image of a woman, seated on a seashore with an open book on her knee, one arm wrapped around the younger woman sitting at her feet. For this duo, the fact of their relationship as mother and daughter is somehow involved with their writing to such a point that they must emphasize this mixture of parentage and poetry in their publication.

If Mother and Daughter was not in a position to have great influence on the women's poetry which came after it, the sequence can certainly be seen to be partaking in the larger progression of women's sonnet sequences from the late eighteenth through the twentieth centuries; indeed, in some ways it is arguably the capstone of Victorian women's sonnet sequences. For Webster's mother-poet does not place herself in the somewhat constricted

position of a woman writing sonnets. She does not feel obliged to frame her sequence with an explanatory preface validating her sequence-writing enterprise, as Christina Rossetti does, nor does she engage in the gender and poetic politics which underpins Sonnets from the Portuguese. Webster does draw greatly from these sonnets, building upon the visions of reciprocity ventured, to varying degrees, by both of these sequences. Both Rossetti's and Barrett Browning's sequences posit this reciprocity as an ideal and somewhat attainable state, but neither fully succeeds in discovering that connectivity (although Barrett Browning's comes closest); the accretions of convention and gender roles which accompany romantic love inhibit, if they do not fully prevent, such a realization. By moving the interactions of the sequence from the highly loaded political and gendered world of the love affair to the more unexplored domain of the mother-child relationship, and by refusing to conform to the traditional vertical power structure of the parent-child relationship, Webster is able to envision and portray a relationship which does attain a distinct measure of reciprocity.

Webster also builds upon the encounters of Rossetti and Barrett Browning with the seemingly male domain of sonnet-sequence writing. These two women had done much to make the genre accessible to the female voice, but by focusing on the romantic love relationship, they both adopted strongly male conventions to their own ends. Webster uses a similar technique by using the genre, but by distancing herself from the topoi of the love-relationship by focusing on the strictly female experience of motherhood, she brings the genre even more closely into the domain of the woman poet. As such, the conflicts which Rossetti and Barrett Browning encounter between their gender and the genre are not a limiting factor for Webster. Instead, Webster is in a position to further refine the struggle of the female voice by exploring a more specific, and at the same time all but universal, aspect of femininity -- motherhood -- which also

conflicts, in a more concrete and quotidian fashion, with a woman's literary endeavors. She finds a way to express the mother-child interaction as profitable to the woman's art, rather than detrimental as was often the case with women writers.⁸³ The mother-poet's struggles are universal across the genders (Shakespeare too writes of aging and death), and specific to the Victorian women poets tradition (in her fixation on the interconnection of body and voice), as she is able to examine a range of issues beyond the immediate concern of motherhood. By not retreading ground already covered by Rossetti and Barrett Browning, Webster frees herself to explore more fully the interactions of poetry and age, poetry and motherhood, and poetry and the voice of the other.

In addition to its central position in an understanding of the development of the female-voiced sonnet sequence, Mother and Daughter can also play an important role for critics reading and interpreting nineteenth-century motherhood poetry. It is a major work in length, genre, and scope, and is overall a more ambitious attempt than many short, lyrical, or occasional poetic motherhood pieces. As such, it may be considered one of the central pieces of Victorian motherhood poetry. Like Alice Meynell's motherhood poetry, Webster's sequence opens a door into an honest and unsentimental portrayal of the consciousness of the mother, something not always found in maternity poetry. Mother and Daughter's vision of mutuality, moreover, may open a door back into previous motherhood poems to enable critics to see them less as trite, sentimental commonplaces, but more as an expression, at least in some cases, of an attempt to connect with or come to an understanding of the child. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dramatic monologue "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus" provides one example of a mother attempting to understand the individuality -- in this case, the Godhead -- of her infant child. Mary wrestles with her own relationship to the infant Jesus, who is never portrayed with the babyish sentimentalism

of many other motherhood poems. While this poem treats a unique relationship, that uniqueness does not distance it from other poems about motherhood; Mary is thoroughly a human mother, and the child Jesus is clearly an infant, even if the poem is heavy with prefigurative images. A similar case could be made for "A Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," for a large part of the mother's struggle focuses around the identity of the child. "The Virgin Mary" approaches a kind of grappling with maternity not commonly portrayed in Barrett Browning's other motherhood poetry.

Some of the poems typical of Mrs. Gatty's anthology may also be recuperable, looked at from this angle. Mrs. Norton's "To My Child" is one candidate. It is less sentimental in tone than many, and takes for its premise a position opposite that which is hinted at (and eventually rejected) in Mother and Daughter 2: the child is not attractive to outside eyes, but he or she is nevertheless beautiful to the mother. In the mother's musings on beauty vs loveliness, she voices thoughts similar to Webster's mother-poet in her Sonnets 22 and 23:

Yet there are things which through the gazing eye
Reach the full soul, and thrill it into love,
Unworthy of those rapturous words of praise,
Yet prized, perchance, the brightest things above;
A look that was on childhood's resting-place,
A smile upon some dear familiar face. (69)

The full step to engaging with the child's personality is not quite attained in this poem, but it is suggested in the "things which . . . / Reach the full soul," that which is able to penetrate the subjectivity of the mother. The mother presents the child as an individual being, one whose attractiveness lies in the mother-child relationship rather than in the symbolic value of the child as a child.

Dora Greenwell's "Demeter and Cora" provides another example of a poem which can be read from the vantage point of Mother and Daughter's exploration of intersubjectivity. The dialogue between mother and daughter in Greenwell's retelling of the Persephone myth is the poem itself -- there is no exposition from a narrative or lyric voice. Additionally, their dialogue interweaves regardless of line breaks and with no stanza breaks, such that the fabric of the poem is a twining of the mother and daughter's voices. The first seven lines will serve as an example of Greenwell's vision of a collaborative poem:

"Speak, daughter, speak; art speaking now?"
 "Seek, mother, seek; art seeking thou
 Thy dear-loved Cora?" "Daughter sweet,
 I bend unto the earth my ear
 To catch the sound of coming feet;
 I listen long, but only hear
 the deep, dark waters running clear." (287, lines 1-7)

Not only do Demeter and Cora's voices interweave, they also echo each other's phraseology throughout the sequence, as Demeter's "speak" is mirrored by Cora's "seek" in the first two lines. Greenwell's poem exemplifies precisely the mingling of voices suggested by Mother and Daughter (and partially achieved by Michael Field), as each voice is distinct, but together they create poetry.

Webster's engagement with these two disparate types of poetry, the sonnet sequence and the poetry of motherhood, has resulted in a sequence which challenges the Victorian notion of poetic propriety. Her sequence opens up the poetic field in three ways. The first is the transformation and broadening of the sonnet sequence tradition by focusing it on the parent-child relationship. The second echoes the vision of "Michael Field" as the sequence poses the radical suggestion of poetic collaboration. The third moves away from the narrow focus of love-poetry on the romantic relationship by opening up the realm of love poetry to include the long-standing, but often ignored, poetry of the parent-child relationship.

Webster's most significant achievement in creating Mother and Daughter is bringing the somewhat marginalized, at least less "serious," topic of motherhood into the poetic mainstream by writing it in what was at the time the popular, even trendy, genre of the sonnet. The sonnet and sonnet sequence were regarded by many late Victorian poets and critics as a forum for serious discussion, far removed from the popular songs and ballads of the early Victorian "poetesses," such as were published in the annuals. In spite of the achievements of Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, sonnets remained primarily in the male domain. In the very writing of the sequence, Webster states that the subjectivity of the mother is a subject worthy of the highest form of poetry, and that a mother's concerns are themselves serious topics. Not only is romantic love a fit topic for a sonnet sequence, whatever the author's gender, but the love of a mother for her daughter is as noble as that of two lovers. Furthermore, the realization of Webster's sequence supports the claims she makes by writing it, for it is an intricate, complex, and organic whole, even while each sonnet preserves the unity and focus of theme desired by Victorian critics and sonnet-writers.⁸⁴ Webster's choice of sequence as a genre legitimizes parental love as a true poetic topic, and her skillful use of the sequence conventions and portrayal of that love completes the task of authorizing the mother-daughter relationship as one worthy of poetic exploration.

Secondly, Mother and Daughter has opened up the definition of a "poet" and what it means to "create poetry" by positing an interactive, if not fully collaborative in the Michael Field sense, vision of poetic creation. In this vision, the object of the poet's musings is not the passive inspiration but is rather an active participant in the poetic enterprise. The radical nature of this admittedly subtle implication can be seen in one instance by looking at the change in review tone when the collaborative nature of "Michael Field's" poetry was known. Bradley feared just this

reaction, when she stated in her letter to Robert Browning that “the revelation of that [dual authorship] would indeed be utter ruin to us” (Field 6). This fear proved true, for after the dual, feminine identity of “Michael Field” was known, the previously laudatory reviews turned damning (Blain 247-8). For Bradley and Cooper, the negative response to their poetry was a reaction to their gender and undermining of traditional gender roles in addition to the collaborative nature of their poetry.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, that poetic collaboration was an uneasy topic for the Victorians is illustrated by Walter Besant’s 1892 article “On Literary Collaboration.” Although Besant agrees that both novels and plays may be profitably written in collaboration, “[o]ne of the two must impress his own individuality upon the work. . . . We must hear – or think we hear – one voice” (204-5). Poetry is not fit for collaborative effort, for “[t]o touch the deeper things one must be alone. . . . To treat of the graver things one must, alone, construct the machinery” (203). If true poetry treats deep and serious topics, then it must be composed by one; and when poetry is composed by two, it must therefore be met with condemnation.

Thirdly, the sequence opens up the definition of “love-poetry” in a broader and more inclusive way, encompassing the full extent of women’s (as well as men’s) emotional attachments. The Athenaeum reviewer of Mother and Daughter recognized the limitations of the narrow-visioned focus of contemporary love poetry, which “concerns itself so largely with sexual love, almost to the exclusion of all other kinds of the love passion. These other kinds of love are quite as noble and poetic as sexual love” and, as the reviewer’s examples show, have been explored by some of the most renowned writers throughout time (346). In exploring the emotional and intellectual attachments between a parent and child, Webster does more than partake of a style of nineteenth-century maternity poetry; she enters into a widespread and far-reaching tradition, ranging from King David’s lament for his son Absalom in II Samuel

18:33-19:4, to Egil Skallagrímsson's dirge for his son in the 13th century Icelandic Egil's Saga, to the poetry of Sylvia Plath. It is a rarely explored tradition, but nevertheless expresses a fundamental human emotion, one which can be as deeply explored and as richly portrayed in poetry as any passion between two lovers. By placing this emotion into the long history of the sonnet sequence, Webster suggests that not only her own work but also other works treating the parent-child relationship ought to be moved into the mainstream critical consciousness, for these works focusing on parenting engage as fully with the exploration of the human psyche as poems concerned with romance.

Webster has already been lauded by the current critical community for questioning social conventions and attacking political inequality in her dramatic monologues and essays. This attention is rightly placed, for Webster's voice provides a strong political element among her contemporary mid- and late-century women poets. The critical focus on Webster's politics and other genres has unfortunately resulted in a lack of interest in Mother and Daughter, as it appears, at a glance, to be an anomaly in Webster's writings. This sonnet sequence, however, provides as pointed and nuanced a critique of the poetic mainstream as her dramatic monologues and essays do of the social mainstream. Mother and Daughter pushes poetic boundaries and conventions subtly but powerfully, with no hesitations or qualifications, while providing a workable and innovative alternative to the stalemate of objectification. One of its most impressive accomplishments, perhaps, is that it could be read simply as "tender, genuine, and discreet confessions" by its contemporary reviewers while providing, beneath the simple surface, a pointed critique of the assumptions and conventions espoused by some of the same reviewers ("Mother and Daughter [review]" Bookman 116). The lack of current critical discussion of Webster's sonnet sequence may be in part due to this apparently simple surface, as well as to its participation

in the unpopular genre of motherhood poetry and the still unresolved issues surrounding its compilation and publication. Nevertheless, Mother and Daughter provides a rich field of discovery for any critic, for Webster has produced in her sonnet sequence as intricate and sophisticated an examination of a subjectivity as any poem praising the “stream’s jubilant gush,” and in doing so has envisioned a relationship of mutuality and connectivity possible only in “the tarn’s strong hush.”

Endnotes

Introduction

- [1] For example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Felicia Hemans, and Alice Meynell were three of the few mother-poets throughout the nineteenth century, while other popular writers such as Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Christina Rossetti, Jean Ingelow, and Matilde Blind did not marry or bear children. Of those three mother-poets, however, Barrett Browning became a mother late in life, such that she was well established as a poet before Pen's birth; Meynell wrote few poems during the youth of her large family (although she was a prolific essay-writer during that time); and Hemans found the financial burden of raising a family to be detrimental to the quality of her poetry (see n. 83 below).
- [2] Angela Leighton, among others, does use Sonnet 27 to make a biographical point in Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart (hereafter Heart) (193), while more recently Bonnie J. Robinson discusses Sonnet 16 as a reframing of the Pygmalion tradition in an all-female enclosure (4-5). Mother and Daughter as a whole has not been treated, although Patricia Rigg is currently preparing an examination of Webster's lyric poetry and sonnets, including her sonnet sequence.
- [3] It should be noted that the Examiner's high praise of Portraits (1870) predates Webster's own involvement with that periodical, so the review should not be considered "puffery." Instead, given the acclaim which Webster's work received in their pages, the Examiner must have been pleased to welcome Webster to their staff later that decade, even though she wrote for them anonymously.
- [4] Of the critics who have treated "A Castaway," Angela Leighton has placed it in the broader scheme of women's poems about prostitution ("Because Men Made the Laws"), Susan Brown has discussed it in conjunction with D.G. Rossetti's "Jenny" ("Economical Representations"), and Christine Sutphin has examined "Castaway" as a commentary on Victorian sexuality ("Human Tigresses"). Sutphin has taken the discussion of Webster's engagement with female sexuality farther in her paper on Webster's dramatic monologues "Circe" and "Medea in Athens" ("Representations of Women's Heterosexual Desire"). Additionally, Leighton has discussed Webster's dramatic monologues in the larger context of Webster's life and other writings in Heart; Isobel Armstrong has placed Webster's writings, especially the dramatic monologues, in the larger context of Victorian women's poetry in that chapter in Victorian Poetry; and Mermin also contextualizes Webster and her work in Godiva's Ride. Sutphin provides an invaluable overview of all of Webster's works in her introduction to the Broadview anthology of Webster's poetry and prose (Portraits). Patricia Rigg has used Webster's dramatic monologues to question the definition of "dramatic monologue" and the appropriateness of the term to women's dramatic poetry.

- [5] Susan Brown has introduced this critical interest in "Determined Heroines." As poets ranging from Robert Browning to "Michael Field" (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) wrote closet dramas which may or may not have been producible, and as these published dramas received great interest when they were printed (evidenced by the number and length of reviews of "closet dramas" in the Athenaeum alone in the 1880s and 1890s), basic work on the genre and broad overviews of published dramas needs to be done to open up the genre.
- [6] For an extended discussion of the reception of Mother and Daughter, see the conclusion, especially pages 118-119 and n. 76-77 below.
- [7] The A Housewife's Opinions essays are taken from October 1876 through September 1878; the preface to A Housewife's Opinions was written in October 1878. As Webster explains in the preface that she has not included reviews in the collection, with the exception of a review of Robert Browning's translations, it is to be assumed that these essays do not comprise the whole of Webster's contributions to the Examiner, and Webster's associations with the periodical may predate 1876, and almost undoubtedly postdate 1878. Unfortunately, no attempt has been made to retrieve all of Webster's Examiner articles.
- [8] I have examined Webster's interaction with the contemporary debates on women's education in an unpublished paper and conference presentation, while relating Webster's positioning in that debate to her portrayal of the supposedly philanthropic husband in her dramatic monologue "Tired." Webster addresses briefly the issue of women's education in several of her dramatic monologues, including "Tired" and "A Castaway."
- [9] Marysa Demoor, one of the individuals involved in the Athenaeum indexing project, has done most of work on Webster's Athenaeum essays; her three articles have addressed Webster's role as one of the many female reviewers employed by the Athenaeum as well as the interaction of Webster's poetry and essays. Demoor's book Their Fair Share has revealed the prominent position which Webster and other female reviewers played, albeit anonymously, at the Athenaeum during its height. As the results of the Athenaeum indexing project are not publicly available for issues published after 1870, I am indebted to Patricia Rigg for sharing with me her list of Webster's reviews, gleaned through many days of pouring over the Athenaeum marked copies.
- [10] The interrelation of the reviewer's sex and comments in the Athenaeum is a complex one, bound up with issues of the genre of literary reviews, social expectations about certain kinds of reviews, and the nature of the Athenaeum as a journal in the late Victorian era. Demoor treats these issues thoroughly in Their Fair Share, particularly Chapters 2 and 3.
- [11] This last quotation is from a review of Edith Nesbit's Leaves of Life. Webster reviewed several of her female contemporaries, including Mary F. Robinson and "Michael Field's" Sight and Song and Underneath the Bough. Webster also reviewed several prominent male poets, including Oliver Wendell Holmes (whom she was acquainted; see p. 10), James Russell Lowell, Arthur Symonds, William Sharpe, and W.B. Yeats' The Countess Kathleen.

The most choice works, such as late works by Robert Browning and Tennyson, however, were reserved for the Athenaeum's top literary reviewer, Theodore Watts-Dunton.

- [12] This letter is addressed to an unidentified woman concerning the anthologizing of some of Webster's poetry, and is dated 30 Sept. 1881 en route to Calais (MS: British Library). It provides an image of the hectic life which Webster led as she prepared to leave London for an extended period of time (although Thomas remained behind), while attempting to fulfill her School Board and other responsibilities, leaving little time to attend to her poetry.

According to The New Sydenham Society's Lexicon of Medicine and the Allied Sciences (1899), pleurisy is general name applied to any manifestation of a specific lung inflammation. Acute pleurisy is characterized by chills and a "severe 'stitch' in the side with every breath" ("Pleurisy"). As will be seen in my later discussions of Webster's sonnet sequence, this difficulty breathing might have affected some of her uses of imagery and manipulations of women's poetry traditions. The 1899 dictionary also reveals that chronic pleurisy is usually an offshoot of some other disease or a worsening of acute pleurisy. It is likely that, if pleurisy did affect Webster after her 1881 trip to Italy, it was not the cause of her death, but rather a secondary illness resulting from a more severe disease, such as cancer.

- [13] These letters, printed by Mackenzie Bell in his biography of Christina Rossetti, are often quoted by Rossetti scholars to display her opinions on suffrage issues; what they do reveal is Webster's deep engagement with the emancipation movement. They also may suggest a stronger friendship between the two authors than current records show. Rossetti comments that Webster wrote with "cordial openness," then replies herself in such frank terms, "writ[ing] as I am thinking and feeling," that one is tempted to guess that these were not the first letters exchanged between the two women (Bell 124; C. Rossetti, Letters 2.158). Additionally, Bell states that Thomas Webster has "placed at my disposal the correspondence that ensued" from Rossetti's reception of Webster's political pamphlet (123). This statement reveals not only the not unsurprising fact that Webster's personal papers were in possession of her husband after her death (papers which are currently lost), but also that the correspondence extended beyond these two quoted letters. See also n. 17.
- [14] D.G. Rossetti's comment to Christina Rossetti on Webster's poetry on this occasion is less than complimentary, as he says that it "seems (like George Eliot's lyrics) written without vocation" (Letters 4.1909).
- [15] Theodore Watts-Dunton, in his obituary for Webster, claims several times that Robert Browning was deeply impressed by Portraits.
- [16] This letter is dated 17 May 1886; Webster addresses May Morris as "Miss Morris," and the tone of the letter throughout is formal, suggesting that the relationship between the two women was not an intimate one. Given Webster's interest in politics and the "woman question," it is not surprising that she should take the question of socialism very seriously. Her thoughtfulness and ability to examine various angles of an issue -- an ability seen in her dramatic monologues -- can be seen in her belief that Socialism does not thoroughly address "many questions, of course, of law and morals and customs." Additionally, her refusal to

become a Socialist “unless a form of Socialism is developed which leaves (as I believe[?] Socialism would) a larger room for Individualism than is generally connected with the idea of Socialism” opens up her focus on the importance of the individual, also seen in her dramatic monologues as well as in Mother and Daughter. This request for Webster to speak formally, and Watts-Dunton’s comment on Webster’s “great power as a speaker,” bring Webster’s accomplishments as a public speaker to the foreground, a trait not previously recognized (“Mrs. Augusta Webster [obituary]” 355). Finally, the letter reveals that in 1886 Webster was living at Temple Lodge, Hammersmith W., instead of on Cheyne Walk.

- [17] This pamphlet appears to be the one sent to Christina Rossetti, for which a portion of the correspondence survives (see n. 13), as Rossetti objects in part to “the exceptions at the exclusion of married women from the suffrage” (Bell 124; C. Rossetti Letters 2.158). As Webster’s pamphlet was originally printed in 1878, this correspondence can also be dated to 1878.
- [18] Patricia Hollis provides a thorough overview of the political climate in which the London School Board positions were opened to women, and gives all the available data about the first women representatives (including Augusta Webster). Additionally, Irene Clephane prints an 1882 image of the London School Board assembly at which Webster was present (although Clephane does not specify which journal the engraving was taken from). The caption reads as follows:
- LONDON’S SCHOOL BOARD: The lady members are prominent, including Mrs. Surr, who is speaking, Miss Helen Taylor, and Mrs. Fenwick-Miller. Mrs. Westlake is an earnest champion of what Mrs. Fenwick-Miller has dubbed “the official ring.” Miss Muller and Miss Simcox are both good workers on the Board, and Miss R. Davenport Hill, Mrs. Webster, and Miss Richardson are quiet helpers. (159)
- Webster is, I believe, seated on the left of the picture, the furthest back of the grouping of four women there.
- [19] Florence Boos’ personal copy of Mother and Daughter is inscribed “Margaret Davies Webster” (Sutphin Portraits 10 n. 1).
- [20] I am indebted to Patricia Rigg for sharing with me these details about Margaret’s professional life from her extensive research into Webster’s biography.
- [21] When Daffodil was published, Margaret would have been a young lady, although the date of composition is unknown. The whimsical element of the clothing made out of flowers -- Daffodil becomes the head designer in this horticultural haberdashery -- is just the detail designed to appeal to a young girl fascinated with flowers. Given Margaret’s apparent interest in flowers (as seen in the crocus story which Webster tells Holmes [cited above p. 10]), as well as the centrality of the daughter’s interest in flowers in Mother and Daughter Sonnets 4 and 12, Daffodil may well have been originally told to the youthful Margaret, then published when Margaret became an adult.

- [22] The sonnets with place and/or date attributions are as follows: Sonnet 1 to Rome, November 1881; Sonnet 13 to Caserta, April 1882; Sonnet 14 undated to Cernobbio; and Sonnet 24 to Ramsgate 1886.
- [23] All Mother and Daughter sonnets will be cited by page number from the 1895 edition. Brief quotations, taken from sonnets which have already been given at length, will not be cited in the text where their provenance is apparent.
- [24] I have coined the term “connectivity” from Margaret Schlegel’s phrase “only connect” in E. M. Forster’s Howards End. Margaret uses the phrase to indicate her attempt to understand as individuals rather than a “type” the commercial Wilcox family, in spite of their dissimilarities to her own cultured upbringing. This concept resonates with my discussion of the mother-poet’s desire to connect with and understand the individuality of her daughter.
- [25] Patricia Rigg has generously shared with me these fruits from her laborious pourings-over letters in the Macmillan archives.

Chapter 1

- [26] These two poems, by Samuel Rogers and Thomas Campbell respectively, date to the early years of the nineteenth century; their popularity is attested to by the 1841 collection The Poems of the Pleasures in which I accessed them, in which they are grouped with The Pleasures of Imagination and The Pleasures of Friendship. The edition is ornamented and printed on heavy paper; a full preface, biographical material on the authors, and extensive explication accompanies each poem. Both the poems to which W.M. Rossetti refers are somewhat rambling musings on the two titular topics, and are sentimental in tone and domestic in focus (the far-reaching allusions to Biblical, mythical, and international events notwithstanding). The connection which Rossetti draws between The Pleasures of Memory and The Pleasures of Hope and Webster’s sequence is not readily apparent to me, except in the broadest sense in which Mother and Daughter focuses on both memory and hope at different times, and in which the sequence could be read in the simplest domestic terms. The Pleasures of Hope does contain a long maternal passage (pages 229-231) which echoes in tone many of the poems in Mrs. Gatty’s anthology, discussed below (pages 41-42).
- [27] Both Petrarch and Dante were acclaimed by the Victorians, and either one may be touted by Victorian critics as providing the ultimate example of sonnets depending on the critic’s ideological aims. Additionally, Shakespeare’s sonnets were also popular, more for their proof of the “Englishness” of the sonnet than for being perfect sonnet prototypes (see Natalie M. Houston). I have chosen to focus more strongly on the Victorian reception of Petrarch because Webster’s sonnets align themselves more closely with Petrarchan sonnet conventions, as understood by the Victorians, than the Dantean or Shakespearean. Webster’s sonnets are strongly Petrarchan in their formal elements; she adopts the blazon in Sonnet 2; Sonnet 26 hints at a parallel between her love for her daughter and a lover’s love for his beloved; and, most significantly, she does not frame the daughter as a spiritual guide or mentor (as would not have been uncommon in such a sequence). Many Victorian

commentators associated Petrarch with sensual love and Dante with spiritual, so by emphasizing the physical relationship instead of a spiritual one, Webster is associating herself more with the Petrarchan tradition.

- [28] Spiller's general thesis which underlies both The Sonnet Sequence and The Development of the Sonnet is that the rise of the sonnet, with its introspective nature, aided in the development of a more self-conscious, introspective approach to understanding the self. The stilnovisti poets' major change from the troubadour tradition, which sonnet writers since have expanded upon, is the move from the social sphere to personal introspection. "Since the Lady is no longer the real object of desire, but a medium to be transcended," Spiller argues, "the discourse [becomes] increasingly internally directed. The /I/ speaks to himself, of himself, and for himself" (Development 35). The sonnet is then the poetry of subjectivity. Paul Oppenheimer provides a more forcefully argued, if perhaps less nuanced, version of the argument, positing the invention of the sonnet as the turning point from the medieval mind to the modern one.
- [29] For examinations of subjectivity in Petrarch, see John Freccero and Robert M. Durling's introduction to his parallel-text translations of Petrarch's Rime Sparse. Sara Sturm-Maddox provides an excellent analysis of the poet's framing of Laura and the laurel (as a symbol of poetry). Heather Dubrow and Mary B. Moore's discussions of the interplay of gender and subjectivity, as well as Nancy J. Vicker's analysis of the poet's subjectivity and the fragmentation of Laura, are overviewed in n. 30.
- [30] Nancy J. Vickers has provided an extensive analysis of this fragmentation of Laura, in person and in speech, in Petrarch's retelling in Poem 23 of Ovid's story of Diana and Actaeon. She concludes that Petrarch must reduce Laura to pieces to counteract the threat which she, as a parallel to Diana who can destroy Actaeon, poses to his subjectivity and speech. D.G. Rossetti undertakes a similar fragmenting of his beloveds in The House of Life, particularly in "The Portrait" (see page 33). Additionally, both Heather Dubrow and Mary B. Moore provide extensive discussions of the development and undermining of subjectivity in Petrarch's poetry. Within her extended discussion of Renaissance English Petrarchism and counter-Petrarchism, Dubrow associates the identity slippage of both the poet and Laura, and the adaptation of this slippage in early modern England, with the instability of gender categories at the time. She provides a necessary, if at times overstated, corrective to my focus on Laura's effacement in her belief that, in Petrarchan and other early modern texts, "female speech . . . complicates frequently asserted connections among gender, speechlessness, and passivity. Although the Petrarchan mistress is sometimes silenced, in many instances she is not. Her voice . . . is threatening not least because it comprises such varied and even contradictory registers" (11). See Dubrow 40-48 for a discussion of Laura's voice and speech within the Rime Sparse. Moore sees this same slippage between poet and subject, male and female, as creating a mode which "invite[s] female imitation"; she examines six female-voiced sonnet sequences from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries, including Barrett Browning's, but not including any of Christina Rossetti's or Webster's (11).

- [31] Jennifer Wagner provides insight into the moral and aesthetic aspects of “sonnetomania” in Chapter 4 of A Moment's Monument, and Natalie M. Houston surveys some of the critical writings surrounding sonnet anthologies. Steve Ellis supplies indispensable information on the influence of Dante in the Victorian period. For additional critical discussions of the Victorian sonnet sequence, see William T. Going, Patrick Crutwell, and the appropriate sections of Spiller, The Sonnet Sequence. Although the above works provide useful overviews of individual sonnet sequences, no comprehensive treatment of the Victorian sonnet, encompassing contemporary critical stances, the popularity of the sonnet among minor sonneteers, and the influence of Italian, Renaissance, and contemporary sonnets has been written (although Wagner's book does address many of these issues). Lacking such a critical aid for assessing Victorian attitudes toward Petrarchism and the subjective position in sonnet sequences, my conclusions concerning the reception and adaptation of Petrarchism in the late nineteenth century are necessarily limited and not comprehensive. The material I assessed in this endeavor consists of articles, reviews, anthologies, and studies on the sonnet, and Petrarch in particular, written between 1870 and 1895. The homogeneity of the attitudes expressed about the sonnet, even as the authors differ on trifles, in addition to corroboration from Wagner and Ellis when their interests overlap with mine, makes me confident that I am presenting a fair and nuanced picture of Victorian attitudes toward Petrarchism and sonnets.
- [32] La Vita Nuova is, of course, a hybrid sequence in that Dante has included prose exposition and critical commentary on his own sonnets as connective tissue between individual sonnets. I did not encounter any instances of a Victorian critic disparaging these prose interpolations, however, and they seemed to accept, as do current critics, La Vita Nuova as a true sonnet sequence.
- [33] Steve Ellis has thoroughly examined the cult of the Vita Nuova which grew rapidly from the 1830s; see chapter 2. Ellis' readings of this cult and of D.G. Rossetti's role in it support my own conclusions in this section and the section treating Rossetti's translations and sonnets. For samples of late Victorian visions of the “Englishness” of the sonnet, see J.A. Noble and John Dennis. Although there was no consensus concerning which poet was the greater, Petrarch or Dante, often Petrarch was considered greater in form, while Dante's sonnets were viewed as more sublime because of their spiritual and moral content.
- [34] All the Victorian articles, criticism, and reviews I surveyed, even when their focus was primarily biographical rather than literary, expressed similar sentiments concerning the ideal quality and substance of sonnets. See in particular Leigh Hunt and S. Adam Lee, 1.14-15. Wagner has come to similar conclusions in Ch. 4.
- [35] Edmund Gosse provided a highly researched biography of Laura for The Cosmopolitan which is resplendent with detailed, supposedly historical information and photographs of images of Laura. Curiously, he also authored the apocryphal story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's presentation of the manuscript of Sonnets from the Portuguese to Robert Browning, a story which “was frequently reprinted with the Sonnets and became part of their tremendous popularity” (Mermin, “Female Poet” 367 n. 14). Gosse appears, then, to have

played a distinct role in the biographical cults which grew up around at least two of the sonnet sequences I discuss.

- [36] See specifically Jerome McGann, The Game That Must Be Lost, chapters 1-2, and Robert Zweig.
- [37] Of course, Rossetti's translation goals differed from those of the twentieth century, and his translations were successful within the framework he set for himself. Jerome McGann provides a sympathetic treatment of Rossetti's accomplishments in his translation project in The Game That Must Be Lost, pp. 32-39; his preliminary discussion of Rossetti's translations can be found in "A Commentary on Some of Rossetti's Translations from Dante."
- [38] One of the downfalls of a broad survey such as this one is that it is unable to take into consideration the poetry's achievements attained through, in this case, the objectification and etherealization of the woman, achievements which have been treated by many previous critics. The groundwork for a critical, as opposed to psychobiographical, study of Rossetti's poetry was laid in the 1970s with the works of Houston A. Baker, Jr., Florence Saunders Boos, Robert M. Cooper, William E. Fredeman, Ronnalie Roper Howard, and Clyde de L. Ryals. Several critics have admirably handled the surprisingly difficult task of coming to terms with Rossetti's poetic vision in The House of Life; see D.M.R. Bentley, John R. Conners, Martin A. Danahay, John Granger, Jerome McGann The Game That Must Be Lost and "Rossetti's Significant Details," J. Hillis Miller, Christopher Nassar, and David G. Riede. Jerome McGann Game, David Riede, Martin Danahay, John Granger, Houston A. Baker, and J. Hillis Miller have specifically treated the role of the beloved in The House of Life, and Donald C. Stuart, J. Hillis Miller, David Riede, and Martin Danahay have additionally focused on mirrors and narcissism -- a topic tangentially relevant to this overview -- in the sequence. Jennifer Wagner's chapter on The House of Life places the sequence in the larger scheme of Victorian and Romantic sonnet sequences.
- [39] This poem is often considered a direct critique of D.G. Rossetti's own artistic vision; see Terry L. Spaise 59 and Martin Danahay 24.
- [40] D.G. Rossetti's wife Elizabeth Siddal, a poet and painter in her own right, provides a similar critique of the idealization of women in her poem "The Lust of the Eyes." Beverly Taylor provides the full text of the poem in addition to an insightful analysis of the poem, which "unmasks the fraudulent representations of power relations conventionally displayed in love poetry, directly revealing the speaker's hypocrisy in feigning a position of inferiority, worshipping at the feet of an ostensibly exalted lady" (36). Siddal's and Christina Rossetti's poems, both written by women who were close to D.G. Rossetti and his poetry, suggest that D.G. Rossetti's artistic treatment of women did not sit well with his female readers.
- [41] Much has been written on Monna Innominata which complements my short comments on the preface and my overarching argument concerning mutuality in Mother and Daughter. William Whitley provides a thorough examination of the interrelation of the various aspects of

Monna Innominata, the preface, epigraphs, and sonnets, and how the sequence as a whole interrogates the Petrarchan tradition. Antony H. Harrison explores Rossetti's interaction with and debt to Dante. Marjorie Stone examines Rossetti's sequence in relationship with Sonnets from the Portuguese and House of Life in addition to Petrarch and Dante, seeking a middle ground between the somewhat opposing views of Whitla and Harrison. Other insightful studies of Monna Innominata include those of Betty S. Flowers, Krista Lysack, Linda Schofield, in addition to the biographical background to the writing of the sequence given by Jan Marsh (470-76).

- [42] Webster makes a similar suggestion concerning a very different poem. In her 1886 review of Robert Bridges' Eros and Psyche, in which she compares Bridges' retelling of this myth to William Morris' formulation of the same tale, Webster ends the article with the following statement:

They [Bridges and Morris] have one coincidence. Neither of them has the heart to let Psyche dulcissima, Psyche simplicissima, plan for herself and carry out of her own free will the punishment of her sisters by sending them to their deadly leap from the mountain crag under the delusion that Zephyr is to float them to Cupid's palace to take the place of the banished wife. Each attributes the deception to Cupid. We mention this coincidence because it surprises at first, and to some it might seem suspicious. But in fact the desire to keep Psyche blameless of the murder of her sisters would present itself to any modern renderer of the tale, and the natural resource is to ascribe their fate to a divine vengeance. ("Eros and Psyche [review]" 451).

In the original story of Eros and Psyche by Apuleius, although Cupid does pronounce an unspecified penalty against Psyche's sisters for their ill advice, Psyche is the one who (with no stated intrusion from the gods) tells the sisters to jump from the cliff to wed Cupid. Webster's comment on both Victorian poets' significant alteration of the original story (Bridges' Eros tells Psyche specifically to go to her sisters with the false story), while couched as a defense against a potential charge of plagiarism, functions as a criticism of these poets' idealization and objectification of Psyche. The Italian superlatives used to describe Psyche draw parallels between Psyche and idealized Italian women like Beatrice and Laura, while the supposed naturalness of "any modern reader['s]" desire not to portray this perfect Psyche as vengeful reads somewhat tongue-in-cheek. These implications combine to suggest that a "real" Psyche -- one who was not dulcissima and simplicissima but rather a believable woman -- might desire to avenge her loss against her sisters. The suggestion, that these male poets have written a Psyche who is more idealized than she is even in the original version, rather than a multidimensional and therefore more sympathetic woman, coincides with Christina Rossetti's argument that a woman's own self portrait is "more tender, if less dignified," than that created by friend or beloved. Although Webster does not imply that a woman's retelling of Eros and Psyche would be different, she does hint that a woman who is allowed to seek her own retribution may be "less dignified," but would be more true to an individual's experience of the situation.

- [43] Dorothy Mermin makes this point in both of her works on Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Elizabeth Barrett Browning and "Female Poet"), as does Glennis Stephenson, Marjorie Stone, Angela Leighton Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Mary B. Moore in her chapter on

Sonnets from the Portuguese. The relationship of Sonnets from the Portuguese to Petrarchism is complex, and the above critics, in addition to Shaakeh S. Agajanian, all shed light from different angles on this slippery issue. Moore in particular, in addressing Sonnets from the Portuguese in the context of other female-voiced Petrarchan sequences, manages to skillfully negotiate the sometimes-problematic relationship of Barrett Browning to her model. Other studies of Sonnets from the Portuguese include Jerome Mazzaro, Angela Leighton "Stirring a Dust," Sharon Smulders "Sincere Doubt," Phyllis Pearson Elmore, and Alison Chapman. Elmore's structural analysis is particularly useful in understanding the development of the speaker's confidence in her own subjective voice.

- [44] A full examination of the intertextuality between Sonnets from the Portuguese and Mother and Daughter would be a profitable venture, for Webster's sequence comments upon Barrett Browning's more extensively than I have been able to show in this work, while Sonnets from the Portuguese also helps to illuminate various aspects of Webster's sequence.
- [45] Although no one doubts that Barrett Browning's sequence is intertwined with her relationship with Robert Browning, I am treating Barrett Browning's two lovers as separate from her and Robert Browning, to emphasize the parallels between Barrett Browning and Webster's creations of women sonnet-writer personae in their sequences.
- [46] Angela Leighton Elizabeth Barrett Browning also examines from a different angle the methods which Barrett Browning uses to keep from objectifying the male poet -- in her reading, specifically Robert Browning -- and turning him into a muse for her poetry (99-110).
- [47] The sympathy of the male poet's character is one which has not been explored deeply by critics. This is understandable, as the speaker's portrayal of his character is somewhat clouded by her deliberate use of Petrarchan conventions, and at times it is difficult to distinguish what one might term his "naturally" noble or sympathetic characteristics from his portrayal as a noble Petrarchan beloved. Nevertheless, I do think that the male poet's ability to see and love the female poet "for who she is," in common parlance, is central to the fact that this is a fulfilled romance and a romance of equality.
- [48] Antony H. Harrison reads the silence in the final sonnet of Monna Innominata as "deliberately [defying] that role [as the silent object] as traditionally conceived" in light of the previous 13 sonnets (155). She may be defying the silent role, but she is doing so not solely in the context of her own poetic powers, but rather in the context of the impotency of love-language in the face of the Divine (Sonnet 13). Silence is more empowering than speech when faced with the ineffability of true divine Love, but a more secular sequence might not have arrived at the same conclusion. For the centrality of religion to Monna Innominata, see also Stone 58-61, 68.
- [49] Victorian motherhood poetry, as a general topic, has not received any critical attention beyond Dorothy Mermin and Angela Leighton's pieces, which I discuss below. Kathleen Hickock does survey the role of the mother in Victorian women's poetry, but her study is

more useful for its survey of a wide variety of poetry and themes rather than for its overall conclusions. Individual writers of motherhood poetry have been discussed somewhat more, with Alice Meynell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti receiving the bulk of the attention. I list these articles in footnotes 53, 54-55, and 57 below, respectively. Motherhood poetry, as defined in the Introduction, occupies a gray area for contemporary critics, lying between children's poetry on the one hand and literature and criticism about motherhood (rather than from the mother's perspective) on the other. Both areas have provided useful information and ideas, which I have cited appropriately throughout my argument.

Twentieth-century motherhood poetry, on the other hand, is currently receiving fascinating, insightful attention by critics. Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvia Plath, among many others, provide fertile ground for examination of poetic portrayals of mothering that counter received notions of expectations about mother-child interactions. Two of the many articles treating twentieth-century motherhood poetry are Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb's "Bitches with Broomsticks: The Bad Mother in American Maternity Poetry" and Mary Lynn Broe's "A Subtle Psychic Bond: The Mother Figure in Sylvia Plath's Poetry."

- [50] A survey of Victorian and Edwardian British and American poetry anthologies easily available to me has shown that every one has included selections similar to those of Mrs. Gatty. Most anthologies are subdivided into topical sections. H.C. Beeching's A Paradise of English Poetry (1893) has a section entitled "Home Affections and Friendship," of which almost half consists of, loosely speaking, motherhood poetry. (As the editor included no poems by living authors or poems still under copyright, these poems are all by men, with the exception of a poem by Mary Lamb.) Charles A. Dana's The Household Book of Poetry (10th ed., 1865) also contains a 50-page section of "Poems of Childhood," the selection of which mirrors Mrs. Gatty's in many ways. B.E. Stevenson's The Home Book of Verse (1912) is the most comprehensive of the anthologies surveyed; it contains seven subsections under "Poems of Youth and Age" which focus on motherhood and children's poetry, and other poems which fit the "motherhood poetry" definition are scattered throughout the book. Even those anthologies not subdivided, such as Alarac A. Watts's The Poetical Album (1826), include a wide variety of motherhood poetry. These collections (with the exception of Stevenson's, which appears to have a different goal and aesthetic) are also characterized by high-quality paper, elaborate cover designs, and engraved frontispieces (although they are not otherwise illustrated), suggesting that they may have been designed for the gift book market.

In addition to anthologies which included motherhood poetry among their topics were a number of British and American collections of children's poetry edited by poets who were well regarded in their own rights. As the headings of the above anthologies indicate, motherhood poetry was often subsumed under the topic of childhood, so that both anthologies and original collections of children's poetry (such as Kate Greenaway, mentioned in the Introduction, or Christina Rossetti's Sing-Song discussed below), usually contained poems spoken in the mother's voice, expressing her perception of the poetic situation. J.G. Whittier's Child-Life (1871) falls into this category, as presumably does the posthumous collection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's motherhood poetry, entitled Poems

of Childhood (1866), which I was unfortunately unable to access. The review of this curious collection, however, attributes the editing to a Mr. Miller and includes in its discussion of the book "A Cry of the Children" and "Isobel's Child" ("Poems of Childhood [review]" 517). Barrett Browning's dramatic monologue "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus" was printed in the United States in 1868 as a single volume entitled The True Mary, edited with notes by W.A. Muhlenberg examining the religious portrayal of Mary. Although Muhlenberg's agenda is a Protestant defense, he bases his apologia around Barrett Browning's portrayal of a real mother-child relationship between Mary and Jesus; this curious volume illustrates one aspect of the nineteenth-century interest in the mother-child relationship.

The single exception I found to the inclusion of motherhood poetry in a collection of children's poetry was Coventry Patmore's The Children's Garden (1863), which includes poetry ranging from Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Barrett Browning's "The Romance of the Swan's Nest" to traditional ballads, but includes no motherhood poetry, and very little poetry by women. Patmore does acknowledge the lack of "children's poetry" and "motherhood poetry" in his introduction; his chosen poems are "genuine," he claims, and have been tested on "intelligent children," and as such the selections exclude "nearly all verse written expressly for children, and most of the poetry written about children for grown people" (v, vi). Patmore's comments resonate with Webster's own comments on children's literature in A Housewife's Opinions (see p. 11 above). The disparity between Patmore's selections and those of other anthologies of children's poetry suggests that the intended audience for the majority of these anthologies was adult, at least as purchasers and selectors of literature for their children as well as readers.

In many ways, Margaret Gatty's anthology is the ideal volume to select for examination. Its poetic selections are typical of all the other anthologies I surveyed (with the exception of Patmore's). Mrs. Gatty herself wrote children's stories and some poetry (some of her own poems are included in the anthology), and hers is the only anthology I have discovered which is deliberately "directed to the use and comfort of mothers of families especially" (xiv). As such, it is self-consciously directed toward mothers more than children, while it mirrors the poetry selections of other anthologies, placing this continuity of theme in an adult context which, to the modern eye at least, seems more appropriate than the childhood focus of the other anthologizers. With this adult focus, it is the only anthology which does not contain strictly children's poetry, therefore providing the widest selection of relevant poems for examination.

- [51] To be fair to Mrs. Gatty's selection process, it must be noted that in addition to her sentimental selections, she also includes poems which provide a more understanding treatment of childhood or the parent's perspective, such as Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman," and the five Jean Ingelow "Seven Times..." poems. Ingelow's poems, nominally dramatic monologues, which track the "ages of woman" from childhood ("Seven Times One") through wishing for marriage ("Seven Times Two") and motherhood ("Seven Times Four: Maternity") to her children's adulthood ("Seven Times Six: Giving in Marriage") and her looking forward to death ("Seven Times Seven: Longing for Home"), deserve an extended critical examination in their own right. By providing a progressive treatment which examines both the inevitable maturation of a child and the changing perspective of that individual, Ingelow creates a series of

multifaceted and multivoiced poems examining the maturation of women, even while some of those poems repeat the stock platitudes of motherhood poetry.

- [52] "We Are Seven" provides an interesting Romantic prelude to Webster's later use of the child's direct speech in her sonnet sequence. The child and the narrator are set as equals in "We Are Seven," as the poet gives the girl's speech without intrusive descriptions or qualifications. Even though we as educated scholars may know that Wordsworth is highly vested in the romanticized child, as many of his other poems show, the child in "We Are Seven" manages to elude Wordsworth's tendency to romanticize her, largely through the foregrounding of her own words within the poem to the exclusion of almost all interpretation on the part of the poet. As he attempts here to remain true to the thought patterns and speech of a young child, the poet finds that, just as the child refuses to accept the narrator's opinions of what does and does not constitute a sibling, she also refuses to cooperate with the poet's attempt to romanticize her. The "rustic, woodland" girl speaks about her domestic skills rather than her woodland haunts, and the girl's speech is simple, direct, and concrete, as she shows no tendency to become the "Faery Voyager" of Wordsworth's "To H.C., Six Years Old" ("Seven" line 9; "H.C." line 5). Just as the child "would have her will" as she defies the narrator's knowledge, so does she manage to remain a lifelike child in the poem without the romantic garb of many of Wordsworth's other children (line 68).
- [53] In addition to Leighton's chapter on Meynell in Heart and Maria Frawley's article, both of which are cited below, see Beverly Ann Schlack.
- [54] Sandra Donaldson and Mairi Calcraft-Rennie have both written biographically-focused articles on Barrett Browning's motherhood poetry. These articles highlight the importance of motherhood to Barrett Browning as a person, and the way she portrayed her own motherhood experiences "sideways" or marginally through her poetry. However, they do not provide the kind of tools necessary for a strictly literary examination of motherhood themes and concerns.
- [55] "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" does provide an examination of the mother's subjectivity, similar to that which Leighton values in Meynell. Elizabeth H. Battles discusses the way this dramatic monologue foregrounds the consciousness of the slave mother, and also the way her child mutates through various symbolic phases for the mother, providing yet another example of one of the ways in which the subjectivity of the mother can override that of the child. The preponderance of dead-child poems in Barrett Browning's oeuvre, however, as well as the overlaid emotionalism in poems such as "The Cry of the Children," repeat the sentimental qualities that characterize much motherhood poetry. Sandra Donaldson's article provides a more nuanced look at the changes her motherhood poetry underwent after her son Pen's birth. Nevertheless, the child is consistently idealized or distanced throughout Barrett Browning's maternal poems, and while much can be made of these poems for what they contribute to the genre as a whole, what they do not seem to be able to contribute is a carefully nuanced portrayal of a child. Often, the child acts as a stand-in for a political point which Barrett Browning is making, as in "Casa Guidi Windows"

and “The Cry of the Children” as well as in “Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point.” While these poems are certainly powerful, their power comes in part from the symbolic role which the child plays, not through a sympathetic portrayal of the child.

- [56] All references to Aurora Leigh are for the Norton edition and will be cited with the abbreviation AL and book and line numbers.
- [57] Lila Hanft and Virginia Sickbert have both examined the maternal perspective in Sing-Song; I discuss their work below. The majority of the criticism on Sing-Song has not focused on the maternal voice of the sonnets. Sharon Smulders’ “Sound, Sense, and Structure” looks at the overarching structure in Sing-Song and places it in the larger context of Rossetti’s poetry, while Roderick McGillis examines the didactic significance of Sing-Song and Rossetti’s other pieces of children’s literature. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra provides a fascinating examination of the interplay of Rossetti’s text, Rossetti’s sketches for each of the poems, and illustrator Arthur Hughes’ realizations of Rossetti’s sketches.
- [58] I am indebted to Sickbert’s article for an example of the ways Benjamin’s theory can be applied in literary criticism.
- [59] All citations for Sing-Song are from the Ann Arbor reprint of the original 1872 volume, with the original illustrations, and will be cited by page number.

Chapter 2

- [60] Jessica Benjamin’s psychoanalytic writings which focus predominately on intersubjectivity include, beyond The Bonds of Love (1988) and “An Outline of Intersubjectivity” (1990) mentioned below, “Recognition and Destruction: An Outline of Intersubjectivity” (1992), and Shadow of the Other (1998), in addition to published discussions mentioned below in this footnote. Shadow of the Other moves beyond the strictly psychoanalytic to position Benjamin’s work within the larger realm of feminist theorizing on the development of the gendered self. Much of her other work, including Like Subjects, Love Objects (1995) and examinations of the daughter-father relationship, addresses more specifically gender roles in the drama of domination and subjugation. Additionally, Benjamin has done studies on transference and criticism of the psychoanalytic analyst-patient relationship.
- Benjamin has also engaged in several published discussions of intersubjectivity, in which she has further refined and explained her theory. These include “Reply to Burack” (1993) (responding to Cynthia Burack’s critique “Love, Rage, and Destruction”), “Intersubjective Distinctions” (2000) (replying to Gerhardt, Sweetnam, and Borton’s synopsis and discussion of Benjamin’s theories in light of the patient-analysis relationship), and “Discussion: The Relational Self” (1992) (clarifying her position in the larger development of feminism in psychoanalysis in responding to Judith V. Jordon). Her paper “Finding the Way Out” (1998) examines her intersubjective theories in the specific realm of clinical psychoanalysis, responding to papers by Malcom Owen Slavin and Daniel Kriegman and by Philip A. Ringstrom. Both Judith Butler and Stephen A. Mitchell have provided excellent insight into the strengths and weaknesses of Benjamin’s ideas on sexuality and intersubjectivity (to

which Benjamin responded in an article entitled "Response to Commentaries by Mitchell and by Butler"). In addition to these dialogues, Stephen Frosh has examined Benjamin's theories alongside those of Lacan, and José Brunner has discussed Benjamin's version of intersubjectivity alongside earlier feminist critiques of Freud.

Benjamin's formulation of intersubjectivity theory is also beginning to be examined and used in the literary field. As Judith Butler points out, in Benjamin's theory intersubjective interaction takes place within the realm of communication, both verbal and non-verbal -- making Benjamin's theory harmonize well with literary explorations (272). Her name is becoming increasingly common in dissertation abstracts as her usefulness as a feminist alternative to Freudian concepts is becoming recognized, as Sickbert's article demonstrates. Additionally, Kay Torney Souter provides a useful discussion how the psychology of the interpersonal, including Benjamin's development among others, can engage in a mutually beneficial interplay with poststructural literary criticism.

- [61] The psychological concept of intersubjectivity is not unique to Benjamin; she derives the term and portions of her thought from the social theory of Jurgen Habermas as well as the infant psychology of Colin Trevarthen and Daniel Stern (see Bonds 19-20). Many of the concepts which underpin Benjamin's argument stem from the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, of whom Benjamin is a pupil (see Burack and Brunner; Brunner also discusses some of Benjamin's other critical debts). Additionally, there is no single intersubjective psychoanalytic approach; other analysts have proposed different approaches to a relational theory (Gerhardt, Sweetman, and Borton 7). However, I am using Benjamin's formulation and synthesis of intersubjectivity because it is clearly, even elegantly, expressed; it stems from Benjamin's own feminist agenda which holds repercussions on a larger scale for feminist analysis of the work of Victorian women poets; and it lends itself to literary uses, as Sickbert, Souter, and Benjamin herself have shown.
- [62] Benjamin applies the term "intersubjectivity" to the entire theory. I use it as a noun to apply to the theory, and as an adjective to apply to a relationship which is characterized by the desire of one or both parties to maintain a relationship of mutuality and recognition.
- [63] See Bonds 13 (248 n.3) and 18. The limited interest in the speaking or writing mother until the late 1970s is due, in part, to the invisibility of this concept. Individuals, both men and women, write more frequently from the viewpoint of the child rather than of the parent, and as the feminist attitudes of the first half of the twentieth century grew, the women writing often defined themselves against their parents, rather than as progenitors (of ideas, if not of children) themselves. Simone de Beauvoir's biographical writings, many of Colette's novels, and some of Virginia Woolf's writings exemplify this child's perspective in the modernist era.
- [64] The speaker in Meynell's "Maternity" uses a similar technique, by phrasing the mother's defense of her sorrow as a direct quotation. If one of Meynell's significant contributions to Victorian women's poetry is in giving a direct, unsentimental voice to the mother, this poem illustrates that contribution structurally by literally giving the mother a voice in the poem.

Victorian women's poetry is in giving a direct, unsentimental voice to the mother, this poem illustrates that contribution structurally by literally giving the mother a voice in the poem.

- [65] This fear is certainly legitimate, as examples abound of the marginalization and objectification of the mother in poetry from the child's point of view. Gilbert's analysis of Aurora and Marion's ambivalent or even hostile mother-figures provides just one example of this kind of de-individualization of the mother. Certainly Freud's portrayal of the mother as either the prize or the "bad guy" in the Oedipal family drama has helped to reinforce this objectification of the mother in literature. In many ways, then, Webster is attempting to recuperate the maternal voice in Sonnets 8-11 in much the same way as certain current feminists are attempting to recover the mother's voice and point of view from obscurity.
- [66] The writings of Sarah Stickney Ellis exemplify this concept in the Victorian era, although the sentiment can be found in many other places as well. Underpinning most of her arguments lies the assumption that "woman's love is an ever-flowing and inexhaustible fountain, that must be perpetually imparting from the source of its own blessedness" (Women of England 16). The quintessential example of the longsuffering woman, loving even thorough the most vile of persecutions, is the story of Griselda, which has been retold, in various forms, through many centuries and in many cultures, but is most commonly known by English-speakers from Chaucer's Clerk's Tale from the Canterbury Tales; it is also broadly disseminated in Boccaccio's Decameron, Day 10 tale 10. Interestingly, Webster herself invokes the Griselda theme in her essay "A Polynesian Griselda" in A Housewife's Opinions. Webster tells the missionary's tale of the Polynesian wife who allowed her cannibal husband to eat her because of her beauty, and who composes her own dirge as the husband prepares the fire. The essay, with the blend of humor, sarcasm, sympathy, and seriousness which characterizes Webster's prose, subtly critiques the supposed virtues of "sublime and ludicrous submission, . . . dignity and abjectness of utter obedience, . . . sedate approval of a lord and master's crimes, . . . [and] strength and servility" which characterize Griselda (127).
- [67] Of course, Webster's mother-poet does not venture as far into the realm of cooperative poetry as does Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), a connection which will be explored further in the conclusion. A comparison of Webster's sonnet sequence and the poetry and journals of Michael Field may prove to be a fruitful beginning point to examining late Victorian women poets' attempt at deconstructing the concept of the inspired poet in favor of a more cooperative approach to creating poetry.

Chapter 4

- [68] Webster herself presumably knew that she was dying, as she had been suffering from a respiratory disease at least since the early 1880s, so this sonnet may signal Webster's reconciliation with her own mortality and impending death.
- [69] Apollo, the sun god and god of poetry, may also be glancingly suggested here. Victorian women poets' often focused on Apollo and his laurels (as evidenced, for example, by Aurora Leigh's wish for, but denial of, a crown of bay in Book 2). This focus on Apollo's poetic

powers by women poets makes his possible presence in this poem more likely, and the allusion to Apollo and his poetic powers may reinforce the emphasis later in Mother and Daughter on the daughter's voice as the equal of the mother-poet's. The interesting emphasis on "misbelief" (as implicitly opposed to true belief) and immortality in this sonnet, aligning the daughter with the gods (as was suggested in Sonnet 2), also supports the possibility that the sun imagery in this and the following sonnets may hold a hint of Apollo's presence in it.

- [70] Children are often associated with a kind of immortality for the family line. On a biographical note, Margaret never married or had children (at least by the end of Webster's life), so in order for Webster's biological line to continue "immortal," Margaret would have had to remain alive indefinitely.
- [71] Theodore Watts-Dunton, interestingly, makes a comment in his obituary for Webster about her poetry which may further explain why her mother-poet does not seek to find immortality in her sonnets. Extrapolating from the likely fate of Webster's poetry -- that it would not be read beyond her lifetime -- to the fate of most late Victorian poetry -- that it would not be read beyond its own age -- Watts-Dunton comments "[p]oetic immortality is, therefore, a relative term" ("Mrs. Augusta Webster" 355). Watts-Dunton's assumption that the canon could not hold the bounty of good poetry being written, and that as tastes in poetry changed, late Victorian poetry would go out of vogue, may have reflected a view held not only by himself but by others of his circle, including Webster. The affinity between Watts-Dunton's dim view of the life span of contemporary poetry and Webster's mother-poet's refusal to seek immortality in her own poetry is noteworthy for understanding Webster's treatment of immortality in this sonnet.
- [72] This theme is linked with the body being the musical instrument of the woman poet, and as such it occurs frequently in the poetry of Letitia Elizabeth Landon and others. Barrett Browning's "A Musical Instrument," for example, carries the theme into the poetry of later Victorian women.
- [73] Although the simile refers directly to the mother's "youth upflower[ing] with hers," rather than specifically to the mother's articulation of the daughter's fresh ideas, we have already seen in Sonnet 16 how closely connected the mother's physical being is with her poetic endeavors. Therefore, because of this interconnectedness between the physical and poetical, the simile used to illustrate the rebloom of the mother's youth can also illuminate the linguistic rejuvenation of the mother by the daughter.
- [74] This image is also a comment on the lyrics of the troubadours and trouveres, which were an important influence on Petrarch's own love poetry. The formula and stylization of the troubadour lyrics are such that they do not refer to any reality or love outside the poem itself; the love does not exist beyond the expression thereof. See Paul Zumthor Chapter 5 for further explication.

- [75] The cuckoo does not build its own nests and raise its own young; rather, the cuckoo lays an egg in the nest of another bird. The foster parents incubate the cuckoo egg along with their own, and feed the cuckoo chick alongside their own young. Eventually, newly hatched cuckoo ejects the chicks and any unhatched eggs of the parent birds from the nest, so that only the cuckoo chick survives.

Conclusion

- [76] I am aware of only two reviews, the September 1895 Athenaeum review and the short review in The Bookman, July 1895.
- [77] The reviewer may well have been Theodore Watts-Dunton. He was a friend and supporter of Webster from the days before she came to London in 1870; they worked together for both the Examiner and the Athenaeum, and he wrote her obituary for the Athenaeum (15 September 1894). Furthermore, the reviewer's notions of what are and are not appropriate diction and poetic form for sonnets coincide with Watts-Dunton's widely accepted views. In his article "Poetry" for the 9th ed. Encyclopaedia Britannica (reprinted afterwards in many different forms), Watts-Dunton makes the following statement about the sonnet's function as didactic poetry:
- Of course, before didactic matter can become anything more than versified prose, it has to be excarnated from the prose tissue in which all such matter takes birth, and then incarnated anew in the spiritualized tissue of which the poetic body is and must always be composed. (Poetry 173-4)
- This quotation aligns closely with the Athenaeum reviewer's comment that Webster, in her sonnets, "is apt to pass into colloquial form of expression such as have no place in the artistic kind of poetry she adopts" (346).
- [78] See also Sutphin Potraits 34-36. The early twentieth-century references to Webster are few, and rarely laudatory. In her 1949 biography of Christina Rossetti, Marya Zaturenska discusses the oft-quoted letter of Webster's to Rossetti on the suffrage question. Rossetti, of course, did not respond favorably, and Zaturenska comments on the supposed inappropriateness of Webster's approach that "Mrs. Webster was insensitive as we can see in her poetry," although she does not expand on this "insensitive" poetic style (188). Additionally, a Professor Walker, of St David's College, Lampeter, appears to have written an essay on Webster, although the contents of this essay are not currently known (Hake and Compton-Rickett 18).
- Even though her poetry was not well accepted by the generations which followed her, Webster's essays, particularly those in A Housewife's Opinions on the "woman question," were quoted authoritatively and respectfully; I have discovered two by chance, and undoubtedly others exist. Mona Caird quotes from Webster's essay "Husband-Hunting and Match-Making" in her provocative article "Marriage" in the August 1888 issue of Westminster Review, and Irene Clephane quotes frequently from various of Webster's essays in her 1932 retrospective collection of illustrations entitled Our Mothers.

- [79] See, for example, Marylu Hill, who clearly sees the female protagonists in modernist women's novels as a daughter venturing "from the father's world of language and public action and back into a new appreciation of the mother's hitherto unrecognized virtues" (1), and Jane Lilienfeld's examination of Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf, and Colette's responses to their mothers in their lives and novels. Virginia Woolf writes often about mothers, but even when portraying their thoughts, one has the impression of a daughter-writer exploring and experimenting with the values and concerns of a different generation rather than someone fully engaged with the mother's subjectivity.
- [80] Kathryn Prince has thoroughly outlined the history of the critical reactions to the "unity" of voice in Michael Field's poetry (esp. pages 8-9). Essentially, the earliest critics viewed the poetry as the perfect blending of two voices into one, while some (but not all) critics since the late 1970s have focused rather on the divergence between the two poets' skills and strengths. Virginia Blain provides an insightful and even-handed discussion of the nature of the romantic and poetic relationship between the two which keeps each poet's individuality and strengths intact while still recognizing the mutuality which permeated their creative endeavors.
- [81] I am grateful to Kathryn Prince for allowing me to read her unpublished paper on the reception of and critical responses to Michael Field's poetry, and for several lively discussions of Michael Field and other Victorian poets.
- [82] The British Library online catalogue, where I found the initial reference, attributes the volume to Alice Macdonald Kipling and Alice Kipling Fleming, the mother and sister of Rudyard Kipling. Alice Kipling Fleming also published verse with her more famous brother in an 1884 volume entitled Echoes. An examination of the Kipling papers may render further explanations of the idiosyncratic nature of this volume of verse and these women's reasons for emphasizing the nature of their relationship in the publication.
- [83] Many women writers, novelists and poets, felt that their art was hampered by their dual role as mother and author. Margaret Oliphant's disappointment in the quality of her own body of works stems in part from the fact that she had to support not only her own children, but also her brother's (5-6). Like Oliphant, Felicia Hemans also lamented that "the constant necessity of providing sums of money to meet the exigencies of the boys' education has obliged me to waste my mind in what I consider desultory effusions" (qtd. in Leighton, Heart 14). The early nineteenth-century poet Ann Taylor ceased writing after her children were born because she felt that "if one [of writing or children] must suffer, it should certainly be the literary," while her unmarried sister Jane continued to publish (qtd. in Davidoff and Hall 66).
- [84] For all the Victorian sonnet critics I surveyed in Chapter 1, as well as sonnet writers such as D.G. Rossetti, the sonnet had a distinct form. It must have a narrow focus on a single topic or idea; present a unified, complete, and transparent vision of that topic or idea; and (ideally) provide movement from or an extrapolation of the proposition of the octave in the sestet, while still remaining focused on the original idea. Additionally, line number, meter, length,

and diction must all be appropriate to this compact but powerful poetic form. Victorian critics spent the majority of their time elaborating on these basic principles to try to define the "ideal" sonnet. See specifically Charles Tomlinson, Leigh Hunt and S. Adams Lee, and James Ashcroft Noble. Webster's sonnets generally fit these basic ideas about the true sonnet form (even though the more narrowly-focused critics would find many points at which to quibble), although her meter and diction do fall shy of at least the Athenaeum reviewer's sonnet ideals.

- [85] Virginia Blain has thoroughly addressed this issue in her article "Michael Field, the Two-headed Nightingale."
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