

Expressions of White Ink:
Victorian Women's Poetry
and the Lactating Breast

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Abstract

The period spanning from the late 1850s to the mid-1860s frames a historical moment in Victorian England when lactation and breastfeeding came under intense public scrutiny in both medical and creative writing. While popular domestic author Isabella Beeton wrote on the dangers that an unwary mother's milk represented for her child and herself in her serial publication, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1859-1861), prominent physicians C.H.F. Routh and William Acton launched a public dispute in medical journals contesting the physiological and moral dangers that the fallen wet nurse posed for the middle-class household (1859). Meanwhile, the medical community catalogued the bizarre long-term physical and dispositional side-effects of an infant's consumption of "bad milk" – among them, syphilis, swearing, sexual immorality, and death (Matus 161-162). But it is not only medical writers who were *latching on* to the breastfeeding debate as a means of voicing social and political concerns of the day; recent literary critics have gestured towards the troubling manifestations of lactation in popular mid-century novels like Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) and George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) as entry points into Victorian anxieties about classed and gendered embodiment. This project stipulates that the mid-century preoccupation with managing women's milk represents an intersection of two overlapping cultural paradigms pertaining to female expression: a cultural devaluation of female physiological expression as unconscious if not dangerous leakage, and a deprecation of female linguistic and poetic expression as an analogously unmeditated and potentially disruptive kind of communication. Mid-century manuals, articles, and novels offered public voice to a number of existing anxieties surrounding breastfeeding which accompanied the

mid-nineteenth century, a historical moment at the cusp of a waning popularity in wet nursing and at the advent and rise of patented infant formula. This project stipulates that at least three female poets of the mid-nineteenth century employ lactation imagery in their works as a means of recasting a cultural devaluation of female expression – inventing a new critical terminology of feminine poetic signifiers that uses the symbolic medium of breastmilk as its ink. Informed by the medical and cultural context of the High Victorian age, I explore how poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), and Augusta Webster (1837-1894) not only participate in the preoccupation with unstable bodies and fluids, but capitalize on female leakage in an elaborate rhetorical strategy that embarks on a new embodied female poetics. Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Rossetti's "Goblin Market," and Webster's *Mother and Daughter* all enlist the lactating and feeding breast in a series of elaborate metaphors of female identity construction, literary expression, and poetic voice.

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Chapter One

Milk Matters: The Victorian Context of Breastfeeding

In *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1859-1861), one of the most comprehensive and widely circulated advice manuals on Victorian domestic life, the eponymous Beeton outlines the otherworldly dangers of breastfeeding. Operating under the popular assumption that the breastfeeder's temperament fundamentally determines the quality of the milk produced, Beeton warns that any sleeping mother who allows her infant to nurse is liable to produce a "sluggish" fluid and, in turn, a monstrous child. The mother awakes "languid and unrefreshed from her sleep," suffering from "febrile symptoms and hectic flushes, caused by her baby vampire, who, while dragging from her her health and strength, has excited in itself a set of symptoms directly opposite, but fraught with the same injurious consequences – functional derangement" (489). That the sleeping mother's milk could be perceived as a newly transformed poison for her drinking infant points to a widespread cultural uneasiness about the instability of this singular bodily fluid. What's more, Beeton's description exposes a mid-nineteenth-century conviction that the breast milk's constant fluctuation becomes problematic only once this "most sentimentalized and personal of bodily fluids" is destined for inter-body exchange (Law 94) – externalized beyond the bounds of the mother's breast and re-internalized in the infant's mouth in a twofold process of literal and symbolical communication. The constitution of this liquid determines the constitution of the body it enters with the result that, based on her temperament alone, the lactating mother could be at one instance a source of vital

nourishment to her infant and, the next, a contaminator to her suckling child. Not to be overlooked – at the core of this crisis is an expressive woman.

This fraught rendering of a woman's physiological emission, bizarre as it may seem, has both historical and critical precedence. It has long been established amongst scholars of social history and feminism that there is a deep-seated cultural anxiety in place regarding the instability of bodily fluids, one that has often manifested itself in a cultural discourse which disparages the female body as the "leaky vessel" by negatively coding its intermittent processes of lubrication, menstruation, childbirth, and lactation. Indeed, according to Gail Paster's compelling critical discussion of bodily leaks in early modern literature, women's production of fluids has long been represented "as excessive, hence either disturbing or shameful" (46). The likes of Paster's criticism has been part and parcel of a late twentieth-century critical rhetoric on literary representations of the female body's material expressiveness, including Margrit Shildrick's seminal work on leaky bodies and boundaries in postmodernist literature and Elizabeth Grosz's efforts to inculcate a new "corporeal feminism" out of a deeply misogynous written tradition.¹ But scholarship on the leaky woman has for the most part overlooked a historical period which was a hotbed for this social anxiety – that of Victorian England – and one particular female leakage that perhaps holds the most disruptive sway over the Victorian body on account of its potential for interpersonal communication – that of lactation.

¹ In *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (1997), Margrit Shildrick traces a historical trend in western medical texts which normalizes a construction of stable bodies, coded male, while "unstable" female bodies are denied moral agency and embodiment. For Shildrick, the "leakiness" associated with feminine bodies ought to be reconstructed as the model for a new feminist (bio)ethics, as "an expression of the discursive interplay between all bodies and all subjects" (217). Meanwhile, in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz argues that the sexually specific body is socially constructed, with the result that "women's corporeal specificity is used to explain and justify the different (read: unequal) social positions and cognitive abilities of the two sexes" that have systematically disadvantaged women (14). Grosz locates women's physiological experiences (menstruation, childbirth, lactation, and menopause) as the foundation of a new, corporeal feminism.

Shared Leakages: The Breastfeeder, the Infant, and the Female Poet

The middle-class woman's lifelong affiliation with the child goes well beyond her literal consignment to the role of childcare provider within the Victorian household; she was imaginatively aligned with the figure of the infant by way of their shared bodily incontinence. Since the 1970s, scholars have been arguing that a middle-class woman's mothering capacities were central to her identity during the Victorian period, a number of them focussing on a woman's identification with the Angel in the House as a method of excluding her from what has been widely referred to as the "public sphere" of higher education, paid employment, and government.² But apart from Elaine and English Showalter's unconventional 1970 publication, "Victorian Women and Menstruation," it has only been quite recently that critics such as Julie Marie Strange and Amy D'Antonio have gestured towards the interplay between the lived reality of a woman's reproductive processes and her delegation to the nursery. Of course not all middle-class women were mothers, and even those who were did not always single-handedly or even personally attend to their infants, but the cult of motherhood ensured that their proximity to the nursery was an imagined, if not a literal, reality. Among both mothers and non-mothers, those physiological processes connoting the female reproductive role – menstruation and lactation alike – were considered unconscious and uncontrolled bodily leakages of the kind that infants were at the mercy of until they developed the physiological and intellectual faculties to turn them on and

² This construction of woman as the "Angel in the House" originated with Coventry Patmore's emblematic 1854 poem of the same name. The critical framework of private/public spheres is so widespread that it does not require much reiteration here; for some notable examples of the intersection of gendered spheres and English literature, see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*.

off at will.³ Never able to get a handle on her leakages, woman's role as eternal child lent itself to a rhetoric of physical and mental inferiority stemming from bodily incontinence, and that characterization appeared in both writing about women and writing about women's writing.

This trope of what Claudia Nelson terms the "arrested child-woman" appeared as a common thread in Victorian literature and served to undermine feminist movements aimed at increased political autonomy and public voice for women.⁴ In an effort to delegitimize female-authored writing, a number of prominent male authors reasoned that if a woman's physiological expressions were a series of unbidden leakages, then her linguistic expressions in writing represented yet another drain on her already volatile bodily and intellectual faculties. Politicians who contested woman's growing political voice construed the spinster's pleas for the vote as an extension of her bodily leakage (Vlock 168), while some medical men even subscribed to an early modern belief that "a woman's body was less hermetically sealed than a man's" and therefore inherently broken, echoing Gonzalo's remark in *The Tempest* that his sinking ship is as dysfunctional as an "unstaunched wench" or freely menstruating woman (Siena 168).

The maternal function was largely considered to be draining for a woman's body and mind, and even Beeton warns that breastfeeding for too long a period is liable to sap the mother of both physical and intellectual strength (204-205). What is crucial here is that just as feminine depletion exceeded the body and impinged on the intellect, the depletion itself

³ For Julie Marie Strange, nineteenth-century menstruation narratives "placed women firmly in the orbit of domesticity by virtue of her biology" (607). For Amy D'Antonio, Victorian representations of the mother operate by "othering" female physiological fluidity as being counter to culture, situating the nursing mother "as an adult who has returned to the infantile condition of boundlessness" (7).

⁴ Nelson links the literary trope of the "child-woman" to the ideal of a financially dependent Victorian woman, where "her inability to grow is frequently also encouraged by the paradigms of Victorian romance, since society, especially male society, may reward the child-woman with admiration and protection" (7).

was not just a factor of motherhood but of all womanhood. The metaphor of drainage functioned to “prove” that menstruation was a literal drain on both the blood from the body and a figurative cerebral fluid from the mind (Strange 613), and as late as 1873, Dr. Edward Clarke of Harvard University denied women entrance on the basis that menstruation made them something of *periodic* invalids, unsuited for academic pursuits (Showalter 86). Veiled references to bodily expressions were sought out as proof of women’s inability for written expression, and as such, in no uncertain terms in 1852 George Henry Lewes used menstruation and childbirth to explain why women could never be great writers, claiming that “For twenty years of the best years of their lives [...] women are mainly occupied by the cares, the duties, the enjoyments, and the sufferings of maternity. During large parts of these years, too, their bodily health is generally so broken and precarious as to incapacitate them for any strenuous exertion” (“Lady Novelists” 133). The Showalters conclude that since Lewes targets Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë here, neither of whom had any children, he is conflating the female expressions of childbirth and menstruation (88) as being dual signifiers of a woman’s inability to write good literature and subscribing to this model of female bodily and writerly incontinence. In the chapters that follow, I entertain the possibility that Victorian women poets were not incognisant of the misogynist rhetoric of the leaky body, nor did they attempt to stanch such a longstanding and widespread discourse of gendered expression. Instead, they capitalize on the leaky body by channelling it into a project bent on legitimizing female expression in all of its manifestations – most notably, in authorship. Moreover, these poets benefit from this familiar alignment of the woman with the child by portraying the correlation in vivid reimaginings of the nursing dyad which

retrofit female leakage into a productive metaphor for poetic communication and community.

Perhaps this is a good time to make an important qualification against a potential reading of my project as essentialist. Historically, the role of an author's embodied experience is something that has fallen by the wayside in critical readings of that author's work, and recent proponents of intersectional feminism and social epistemology have been some of the first to consider that a person's lived circumstances contribute to unique ways of knowing. With theorists like Donna Haraway and Evelyn Fox Keller helping to foreground the notion of situated knowledge, modern scholars have begun to recognize the embodied experiences of female, non-Caucasian, non-Judeo-Christian, and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) individuals as providing unique insights that have not been adequately represented in dominant discourse.⁵ For me, the reality that each of these poets was born and self-identified as women cannot be overlooked; while their poetic scenes of lactation do not necessarily correspond to actual, embodied experiences of motherhood, they function in the poets' larger rhetorical strategy towards a feminine poetics. To be sure, this interpretation is grounded in the assumption that these women were sufficiently aware of and concerned with female corporeal experience to warrant its inclusion in their poetry, but my reading does not suppose that the employment of this rhetorical strategy is limited to biological mothers who breastfed their own offspring. One of the appeals of this triad is their diverse relationships to maternity and breastfeeding: although there is evidence to suggest that Augusta Webster breastfed her daughter, Margaret, Elizabeth Barrett Browning hired wet nurses to breastfeed her only son, Pen; meanwhile, despite writing children's poems,

⁵ See, for instance, Donna Haraway's "Situated Knowledges" and Evelyn Fox Keller's *Reflections on Gender and Science*.

Christina Rossetti never had any children. But maternity and lactation can be conceptual and figurative as well as embodied, lived experience: even male poets – including Dante Gabriel Rossetti – participated in a centuries-old tradition of using maternity metaphors to describe poetic generation (Van Remoortel, “Metaphor” 470-471). While I also concede that my three female poets represent exclusively – and yet only a small fraction of – privileged, middle-class, Caucasian, female experience, I still believe there is something to be said about the fact of their occupying and living in an ascribed female body and using that referentiality as a vector for writerly expression. That said, my focus is directed less on these authors’ physiological experiences within their bodies – which can only ever amount to speculation – and towards an understanding of the female expressions that stem from the poet’s *text* body and how maternal metaphors can be read in a different capacity from those of a male-authored tradition. Thus when Aurora, and by extension, Barrett Browning, describes her poems as “Men” (3: 90), her insistence on a woman’s capacity to write poetry stems from that poet’s real or imagined capacity to carry and give birth to human beings, and this claim holds an altogether different meaning when it is expressed by a character, or poet, who self-identifies as female. I am less concerned with the literal matter of sexually specific leakage, then, and more so the literary matter that both concerns this leakage and affords it meaning.

If these three poets are indeed using lactation imagery in their poems to assert women’s literary authority, then they are threatening a dominant cultural narrative that has negatively constructed female liquid and linguistic expression. For as much as I emphasize the embodied reality of these poets’ “being” women, a woman’s delegation to leaky vessel does not stem from actual physiological processes so much as negative medical and cultural constructions of what it means to be female. Not all women lactate, just as not all women

give birth, just as not all women menstruate,⁶ but as Julie Marie Strange demonstrates in “Menstrual Fictions,” cultural narratives and discourses on female physiology have often misrepresented women’s own lived experiences and voices. For Strange, nineteenth-century medical documents present “findings” on female leakage that are “inextricable from the discursive construction of gender,” while women’s actual stories of their bodies are “obscured, fragmented, and/or silenced” (608-609). We can understand the sexual coding of fluids in the context of an emerging model of productive, industrial, masculinity, where the mid-nineteenth-century image of the woman as a leaky body was set in opposition to (and made possible by) an increasingly prevalent construction of a phallic, middle-class male body as hard, self-disciplined, and impermeable – “freed from the vicissitudes of organic and involuntary processes, [and] entirely under conscious control” (Rosenman 25, 18-20). This man’s “conscious control” over his mind and body was thought to give way to deliberate, verbal and physiological emissions of the kind that his female counterpart was frequently considered incapable of.⁷

As George Henry Lewes’s essay on “Lady Novelists” helps to demonstrate, mid-century cultural narratives of gendered leakage often superimposed a woman’s physiological expressions onto her linguistic and literary expressions, juxtaposing a picture of the male author with bodily and “conscious control” against a trope of the female author whose bodily and verbal expressions consisted of a kind of unconscious leakage. Unbidden female

⁶While amenorrhea has been linked to pathological disorders such as anorexia and hormonal imbalance, a non-menstruating state is an ordinary reality amongst post-menopausal, post-hysterectomy and trans women.

⁷We might see the mid-century Victorian spermatorrhea panic as an instance where Victorian medical writers fortified this now-familiar construction of phallic masculinity by othering “leaky” men as lacking the physiological and mental control ascribed to males. The fact that middle-class men who were considered to be engaging in untimely and/or excessive ejaculation were pathologized actually serves to reinforce this ideal of phallic masculinity because these “leaky” men were often aligned with a tradition of “incontinent” female bodies and minds. Rosenman reasons that “bodily fluids in themselves threaten masculinity, which contrasts itself to the flows and secretions of the female body and projects the vulnerability of flesh and blood onto women” (23 fn. 14).

imagination and emotion were often deemed to be dangerous when expressed physiologically in breastmilk, and William Carpenter reiterates a common medical opinion that “Grief, anxiety, fretfulness, fear, and fits of anger” dramatically alter the milk so as to produce “serious diseases” if not death in the suckling infant (318). He relates one striking example where a breastfeeding mother witnessed her husband brawling with a soldier and afterwards remained in such a mental “state of strong excitement” that when she picked up her babe to suckle, her milk instantly killed it (318). This is not to say that positive depictions of lactation and breastfeeding in reference to imagination and literary production did not exist, and I certainly do not wish to downplay how fundamental the trope was within the tradition of Romantic and Victorian poetry. As Jules Law relates, “The iconic image of a mother suckling her baby becomes a touchstone for romantic ideas about imaginative spontaneity” that consolidates in two monumental poetic works (by no less than poet laureates) that were both published in 1850: William Wordsworth’s *Prelude* poem ‘Blest the Infant Babe’ and section 45 of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (Law 24). But as much as the poets valorize the nursing dyad as a precursor to the suckling infant’s career as a prolific poet, the lactating breast does not function as a source of poetic inspiration for the babe, but rather as a site of referentiality from which the infant may dissociate himself as a growing male poet. In Wordsworth’s poem, the infant who is “Rocked on his mother’s breast” is “Blessed” (230-233) because, as Amar Nath Prasad notes, the mother’s fluid offering helps the male infant to cultivate his eventual “poetic spirit in man” (91), but her process of nursing does not represent an analogous “poetic spirit.” In Tennyson’s scene, the mother and her milk are antithetical to the male poet and his ink; when the infant lay “Against the circle of the breast/He has never thought that ‘this is I,’” and, resultantly, the

lactating breast functions in opposition to the adult poet's linguistic "use of 'I' and 'me'" (45: 3-4, 6). Moreover, as Law's use of the term "spontaneity" suggests, when female physiological processes are explicitly aligned with poetic production, they are figured in terms of uncontrolled and unmediated expression. The "leaky woman" rhetoric lent itself to a parallel construction of the incontinent female poet, whose poetic expressions were as unconscious as they were unbidden. Isobel Armstrong has affiliated this fluid characterization of poetic production with "the gush of the feminine," a romantic trope from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries that characterizes the female poet's expressions as unmediated sentiment and feeling, vested in physiological expressions of breath, song, and a variety of overtly fluid gushes. There is, of course, a long literary history of signifying poetic expression with bodily fluids, but these almost always correspond to notions of sexual difference: while male poetic expressions have taken the shape of deliberate linguistic expression – seminal ink – within a prominently male poetic tradition, female poetry has often been coded as unmediated utterances from correspondingly leaky bodies. What Armstrong calls these "metaphors of expressive aesthetics" are subject to gendering: "they are given both a negative or pathological and a positive 'healthy' signification, a hysterical and a wholesome aspect, often implicitly gendered respectively as 'feminine' and 'masculine'" (*Victorian Poetry* 267). It may come as unsurprising, then, given this rhetoric of the female poet as unconsciously expressive, that Christina Rossetti's contemporaries backhandedly characterized her as a "spontaneous songbird-poet" who was "representative of 'artless art'" (Lootens 12). While there was certainly a mid-century vein of writers who disparaged women's physiological and literary expressions as a kind of infant-like incompetence or unmediated utterance, I would like to suggest that there was also an

undercurrent of female poets who exploited the rhetoric of female leakage to define a new feminine poetics.

Milk Markets: Saving Antidotes and Poisoning Draughts

While the popular Victorian imagination may have conceived of a mother suckling her babe as being the very picture of natural, feminine glory (D'Antonio 58), even the most benign representations of the nursing dyad carried troubling undertones. Mid-nineteenth-century Victorians saw in the lactating breast a site of vexed discourses on contamination and rejuvenation; its fluid (mis)management was enlisted in political discourse as a benchmark of national health – a dual signifier of moral corruption and purity (Kreisel 186). Mary Wollstonecraft's idyllic picture of the breastfeeding mother who dutifully offered her milk to her infant⁸ conceals an undercurrent of middle-class anxieties about how the process could be dangerous for the health of both mother and baby. But as Beeton's picture of the vampire baby draining its mother makes apparent, the mismanagement of milk could prove both debilitating for the mother (Draznin 110) and morally damaging for her suckling child (Matus 69). Beeton's portrayal of a breastfeeding mother running dry is consistent with a troubling Victorian ideal of wifely and maternal devotion as an endless outpouring of energy and love even if that meant an exhaustion on the part of the wife and mother (Behlman para. 8), an ideal which Webster destabilizes in her sonnet sequence, *Mother and Daughter*, where maternal love between a mother and daughter outlasts that of a wife and husband. On a

⁸ Wollstonecraft was a fierce proponent of maternal breastfeeding at the turn of the nineteenth century, declaring it “the duty of every rational creature to attend to its offspring...The mother [...] ought to suckle her children. Her milk is their proper nutriment, and for some time quite sufficient” (*Education of Daughters* 3).

macrocosmic scale, the breastfeeding mother figures as the emblem of enduring literal and moral sustenance not only for the infant body but the English body politic (Kreisel 223), and Barrett Browning builds on this familiar metaphor in that triumphant exclamation of common inheritance in *Aurora Leigh*: “Behold,--behold the paps we all have sucked!” (4: 219). With such an enormous symbolic weight bestowed upon the nursing mother, perhaps it is unsurprising that so many prominent mid-century writers argued for an increased public management of breastfeeding – one where a range of factors such as the (im)moral circumstances leading up to the infant’s birth, the (im)moral disposition of the breastfeeding mother or wet nurse, and her (dis)engagement in decidedly corruptive economic markets – grew to have the utmost importance for medical professionals. Envisioning her own market, Rossetti answers such breastfeeding anxieties by postulating that neither a woman nor her fluid expressions are necessarily contaminated by a communication with merchant men, but can actually benefit from this communication.

Beyond these literary and poetic depictions of breastmilk, the economic crosscurrents of this private fluid operated in very real, tangible ways for mid-century Victorians. I have already alluded to how the lactating breast mid-century was a site of literal and symbolic incursion because its contents – representing the moral essence of its owner – were thought to instill a moral constitution in the suckling baby, but what remains to be seen is how there was a direct correlation between the constitution of the breastmilk and the economic position of the breastfeeder. These issues of fluid transmission and identity formation were brought to the fore in a series of articles disputing the employment of “fallen women” as wet nurses, published in the *Lancet* in 1859. Prominent physician C.H.F. Routh contested that hiring these sexually licentious women, whom he maintained were often physically and always

morally diseased, would contaminate infants of the middle-class families who foolishly hired them. Routh underlines the contaminating potential of this process when he relates that “when a woman suckles a child she undoubtedly communicates to it the distillation, as it were, of the vital essence of her own blood” and from this premise, he concludes that if a nurse “of confirmed vicious and passionate habits” offers her breast to a child in such a fundamental stage of growth, it is likely to have “its own morality tainted likewise” (“On the Selection” 580). This *spoiled* milk, what Routh calls “original evil,” manifests in the infant like a “carcinomatous” tumor: for once the “morbid cell has been developed” in the infant, it will “impart its nature to surrounding parts, and poison the whole blood” (581).⁹ Routh’s opponent William Acton¹⁰ argued that hiring downtrodden women, so long as they were not physically diseased, would offer them an alternative means of making money in the domestic sphere rather than on the streets in prostitution (*Prostitution Considered* 288). A third writer going only by the name of Mater underscored the troubling implications of Acton’s philanthropic proposal by gesturing towards how the “tyrant custom, *wet-nursing*” necessitated the help of the “demon *Infanticide*” (201). In other words, the women who were hired as live-in wet nurses would be obliged to get rid of their illegitimate infants by any means necessary with the result that, for Mater, wet nurses literally profited from infanticide through the lucrative baby farming trade (200-201).¹¹ Mater’s response spurred a number of vigorous publications in the coming years about the potential economic motivations behind

⁹ A year later, Routh would continue this tirade in his book on *Infant Feeding* (1860), where he devotes considerable attention to disparaging the fallen wet nurse, whom he claims is “an outcast of society, shunned by the virtuous” and urged “greedily into crime”; she is liable to lie about having communicable diseases to gain employment (205-207).

¹⁰ Prominent physician and gynaecologist William Acton (1813-1875) wrote on a wide range of topics including venereal disease, prostitution, and masturbation. Interestingly for our purposes, he was a proponent of the closed-body system, which maintained that the body had a finite amount of energy, making masturbation dangerous, see Mary Jacobus et al., *Body/Politics* 57.

¹¹ For highly detailed accounts of the many figures and publications surrounding the wet nursing debate, see Berry (63-92) and Matus (159-167).

infanticide, but for Jill Matus, both debates disclose a cultural uneasiness towards women entering the public, economic realm, revealing the “ideological centrality of the maternal body to the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women” (163). After all, all three writers link a woman’s employment within the physical space of a masculine market as having a potentially – if not inevitably – corrupting effect on either the woman or her breastmilk, or both. I would like to posit that at least some of the mania surrounding the human milk market can be understood in relation to mid-century fears about drinking a number of contaminated fluids.

This project stipulates that medical and creative literature written in the 1850s-1860s frames a historical moment when the seemingly private phenomenon of lactation intersected with a number of political concerns about the management of consumable fluids. At this given moment, the ordinary Englishperson’s relationship to digestible fluids outside of his or her body was dramatically altered. With the growing popularity and accessibility of microscopes that helped to reveal the filthy and adulterated content of domestic fluids, the act of drinking came to fall under rigid public scrutiny (Stern 477). Londoners’ rising worries about the consumption of poisonous fluids came to the surface notably during the 1854 Broad Street cholera outbreak and the 1858 Great Stink.¹² In contrast to picturesque depictions of the rural English dairy in eighteenth-century works (Carroll 168), literary depictions of urban milk markets came to represent another reservoir of contamination and source of anxiety. In Jules Law’s influential study of nineteenth-century liquid metaphors in the Victorian novel, *The Social Life of Fluids*, Law reads Charles Dickens’s 1850 narrative

¹² Physician John Snow traced the 1854 cholera outbreak to a contaminated water pump, fueling concerns about the sanitation of London’s sources of drinking water, see Sandra Hempel’s *The Strange Case of the Broad Street Pump*. The “Great Stink” of 1858 was a summer period when untreated human waste created such a smell throughout London that it spurred a city-wide movement for more regulated water and sewage systems that was implemented over the following years. See Stephen Halliday’s *The Great Stink of London*.

exposé “The Cow with the Iron Tail” as manifesting widespread mid-century anxieties about contaminated cow’s milk,¹³ where the penny-pinching dairyman was believed to dilute his milk with water, adding mashed calf brains for creaminess, “mysterious [...] orange red balls” for a yellowish tint, and snail slime to resemble froth (Law 11). I conjecture that at this time, woman’s breastmilk, occupying a liminal space between consumable entity and bodily fluid – caught between free-flowing resource and salable commodity – was anything but immune to these fears of contamination and decay. This interpretation goes some way in explaining why lactation so often appeared in Victorian medical and creative literature in deeply troubling incarnations, where even idyllic forms of the mother/child nursing dyad roused fears of boundary transgression and disturbing infiltrations of self (literally) and identity (figuratively). Given the highly politicized connotations of breastfeeding, the female expression of breastmilk represented a fear of fluid contamination originating from that seemingly most private microcosmic circuit of mother and child and extending all the way into the broadest macrocosmic systems of England’s economic circuits, its fluid management, and its cultural narratives of gendered expression. This project looks to how a triad of influential, mid-century female poets put to use these anxiety-ridden – often misogyny-laden – constructions of breastmilk as a means of, first, reclaiming female bodily agency amidst an encroaching political atmosphere bent on the management of women’s breastmilk and, second, articulating a newfangled rhetoric of female poetic expression.

¹³ Although this description appears to have been exaggerated, in 1857 chemist Arthur Hassan devoted an entire chapter of his book on food adulteration to the tainting of milk, concluding that “there are few articles of food more liable to adulteration, and this of the grossest description” (205).

Keeping Abreast: Victorian Lactation in Context

A purview of modern breastfeeding scholarship reveals a temporal gap in which the significance of Victorian lactation practices has been markedly neglected. Despite a longstanding socio-scientific interest in infant feeding, from anthropological readings of different cultural practices (Vanessa Maher, Patricia Stuart-Macadam and Katherine Dettwyler, Penny Van Esterik) to historical studies of temporal variations (Rima Apple, Valerie Fildes, Janet Golden, Jacqueline Wolf, Marilyn Yalom), breastfeeding has only really been thought of as a topic worthy of serious academic pursuit since the 1970s (D'Antonio 10). The scant amount of existing quantitative data on Victorian infant-feeding practices certainly accounts for the lack of modern, interpretive studies of the phenomenon, but this gap in the historical records only underlines Victorian creative writing as an indispensable resource by which to speculate on nineteenth-century attitudes towards breastfeeding.

Of course, I am not the first to concern myself with the intersection of Victorian maternity metaphors and female physiological and literary expression, and the contributions of recent scholars are certainly indispensable to my project. I do, however, wish to set myself apart from this lineage of critical forbearers in a number of significant ways. In the late twentieth century, many such critics read female-authored maternity metaphors as being central to the Victorian female poet's project of self-legitimization, but these foundational readings tend to focus on metaphors of childbirth (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Alicia Holmes, and Brenda Weber, to name a few) but only hint at images of the breast's lactational and feeding capacities. Among those scholars who have taken up Victorian literature for its

breastfeeding concerns, the majority have tended to focus on, firstly, breast imagery excluding lactation, or, secondly, the figure of the wet nurse to the exclusion of the maternal feeder. Marjorie Stone's innovative reading of breast imagery in Victorian poetry calls attention to a gap in our modern critical terminology in that there is no female equivalent to the study of literary paternity (753), and I am indebted to this argument in my chapter on *Aurora Leigh*. But, understandably, a lactational interpretation of breasts goes beyond the scope of Stone's ambitious study while it is the focal-point of mine. Alicia Carroll has read disturbing implications of human lactation in *Adam Bede* as a manifestation of encroaching milk markets, while Jules Law, Narin Hassan, and Melisa Klimaszewski have interpreted the wet nursing imagery in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* as a reiteration of a Victorian anxiety regarding upward class mobility by pointing to the wet nurse as a site of foreign incursion on the English family. This literary trope of the dangerous wet nurse informs my reading of strange drinks in "Goblin Market," but in contrast to these readings of Dickens, I read Rossetti as disrupting rather than fostering this trope of dangerous female expression. Similarly, while Laura Berry and Jill Matus have both persuasively written on how Victorian periodicals and novels present the wet nurse as a locus of moral and class contamination, they have not addressed how the image of a lactating breast itself – maternal or non-maternal, healthy or contaminative – was threatening by virtue of its being a vehicle for female expression. By and large, these critics have come away with fascinating readings of literary depictions of lactation and breastfeeding as reiterations of Victorian social realities – realities that were typically debilitating for women. My major departure from these critics is in charting an undercurrent of this dominant stream of writers that espouses a more hopeful vision of female expression for women and women poets alike.

Speaking in Mother Tongues: *Écriture Féminine* and Women's Poetry

My undertaking to read lactational imagery as the metaphor for a uniquely feminine literary expression owes much of its groundwork to the major proponents of late-twentieth-century French feminism: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Although the three theorists vary somewhat in their theoretical trajectories, they are aligned in their presumption of a distinct, feminine order of expression. They lay claim to the notion that the physiological states and processes of women amount to their inclusion in a separate signifying order and corresponding means of linguistic expression. It is the project of these writers to reclaim this feminine expression from a historical and literary context that tends to figure the female voice as either passive or entirely absent. Over the course of the next three chapters I set out to underline a similarly overarching continuity amongst female poets Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Augusta Webster, all of whom source – though in varying ways – a feminine poetic voice from a primeval expression within the maternal dyad of mother and daughter. The lactational metaphors in *Aurora Leigh*, “Goblin Market,” and *Mother and Daughter* all disclose the possibility of a new, feminine poetics that has its origin in the fluid communications of the nursing dyad. The theoretical underpinnings of what I term the lactational utterance owes much to the French feminist notion of *Écriture féminine*.

Hélène Cixous was especially central in bringing to the forefront the possibility of an *Écriture féminine*, or women's writing. *Écriture féminine* refers to texts that represent a distinctly feminine experience, ones that move towards sexual difference and undermine the

dominant male-centred, or phallogentric, literary tradition. Cixous is especially important to my literary project for her stipulation that *Écriture féminine* stems from a primordial bond with the lactating mother. In “Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous defines female expression in speech and writing as her thoughts embodied in a kind of ink, for, since they are ill-fitted for phallogentric language, “women must write through their bodies” (“Medusa” 256).

Continuing this metaphorical yet resolutely biological train of thought in *La Jeune Née*, Cixous traces the origin of all feminine expression to the Voice of the Mother, whereby each woman’s voice flows from that primary song of her infancy which does not distinguish between the two forms of maternal expression: the mother’s fluid “Voice” and her “inexhaustible milk” (173). The reason that a woman has a privileged access to the Mother and the pre-linguistic, fluid stage of infancy is because, unlike men, her initiation into the sphere of law, order, and language does not engender a repression of the maternal but, if anything, an identification with it and with that state of fluidity which so epitomizes the feminine experience (Moi 115, 117). Toril Moi envisages Cixous’s notion of lifelong feminine fluidity as a kind of female literary community, where “The mother’s voice, her breasts, milk, honey and female waters are all invoked as part of an eternally present space surrounding her and her readers” (Moi 117). Cixous’s contribution to the theory of *Écriture féminine* links feminine spoken and written expression to that primeval Mother’s song of infancy that is characterized by fluidity and embodied in mother’s milk/ink. Informed by Cixous, I explore how these women poets fashion a new feminine poetry out of what I term the “lactational utterance”; for these poets, this dual liquid/linguistic expression has its origins in an embodied experience at the mother’s breast, and serves as a female signifier of the breast that subverts phallic metaphors of writerly expression. My first chapter develops

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* as founding a system of sophisticated metaphors of maternal production where the female poet, like the nursing mother, is equipped with the white ink of her song with which to write a new feminine poetry.

Luce Irigaray's theoretical influence for my project stems from her later work on female relations and how they can contribute to new ways of reading literary texts. Maternity and feminism are for her indistinguishable as motherhood must be reimagined as a "pre-eminently political" aspect of all womanhood, of mother and non-mother alike.¹⁴ This female/maternal collapse opens the possibility of developing both a lactational reading of a text that does not explicitly evoke breastfeeding – "Goblin Market" – and a maternal reading from an author who did not personally experience motherhood – Christina Rossetti. Inseparable from the concept of *Écriture féminine*, womanspeak (from the French *parler femme*) is Irigaray's term for a distinctly feminine subject-to-subject communication originating in the maternal, fluid, semiotic sphere which threatens the masculine, ordered reality of the symbolic sphere. For Irigaray, maternity under patriarchy occasions a breakdown in female language and community: the daughter is "torn" from her mother as she enters the circuits of sexual, political, and economic exchange between men where she exists as object, and womanspeak becomes obsolete faced with this oppressive male, linguistic economy. To regain her language, a woman must recognize herself, mothers, daughters, sisters, and all women as subjects capable of their own expression, so that the communication between women becomes a two-way feeding of food and words. Hence, "the mother must give the daughter more than food to nourish her, she may also give her words with which to speak and hear [...that are] 'returned' to the mother 'with interest,' in the

¹⁴ Grosz in *Sexual Subversions* 120; I am indebted to Grosz's explication of Irigaray's often, and no doubt deliberately, labyrinthine prose.

daughter's new-found ability to speak *to*, rather than *at* her mother" (Grosz, *Subversions* 124-125). Crucially, Irigaray does not suggest that women completely reject the existing male economy of language in favour of womanspeak, but instead she insists that they reformulate aspects of the current phallogentric system to undermine negative codes of femininity (Grosz, *Subversions* 127). For Irigaray, womanspeak calls for women to join together in a closed female community of language that is situated apart from the male linguistic and material economy (144). With its preoccupation with gendered linguistic and monetary economies, Rossetti's "Goblin Market" begs for an Irigarayan reading to help unpack its fluid, female circuits and the possibilities they may offer for a new, female poetics.

Finally, I will turn to two of Julia Kristeva's theories – the "chora" and the "abject" – as means of articulating how the complicated mother/daughter bond plays out in Webster's *Mother and Daughter*. By way of explaining the semiotic chora, I must go some way in explaining Kristeva's contribution to the semiotic sphere with its interchangeable liquid and linguistic expressions. Kristeva adapts Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychical growth into two distinct experiences of reality and their accompanying forms of expression: the resolutely feminine, unstructured, fluid reality of the semiotic sphere in infancy, and the masculine, structured, stable, realm of the symbolic in adulthood. The semiotic is linked not only to the feminine but to the motherly as a "nourishing and maternal space" governed by the most primitive utterances of language, the semiotic chora (Schippers 46), which refers to a kind of language that operates at the level of pre-symbolic utterances: music, gibberish, and laughter that pass fluidly from mother to infant and infant to mother, fluid inasmuch as they do not conform to the imposing structure and order of the symbolic realm. Kristeva

stresses that in societies such as Victorian England where females are designated the primary caregivers of infants, the symbolic sphere contains an element of the maternal which survives in the semiotic remnants of “adult” language – those laughs, echoes, and poetic rhythms that harken all the way back to the first days of human infancy and “the primal experience of our mother’s body” (Fisher 130) in utero, in childbirth, and in nursing.

But Kristeva fundamentally complicates any idyllic picture of the mother/daughter relationship by envisioning it as a lifelong struggle of dominance and subordination, association and rejection, and I see a similar struggle playing out in the central relationship of Augusta Webster’s *Mother and Daughter*. The female subject’s embodied experience necessitates an altogether unique relationship with the mother figure, whose menstrual blood and lochia (afterbirth) provoke a feeling of what Kristeva terms “abjection,” or “that state of uncertainty regarding the *identity* of the *self* and the *other*” (*Powers of Horror* 50), in the growing subject. Unlike sons, who undergo a clean separation from the mother by recognizing her as the horrifying “other” (the abject) and establishing their own separate identity, daughters retain a lifelong proximity to the semiotic as they simultaneously reject and associate with the mother figure over various life stages, struggling to reach individuation while never truly escaping the maternal, due in part to their own physiological experience of menstruation (De Troyer 58). Therefore, the female infant unlike the male is doubly semiotic, in age and in sex, making the mother/daughter relation – in its infancy as in its adulthood – a singularly complex process of continual identity formation and reformation based on the lifelong interactions between mother and daughter. Webster’s experimental sonnet sequence homes in on the complexities inherent in the mother/daughter bond, depicting a mother who struggles to continue to exert her control over her only child and

daughter as the woman is caught between maintaining a one-sided maternal domination over the child and recognizing her as a subject. The resolution of the fraught mother/daughter relation is a symbolic return to that mode of two-way communicative and liquid exchange existing in the chora.

Writing in “White Ink”: Barrett Browning, Rossetti, and Webster

The poetic works that inspired this literary project are as innovative in their manipulation of genre as they are in their exploration of gendered expression. In three distinct works, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” and Augusta Webster’s *Mother and Daughter*, we encounter, first, a novel-in-verse that maps those immediate experiences of feminized domesticity onto that farthest-reaching “masculine” form of the epic. In the second, we discover a singsong children’s fable laden with adult themes and exploring the diverse effects of drinking fluids from gendered bodies. Third, we uncover a sonnet sequence that does not follow the love story of the speaker and her sexual lover but the love story of a mother and her daughter. All this to say that these three nineteenth-century female poets revisit and reimagine the literary tradition in which they are writing. It is an overwhelmingly male poetic heritage which has often cast women’s embodied experience and voice into silence and passivity, if not omitting them altogether. Depictions of lactation and breastfeeding operate in these poems as reinstatements of (respectively) female linguistic expression and feminine literary community. The nursing dyad functions as a figure in miniature for an emerging mode of female poetic communication, and its liquid expression, a new metaphor for the production of poetry.

Manifest in my argument for an emerging female literary community is the assumption that these three poets – at the same time that they participated in a tradition of male-authored poetry – also saw themselves as both writing in, and being read by, what Angela Leighton refers to as a “self-consciously female tradition” (*Victorian Women Poets* 1). Catherine Maxwell has traced the overarching trajectory of critics who point out this emerging Victorian female poetic tradition, from the broad brushstrokes of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar to the more recent contributions of Angela Leighton and Isobel Armstrong (Maxwell 75-78). Maxwell offers her own insight into Victorian poetic heritage by figuring the major female poets in an elaborate metaphor of poetic maternity – where Elizabeth Barrett Browning served as the female precursor to Christina Rossetti (79), who was in turn something of the precursor to Augusta Webster (87). I want to take up this maternity metaphor where these three poets figure as symbolic mothers and daughters to one other in a kind of female, literary kinship – each successive woman poet picking up, building upon, adopting, and adapting, the poetic tradition of her poetic foremothers. Given that I am interested in how poetic maternity operates in what I will argue to be an emerging, embodied feminine poetics, I see lactation imagery in these poems as signifying a kind of “white ink” that these women pass down to the next generations of women poets.

My following chapter engages with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s political and literary deployment of lactation in the poet’s most celebrated work, *Aurora Leigh*. Tracing an orphaned girl’s life stages from infant to full-fledged poet, Barrett Browning’s epic novel-in-verse partakes both in mid-century breastfeeding discourse and in debates about female authorship as it argues for a distinct, yet valid female vantage and poetry that is predicated on the nursing dyad and vested in a mother’s breastmilk. The poet innovatively reimagines

nineteenth-century constructions of gendered embodiment and expression by introducing a female equivalent to the abstract, seminal ink of a male-authored poetic tradition: a set of real “women’s figures” (8: 1131) including the breastmilk of a new, embodied feminine poetry. Anticipating Kristeva’s semiotic chora as the source of both literal and verbal nourishment, Barrett Browning’s depiction of the nursing dyad with its fluid communications serves as a miniature for the source of inspiration that modern poets may glean from this lactational, mother-age. Epitomized in the image of Aurora’s mother standing at the threshold of the nursery door and the outside world (1: 16), the woman, and by extension the woman poet, exists at an intersection between two linguistic heritages: the immediate, base, and fluid language of the semiotic sphere – one that mothers share with their infants in nonsense syllables (1: 51) – and the great, authoritative language of the symbolic sphere – represented by a longstanding poetic tradition of forefathers. Aurora’s “mother-want” (1: 40) is symptomatic of a mother-wanting age which is lacking a celebrated tradition of female poetic predecessors. With no canonical poetic foremothers to speak of, Aurora urges her fellow poets to find their maternal inspiration from a shared source of literal maternal expression – those “paps we all have sucked” (5: 219). Contrary to many mid-nineteenth-century depictions of female expression, both the real and symbolic mothers of the narrative reveal that the maternal body’s material expressiveness stands for more than just unconscious leakage. In *Aurora Leigh*, liquid and linguistic communication between mother and child is celebrated as a closed circuit of circulation constituting a comprehensive “white ink” for modern poets to imbibe and distill in an emerging feminine poetic tradition.

My third chapter interprets Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” as building on Barrett Browning’s metaphor of liquid and linguistic milk as the signifier for a new mode of

feminine poetry. Rossetti extends the lactation metaphor by envisioning the breastfeeding process as an emblem of female poetic community. Written in 1859 and published in 1862, the poem recounts the story of two young sisters, Laura and Lizzie, who live on a dairy farm and exist in a separate liquid and linguistic circuit from that of the goblin merchant men, who try to tempt the girls with their fruit in elaborate verses. After Laura engages in liquid and linguistic communication with the goblin men, trading a lock of her hair to eat the fruit, she becomes emaciated and ill to the extent that, when she cannot eat anything except the goblin fruit, Lizzie resolves to buy the fruit to bring back to Laura. When the goblins refuse to let Lizzie carry the fruit with her, they subject her to their pelting of fruit, but triumphant Lizzie now carries it on herself and offers her juice for her starving sister to “suck” from her body in that infamous line: “Eat me, drink me, love me” (468, 471). By sucking this fluid from Lizzie’s body, the girl is miraculously cured, a confounding result for the majority of critics who grapple with how the fluid is now a “fiery antidote” instead of a “poison in the blood” (555, 559). Interpretations of “Goblin Market”’s consumable fluids have tended to fall into one of two camps, either reading the juice as literal fluids – representative of real, contaminating fluid transactions of the Victorian food and sex markets, or allegorical fluids – representative of Eden’s forbidden fruit in Genesis and Christ’s redeeming self-offering in the Eucharist. In this chapter I venture that these disparate readings are not necessarily incompatible given the extent to which actual fluids were laden with symbolic meaning in the Victorian imagination, just as literary symbols were informed by beliefs about real, material fluids. Taking this dynamic into consideration, I simultaneously read “Goblin Market” literally and allegorically as dealing in gendered, embodied fluids that also take on symbolic significance. Here, the goblin market stands in for the literary marketplace whose

goblin men offer to Laura and Lizzie what Maxwell identifies as phallic, “male texts” of a masculine poetic tradition (84). While Lizzie’s eventual offering to Laura certainly borrows from this male mode (literally stealing the fruit), I will demonstrate how the fluid/text now also contains a new component of embodied feminine expression for Laura to consume. No scholar, to my knowledge, has ventured to read Lizzie’s bid for Laura to “suck” fluids from her body as a symbolic rendition of breastfeeding, nor have they considered her offering of “my juices” (468) as a lactational one. Reading Lizzie’s offering as a kind of female poetic expression to Laura opens up the possibility that breastfeeding functions in the poem as a microcosm for an emerging female market of readers.

My final chapter turns to the figurative bodily fluids that are exchanged in Augusta Webster’s sonnet sequence *Mother and Daughter*, where the liquid and linguistic circuits pass between a mother and her daughter in a feedback loop of milk, words, and blood. I read the poem’s symbiotic maternity as central to Webster’s rhetorical strategy – originating with Barrett Browning and Rossetti – of radically recuperating the figure of the female beloved from unfavourable renderings of the “love object” in a male-authored poetic tradition. Whether or not Webster began writing the sequence at the time of her daughter’s birth in 1863, Webster’s poem remains intimately linked to both the mid-century preoccupations with female physiological expression, and the lactational metaphors concerning Webster’s poetic foremothers. Innovatively swapping the amatory beloved with the child and a male sonneteer with the child’s mother, the sonnet sequence traces the lifelong trajectory of the mother-daughter relationship in episodes ranging from the mother’s birthing and nursing of her only daughter all the way to the child’s physiological and psychological growth into a full-fledged individual. While a heterosexual romantic dyad of the male-authored sonnet

sequence typically figures the poet speaker's expression as a one-way liquid and linguistic transference towards the "love object," Webster's female nursing dyad takes the shape of a reciprocal, fluid circuit between subjects. This poet speaker's recognition of her beloved as subject, rather than object, is evinced by the mother's inclusion of her beloved's unmediated words in speech, radically departing from a Petrarchan tradition of sonnets – including Dante Gabriel's acclaimed 1850 sequence – which "focuses on ladies never given the chance to speak" (Stone, "Sonnet Traditions" 61). Stemming from the reciprocal exchanges of the mother and daughter's milk, blood, and words, Webster reveals how untenable marital love gives way to sustainable maternal love and communication between women, while outdated modes of the sonnet give way to new models of an embodied, feminine poetry.

Titillating Texts: Towards an Embodied Feminine Poetics

For many mid-century Victorians, the safety of the breastfeeding process was incumbent upon an idyllic, closed circulation between mother and infant that fancifully denied any social, political, or economic infringement on the nursing dyad. But an increasing public concern involving the management of human milk meant that, in reality, this private fluid was in constant symbolic interplay with farther-reaching circulations of cow's milk, water, and money. Medical and literary writers alike enlisted the lactating breast as a political emblem for a whole range of issues related to English identity construction – but, more often than not – destruction. This singular female, physiological, expression served as a representation in miniature for a number of female expressions that were increasingly associated with anxiety, perhaps the most threatening being women's growing political and

literary voice. Amidst a climate that increasingly sought to manage the lactating breast, I focus on a previously undetected undercurrent in women's poetry that resists this negative appropriation and damming up of female expression by recasting the breastfeeding figure as a self-conscious agent at the forefront of a new feminine poetry. Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Rossetti's "Goblin Market," and Webster's *Mother and Daughter* all engage with mid-century breastfeeding discourse in ways that reformulate existing and prevalent notions of female expression and communication, be it through a woman's milk or the "white ink" of women's poetry. And where historical documentation on Victorian infant feeding practices is usually absent and always sparse, its poetry becomes an indispensable resource, a peephole by which we may catch a glimpse of nineteenth-century attitudes to female expression through the nursery door, where we might oversee a mother's declaration of love to her baby or overhear her singsong verses reminding her daughter that there is no friend like a sister.

Chapter Two

‘Behold the paps we all have sucked!’: Lactational Poetics in *Aurora Leigh*

...I’m a woman, sir,

I use the woman’s figures naturally,

As you the male license... (*Aurora Leigh* 8: 1130-1133)

When the young poet Aurora Leigh speaks of her aspiration to capture the spirit of the age in her poetry, she presents the source of this new poetry as a dual figurative and bodily fluid. Figuratively, it springs from a metaphorical volcano as liquid “lava-lymph” that “trickles down successive galaxies” from heaven (5: 3-5). Bodily, it originates “with mother’s breasts,” which “round the new-made creatures hanging there,/Throb luminous and harmonious like pure spheres” (5: 16-18). This last evocation of the nursing dyad is one of many in the poem to construct mother’s milk as a twofold expression: just as the rendering of the fleshy mammary glands as “pure spheres” expands the meaning of the mother’s breasts from a source of earthly to one of spiritual nourishment for the suckling infant, so too do lactating breasts in the poem provide the source of both liquid and linguistic communication for its characters. Through Aurora, her mother, and Aurora’s companion Marian Erle, Elizabeth Barrett Browning firmly grounds female expression in the body, presenting a series of female characters whose physiological expressions (of their bodies) are inseparable from their symbolic expressions (of their text bodies). This semantic figuration of lactation is key to unearthing why, soon after presenting these images of poetic supply, Aurora depicts her era in the shocking image of a “full-veined, heaving, double-breasted age” (5: 216), spouting milk that provides the inspiration for an emerging generation of

poets, who use it as a new-fangled symbol of human community when Aurora imagines them exclaiming: “Behold, - behold the paps we all have sucked!” (5: 219). Mirroring Aurora’s vision of a new feminist poetics, Barrett Browning’s masterwork negotiates with a literary history that has privileged male voices, metaphors, and expressions, while this real poet’s legacy (like breastmilk) would come to provide the sustenance for the following generations of canonical female poets who would expand on her metaphors of female expression. If *Aurora Leigh* is Barrett Browning’s envisioning of the archetypal woman writer of her age, then I would like to suggest that figurative breastmilk functions as this woman writer’s ink.

In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning offers a portrait of the female poet of her age who struggles to find a voice as a woman and poet within a predominantly male-authored literary tradition. Given that Barrett Browning’s ambitious work spans an astounding nine books, it is worthwhile to take a cursory glance at some of the events of Aurora’s literary career. Aurora has a dual cultural heritage as she is born of an English father and Italian mother, and this twofold linguistic parentage foregrounds the conflict she will come to face as she strives to find a place within two similarly gendered literary traditions: the authoritative, epic, works of poetry allocated to her father and poetic forefathers, and the sentimental, embodied novels and poems aligned with women and Aurora’s fluid mother tongue, Italian, which survives to “[come] up to float across the English phrase” (1: 389). This gendering of expression as either individuating or boundless is a useful one; as Marjorie Stone relates, the male, canonical tradition was exclusionary because of its reliance on “classical models barred to most women” compared to generally accessible women’s poetry (“Genre Subversion” 115), and I do not think that it is insignificant given Aurora’s gendered heritages that she describes

her fatherland, England, as an individualistic and parcelled landscape where “The ground seemed cut up from the fellowship/Of verdure, field from field, as man from man” compared to her unconfined motherland (1: 260-261). Aurora spends her first years living comfortably in her maternal homeland, in Florence, but when her mother dies of “the mother’s rapture” (1: 135) when Aurora is four, her scholar father takes her with him to live a secluded existence among the mountains of Pelago (1: 111) where he provides her with the classical works of ancient Greek and Latin texts as well as those of canonical poets like Shakespeare, an unconventional education for a girl. When Aurora’s father dies when she is thirteen, she is sent to live with a cruel, paternal aunt in England who resolves to mend her expressive nature and prepare her for the marriage market (1: 430-438), but the girl continues to take an overambitious interest in literary discourse: discovering her father’s library, writing her own poetry, and quibbling over the merits of literature with her childhood companion and cousin, Romney Leigh, who is a Christian socialist. After Aurora rejects his fumbling marriage proposal and her aunt dies, she undertakes to go to London to make a living as a poet.

The next seven years and books represent Aurora’s efforts to participate in a literary market that has been historically unfavourable towards women and the unique poetic insights they may offer. Finding that her early poems are received with patronizing praise, Aurora turns to making a living writing for encyclopaedias, magazines and newspapers (3: 309-311) before she resolves to search for poetic inspiration in “my Italy” (5: 1266), selling her father’s books and her own incomplete manuscript to fund her journey. But before she can make her way there she has a life-changing chance encounter with her friend and now a fallen woman, Marian Erle, who has given birth to an illegitimate child, the outcome of a rape after she was unknowingly swindled into prostitution. Aurora invites the mother and

child to live with her in Florence, where she is surprised to find that her latest book of poetry has been highly praised. Romney seeks her out in Italy and relates his failed romantic pursuits to her as well as the disastrous outcomes of his social reform, including a violent riot leading to his blindness. All the while he emphasizes to her that he considers her new poetry not only great literature but essential for the social reform required of England. The two reconcile and agree to marry, and in an ending which undermines a dominant cultural belief that a woman's success in love and poetry-writing are fundamentally incompatible, Aurora maintains that her union with Romney will not just accommodate but will ensure her continued success as a poet.

This chapter considers the possibility that we may attribute at least some of the success of Aurora Leigh's book of poetry and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's novel-epic to the poets' radical subversion of dominant models of poetic expression. At the centre of this subversion is the metaphor of a lactating breast expressing poetry in place of a phallic metaphor for poetic expression. Barrett Browning's "woman's figures" (8: 1131) for poetic generation undermine a dominant historical narrative of abstract, paternal authorship. While women's bodily and literary expression has often been segregated to a realm of inferior women's literature, the male phallic metaphor for poetic generation – what Raymond Stephanson aptly terms the "pen-penis/ink-semen trope" that emerged in the Early Modern period (140) – characterizes legitimate authorship as a male pursuit, in addition to many male authors popularly appropriating maternity metaphors to "give birth" to their own texts (139).¹⁵ According to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, another manifestation of this literary paternity has been the characterization of the canon as a patrilineal heritage that

¹⁵ See Van Remoortel on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's maternal metaphors of poetic generation in "Maternity and Metaphor" (468).

passes between literary “father and son” (11). But women’s own figures for poetic generation, when they have occasionally emerged within a literary history in which women’s figures are absent or subsumed by male authors, work to undermine a system of representation that depreciates women’s physiological and literary expressions – their capacities for biological reproduction and literary production alike. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar prompt a critical revisiting of nineteenth-century literary works to expose these phallic myths of literary production. Their first chapter is entirely devoted to a deconstruction of the Victorian metaphor of literary paternity, by which “The poet’s pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis” (4). Looking at *Aurora Leigh*, Gilbert and Gubar read Aurora’s choice to abandon this “opus” of male poetic tropes in favour of “female forms” as the catalyst for her growth into a good poet (19), but they never consider how central a role lactation metaphors play in Barrett Browning’s establishment of this new mode of feminine poetics. Of course this poet would have to care about lactation to do so.

It is safe to say that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was sufficiently preoccupied with breastfeeding in the few years prior to the writing and publishing of *Aurora Leigh* in 1856. She gave birth to her only son, Pen, only a few years earlier in 1849, and she and Robert went through four wet nurses to provide him with sufficient milk. The couple explicitly referred to wet nurses in at least five letters within their highly documented correspondence.¹⁶ That said, well before her own motherhood, in an 1823 letter to her editor

¹⁶ In a letter to Arabella and Henrietta Moulton-Barrett, Robert reveals that he and Elizabeth have already hired four wet nurses (4). Wet nursing is mentioned in the following letters all of which can be found in *The Brownings’ Correspondence* (Kelley): Robert Browning, letter to Arabella Moulton-Barrett and Henrietta Moulton-Barrett, 18 March 1849 (Letter 2779, vol. 15, 241-243), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB), letter to Arabella Moulton-Barrett, 8-16 April 1849 (Letter 2783, vol. 15, 246-255), EBB, letter to Henrietta Moulton-Barrett, 23-25 May 1849 (Letter 2793, vol. 15, 277-286), EBB, letter to Henrietta Moulton-Barrett, 20 February

Thomas Campbell, Barrett Browning forges an explicit affiliation between breastmilk and poetry that looks forward to the poetic lactation in her most famous work. Painting a whimsical picture of the history of literature in the “the ancient and respectable house of the Words,” Barrett Browning presents one of its allegorical family members in the figure of “Mrs Poetical Thought [...] a venerable old Lady who boasts of having wet nursed Homer.”¹⁷ Barrett Browning invites her reader to imagine that this fanciful woman, the stand-in for poetical thought, is proud of having been the wet nurse of such a prolific epic writer as Homer because having this role may grant her at least some of Homer’s success as a poet. However, this rendering of “Poetical Thought” as a lactating woman also invites a collapsing of poetry and breastmilk that sources the inspiration for a tradition of authoritative male poets from Ancient Greece onwards to a resolutely feminine, embodied expression. Barrett Browning’s affiliation of human milk and poetry production in this early letter serves as a prototype for what I will argue is a developed and explicit consolidation of women’s physiological and verbal expression in *Aurora Leigh* – a consolidation that amounts to a profoundly feminist message for female voice.

In recent decades, the metaphor of women writing in breastmilk has proven to be a powerful political symbol to articulate the importance of recognizing a distinctly feminine literary tradition by foregrounding women’s unique bodily processes in similarly unique writing processes. In this regard, Hélène Cixous’s notion of “white ink” provides the critical terminology for modern readers to step into the system of signifiers that Barrett Browning was so innovatively formulating in *Aurora Leigh*, while Cixous’s theory of *Écriture féminine* illuminates for contemporary readers the importance of embodiment within an emergent,

1850 (Letter 2832, vol. 16, 60-67), and EBB, letter to Eliza Anne Ogilvy, 3 September 1852 (Letter 3103, vol. 18, 207-208).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, letter to Thomas Campbell, May 1823 (Letter 181, vol. 1, 180-183).

nineteenth-century female poetics. By way of illustration, in Cixous's "Coming to Writing" (1992), the author capitalizes on the similarly fluid connotations of two female mediums: a woman's experience literally communicating milk to her infant and a writer's experience linguistically communicating ink to her reader.

It was in watching them *giving birth* (to themselves) that I learned to love women, to sense and desire the power and the resources of femininity; to feel astonishment that such immensity can be reabsorbed, covered up, in the ordinary. It wasn't the 'mother' that I saw. The child is her affair. Not mine. It was the woman at the peak of her flesh, her pleasure, her force at last delivered, manifest. Her secret [...] She has her source. She draws deeply. She releases. Laughing. And in the wake of the child, a squall of Breath! A longing for text! Confusion! What's come over her? A child! Paper! Intoxications! I'm brimming over! My breasts are overflowing! Milk. Ink. Nursing time. And me? I'm hungry, too. The milky taste of ink! (31)

In this image of creative production, Cixous positions the writer both as breastfeeding mother and child, author and reader: as producer of literature, she is an entity overflowing with linguistic expression; as consumer of literature, she is a being hungrily ingesting the "ink" of other women writers. Seeing the "woman" and not the "mother" in this writing metaphor (31), Cixous inscribes maternity as a symbolic entry point by which all women, mother and non-mother alike, may speak about their expression. For Cixous, all female bodies have a propensity towards expression within the physiological processes of menstruation, lubrication, childbirth, and lactation; for all of these processes represent instances of a woman's "ink" issuing beyond her own body onto the "pages" of her lived

experience, where this manifold “ink” partakes in symbolic (if not literary) communication within a greater female community (“Medusa” 878).

In our last chapter on the nineteenth-century context of breastfeeding, we encountered a cultural unease directed at these fluid female experiences, and for Cixous, these “woman’s figures,” as Aurora Leigh calls them (8: 1131), have historically been reduced to silence and invisibility by a phallogentric system of representation that is underwritten by male (text) bodies. According to Gilbert and Gubar’s foundational reading, this trend of cultural censorship has privileged “metaphors of literary paternity” over the figurative birthing of texts to the extent that “male sexuality [...] is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power” (4) and the male pen(is), the prerequisite for literary greatness. Unsurprisingly, these women’s figures have typically been “reabsorbed, covered up, in the ordinary” processes of female domestic life and non-canonical literature.¹⁸ In the writings of and on the literary canon, then, discourse on embodied metaphors of women’s poetic generation have fallen by the wayside, foregrounding the necessity of interpreting literature for inscriptions of the female body’s own signifiers of literary production.

A critical re-examination of women’s writing attempts to do just that. *Écriture féminine* is Cixous’s term for those feminine elements of a text that recall a primary maternal expression, an expression that, in *Aurora Leigh*, links together not just female experience but all human experience as originating in that primordial mother’s song and milk of infancy. *Aurora Leigh*’s central metaphor for modernity – a lactating, “double-

¹⁸ On women’s bodily and linguistic expression alike, Cixous writes: “We’re stormy [...] we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end” (“Medusa” 878), similar to Aurora’s early declaration that “Of writing many books there is no end” (1: 1). In spite of this propensity for expression, Cixous laments that the task of writing has been “reserved for the great—that is, for ‘great men’” (876), while Aurora’s success as a young poet is frequently punctured by a dominant belief that men are superior writers to women; cf. Romney’s disparaging portrayal of women poets (2: 220-225) and Aurora on male critics of “mere women’s work” (2: 234-243).

breasted age” (5: 216) – demands an intensive reformulation of a one-sided, poetic vantage informed by the phallic and phallogocentric terminology of a male-authored tradition. Of course, Cixous’s overt grounding of verbal expression in gendered bodies has generated a number of criticisms of her theory as essentialist, but I do not think this is necessarily the case in either Cixous’s or Barrett Browning’s work. Barbara A. Biesecker has persuasively argued that Cixous uses *Écriture féminine* as a rhetorical strategy (86), and I think that this is the best way to pursue and understand Barrett Browning’s engagement with an embodied poetics. In *Aurora Leigh*, the “figure” in “woman’s figures” (8: 1131) comes to signify women’s bodily and writerly expressions interchangeably: Barrett Browning enlists female physiological processes in a rhetorical strategy that reappoints female leakage into a productive force of poetic parentage and generation that has been reserved for male authors and male voices.¹⁹ As Pamela K. Gilbert points out, unlike the male Victorian author whose work was abstracted from his own reproductive processes as he used an abstract, “spermatic economy of inspiration” to “[inseminate] the text with his ideas” (27, 23), the body of his female counterpart was deemed inextricable from the text bodies she produced, so that “in either case it is the physical substance of a woman that is exposed in the marketplace” (25) – in the first, she provides the matter; in the second, she provides the voice and the matter. We may read Barrett Browning’s breastfeeding images as capitalizing on this depreciatory trope of a woman’s “physical substance” always already constituting writers, works, and readers. To be sure, a woman’s capacity to trespass the boundaries of the body by issuing outwardly

¹⁹ For instance, in her piece on Barrett Browning, “Rewriting Mother, Muse, and Miriam” in *Aurora Leigh*, Alicia E. Holmes argues that Aurora gains legitimacy as a poet by reconstructing literary accounts of women’s expression as aimless leakage. Holmes relates that when Romney condescendingly identifies Aurora as a Miriam figure (1: 171) who sings instead of helping her people as the Moses-like Romney does, the poet comes to embrace Miriam’s characterization as singer, so as to accept Romney’s “power paradigm” only to use it “to appropriate linguistic authority herself” (598).

in fluid form suggests a feminine capacity for creative production that is analogous to the male pen(is)'s *seminal* products (in both senses). But only the breastfeeding metaphor literalizes the consumption of texts inherent in the literary marketplace because it engenders not only a literal fluid extension of the woman outside of her own body (in lactation) but a literal integration of the woman by the consumer who imbibes her "ink" (in breastfeeding). If, as Gilbert claims, "the physical substance of a woman," not a man, constitutes all market texts, then it behooves the woman writer to expose this feminine source of inspiration that has been diffused and communicated (albeit unnamed and unacknowledged) from bodies to text bodies. To this end, a woman writer like Aurora can deploy "women's figures" in her works to accomplish two things: to counteract an absence of acknowledged figures of women in the existing literary heritage, and to legitimize female-authored expressions in an emerging literary tradition.

For some decades now, critics have recognized the innovative maternal symbolism within Barrett Browning's ground breaking poem. One of the first reviewers of *Aurora Leigh* in the *Westminster Review* (1857) remarked that the scene of Marian nursing her babe was a "picture of innocence and maternal fondness such as has never before been realized in verse" (qtd. in Cooper 152). More recently, Alicia E. Holmes relates that the maternal metaphors in Barrett Browning's text function as, first, reminders that "Aurora is operating in a male hierarchal tradition which has all but eliminated women as authors," and second, new models by which Aurora may "use her imagination to repair the imperfect record of literary women" (593). Sandra Donaldson reads the poem's breast imagery as an emblem for Aurora's maturation as a woman and a poet alike (59), while Cora Kaplan argues that suckling imagery in the novel-in-verse is an ongoing "multi-purpose symbol of nurturing

and growth” for a number of its characters, including Romney (15). Looking at the poem’s absent mothers, Virginia V. Steinmetz recognizes Aurora’s desire to overcome her “mother-want” (1: 40) and express herself in great poetry as twin desires bent on both legitimizing female poetry and making herself something of “a mother to the next generation of women artists” (357). In separate pieces, Laura J. Faulk and Andrew Burkett have argued that the poem’s images of destructive maternity call for a critical re-evaluation of the age’s poetic depictions of childbirth and motherhood. This extensive body of critical work on the multilayered maternal metaphors of the poem is certainly indispensable to my reading, but its emphasis on birthing metaphors exposes a gap in the current criticism by which the poem’s milk metaphors have been markedly overlooked. Moreover, the sparse criticism on its breastfeeding imagery has done so to the exclusion of lactation metaphors.

This chapter revisits *Aurora Leigh*’s “woman’s figures,” investigating how the breastfeeding metaphor with its blurring of subject boundaries is central to Barrett Browning’s task of poetically articulating this “double-breasted age” with a “double vision” (5: 216, 184). Through a metaphorical return to the breast, Aurora is able to forge a “double-breasted” poetry out of that same social framework which has relegated her bodily and poetic expressions to the domain of shameful physiological leakage and “mere women’s work” (2: 234-243). Barrett Browning enlists the image of the lactating breast as the model for a modern age of feminine poetics and an age when the anatomical woman’s *figure* operates in rhetorical figures that work to sanction female authorship.

Female Leakages: From Maternal Depletion to Poetic Creation

In an 1850 letter to her friend Eliza Ogilvy, Elizabeth Barrett Browning expresses her distress at the prospect of weaning her only son Pen from his wet nurse's milk too early. Fearing for more than just the "temporary suffering for the child," Elizabeth worries that to deprive him of breastmilk in his early infancy would be to deprive him of a tonic that is keeping him healthy (Heydon 29).²⁰ Barrett Browning's breastfeeding anxieties are certainly in keeping with mid-century preoccupations, but far from fearing that an unwary wet nurse will create a monstrous child (Beeton 489), or concerning herself with the moral disposition of the wet nurse potentially corrupting her suckling infant with bad milk (Matus 69), the poet takes as given the goodness of both process and female fluid and only worries about whether her son has had his fill of it. Fears of "mother-want" occupy the major characters of *Aurora Leigh* and have been the focus of a number of modern interpretations of the poem, which typically read Aurora's adoption of new maternal metaphors as helping her to establish a new mode of female poetry.²¹ Be that as it may, before Barrett Browning can use lactation imagery as the rhetoric for a new poetic tradition, she must use it to deconstruct a system of representation which tends to degrade female expression of many kinds.

It is no secret that in English culture, female physiological expressions have long been associated with a great deal of shame, resulting in a negative ideology of the "leaky" female body that is "coded in terms that have been traditionally devalued" according to Elizabeth Grosz in her influential study, *Volatile Bodies* (4). If Grosz is right and "women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage" (*Volatile* 203), then we might read these

²⁰ Margaret Reynolds compares Barrett Browning's fears of Pen's malnutrition in this letter to "the deleted allusion in the first draft manuscript to weaning and aloes" that was removed from the sixth book (193).

²¹ I am referring especially to the contributions of Virginia Steinmetz and Joyce Zonana.

seepages as largely depletive during the Victorian period. Mid-nineteenth-century discourse on the woman question capitalized on this unfavourable coding of female physiological boundlessness, often employing an image of the leaky woman to signify a subsequent drain on her rational faculties, a drain which barred her sex from tending to intellectual pursuits such as writing. As late as 1869, in his address to the Anthropological Society of London, James MacGrigor Allen maintained that women's "periodical illness" assured that their "intellectual labour" would always lag behind men's, "for the obvious reason that nature does not periodically interrupt his thought and application" (qtd. in Showalter "Menstruation" 85). Breastfeeding manuals stressed the inherent harm to the mother who allowed her infant to suck her dry, producing in this mother a number of side-effects from physical and mental fatigue to a catatonic state, but at the same time, these manuals maintained that some of this depletion was inevitable.²² Medical men and politicians alike cited the female body's sites of leakage as both the source of and the justification for women's lesser linguistic, intellectual, and writerly capacities. Whether or not a woman's life involved bearing children, the very reality of a woman's occupation of a female body with any number of its periodical "illnesses" assured that she would be far too compromised by her immediate bodily leakages to partake in those elevated, profoundly disembodied contemplations aligned with the male writer, as George Henry Lewes pointed out in his criticism of "Lady Novelists" (133). Therefore, even though Aurora never has any children of her own over the course of the poem, nor by its end is there any assurance that she will, the very fact of Aurora's being born a woman entrenches her in a system of representation which tends to conflate her physiological and literary processes as an incontinent leakage, a

²² Jill Matus (69) and Isabella Beeton (489); this rhetoric of maternal depletion will be a central concern in our discussion of Augusta Webster's *Mother and Daughter*.

reality that Aurora herself gestures towards when she disparages that a woman's proximate, embodied experience "proves a certain impotence in [her] art" (5: 44). Her reproductive processes drain her productive ones.

Having suffered the premature loss of her mother who "could not bear the joy of giving life" (1: 34), Aurora develops an ambivalence towards her own female creativity which, I venture, manifests itself in a shame at her own liquid and linguistic expressions.²³ Aurora's childhood impression of her mother after her death, via the woman's portrait, is characterized by its lactational properties: images which expose the young girl's understanding of her mother as one who extends her boundaries beyond her own physical form. In her mother's face Aurora sees

That swan-like supernatural white life
 Just sailing upward from the red silk scarf
 Which seemed to have no part in it nor power
 To keep it from quite breaking out of bounds. (1: 139-142)

The painting underlines Aurora's impression of female body as uncontained, where the "white life" of the mother's face – so full of expression that it cannot be kept from flowing outward and "sailing upward" (1: 140) – might be seen as representing two kinds of mother's milk: that originating from her breast in lactation and from her mouth in her linguistic expression. Informed by her father's books (1: 148), Aurora's increasingly disturbing impressions of the painting reflect the increasing stages of this deprivation or

²³ Reading the woman's death's by "the mother's rapture" (1:135) as an allusion to the woman's succumbing to the complications of another childbirth, Virginia Steinmetz maintains that it is because "Aurora's mother died in childbirth [...that] Aurora suffers a profound uncertainty about the good of creativity" (354). I would like to specify that creativity as female creativity since young Aurora exhibits a disdain for a female-authored literary tradition in favour of a male poetic tradition, a disdain that both stems from and is exacerbated by the implicit gendering of these text bodies in addition to her own body.

“mother-want.” Significantly, many of these literary allusions present images of monstrous feminine fluidity as well as a violent break from the maternal breast: now her mother appears as “A still Medusa with mild *milky* brows/All *curdled*,” her snakes not providing milk but dripping slime (1: 160-161); now she is “Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords/Where the babe sucked” (1: 160-161). Though critics like Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi attribute Aurora’s conflicted description of the portrait to “the deep ambivalence she feels about being a woman” who must choose between mother and poet (38), I would go further to suggest that Aurora’s horror at this lactational figure might also represent her internalization of a system of representation that affiliates her own embodied expression with an inferior literary expression.

These unfavourable depictions of the female *gender* channel into a depreciation of a female literary *genre* as leaky and sentimental rather than socially productive expression. Romney and Aurora’s initial conversation about poetry in book two provides an accurate picture of how Victorian assumptions of sexual difference could be debilitating for mid-nineteenth-century female authors like Aurora. Young Romney rehearses a dominant critical assumption about women’s poetry being inferior to men’s due to women’s very physiology – specifically, their frequent liquid outbursts. Assuming that women’s tears and words are an unproductive outflowing, Romney maintains that as she is a mere “personal and passionate” woman with “moist eyes/And hurrying lips,” Aurora is only capable of producing a lesser art (2: 221, 260-261). Romney claims that since every woman “weeps easily” (1: 205), Aurora may only “write as well... and ill... upon the whole/As other women” because she is too preoccupied with herself to notice others (2: 146-147). As a result, the social impact of her poetry might make her a weeping Madonna but cannot make

her either a redemptive Christ or a good writer (2: 223-225). By reducing female expressions to leakage, Romney overtly appeals to a model of the woman as being entirely preoccupied with her own, immediate bodily experiences, a model that restricts her poetic expressions to an embodied, domestic, sentimental poetry. On the other hand, given the historical privileging of male physiology and bodily expression (both of which attain a level of abstraction from the personal, male body), it is hardly surprising that often men alone were deemed competent to write elevated, authoritative poetry – their voices and their writing capable of producing the kind of widespread social impact that young Romney imagines he can perform as a self-ascribed “other Christ” (8: 675).

Though middle-class Victorian women like Aurora’s aunt were often the central figures in programs of social outreach (1: 297), and their participation was actually justified as an extension of their maternal expression,²⁴ unmarried women who were vocal about the rights of children, the poor, and fellow women were frequently aligned with a trope of the babbling spinster, a trope that characterized female verbal fluency as an extension of a woman’s unstable boundaries. Articles opposing women’s suffrage were riddled with parodies of suffragettes showcasing women’s writing as a mere leakage. Deborah Vlock relates that one such fabricated letter from a suffragette pokes fun at women’s “verbal excess” in its “inability to end itself” as it “*bleed[s]* on in two postscripts” (Vlock 168, emphasis added). Similarly, when Aurora relates that women must “prate of women’s rights,” “mission” and “function” until the men deduce that “a woman’s function plainly is [...] to talk” (8: 819-820, 822), she implies that women’s words are thought to lack substance, that their linguistic expression, like their physiological expression, is coded as

²⁴ In *Giving Women*, Jill Rappoport looks at how Victorian women’s altruism was typically affiliated with images of self-sacrificing “giving women,” especially mothers (6).

unconscious leakage – that their speech reflects a desire to hear themselves talk, not to improve the lives of others. Bodily as linguistically, a woman may be as incontinent as an infant. They may be as “competent” as children “to spell,” but they are incapable of meaningful, prophetic expression according to modern critics (2: 243).

Barrett Browning capitalizes on the extant framework aligning women to children and female to infantile expressions. The belief that women’s expression has a lesser capacity for social outreach is frequently linked to women’s generally lesser (thus inferior) physiology. Aurora often disparages her own physical smallness as preventing her from reaching the fame of her male counterparts, and even Lady Waldemar grounds her belief that women are less effective poets in physiological deficiency when she says that “Male poets are preferable, *straining* less/And teaching more” (8: 65-66, emphasis added).²⁵ Aurora appears to reverse the assumptions of gendered expression when she characterizes Romney’s endeavours as embodied and her own, spiritual, Romney always “looking for the worms, and I for the gods” (1: 552). But the only reason that Romney looks to the earth is because he imagines himself to be above it, while Aurora looks upward to the spiritual in an attempt to deny her own embodied experience and negative assignment of her fluidity. Young Aurora refuses to acknowledge the equal contribution of embodied experience, saying to Romney that “it takes a soul,/To move a body; it takes a high-souled man,/To move the masses” (2: 479-481). But Aurora’s mistake at this early point is in assuming that the spirit and the body, the abstract and the embodied, are necessarily at odds. Aurora spends her early years imitating this elevated male poet and striving to be this “high-souled man” at “the cost/Of putting down the woman’s” instinct (9: 646-647). She claims that past, canonical poets are

²⁵ For Margaret Reynolds, Waldemar’s comment rehearses a “common opinion” at the time that men alone were “deemed to offer the authoritative and prophetic strain of poetry” (289 fn. 6).

“the only speakers of essential truth” precisely because she imagines this essential truth to be entirely disembodied; it is a truth that is “opposed” to “temporal truths” and one that goes “beyond this blood beat” and “Beyond these senses” (1: 197). That may be so, but Aurora comes to learn that the truth of her age can only be achieved by the kind of breakdown in these distinctions of abstract and embodied, and the boundaries of self and other, that are couched in the metaphors of a new feminist poetics. The poem’s central emblem of the female poet, the nursing woman, uncovers the possibility that the female poet may occupy an expansive, permeating subjectivity, which I will argue Barrett Browning explicitly identifies with poetic “double vision” (5: 170).²⁶ The breastfeeder’s vantage is twofold: she experiences the smallest, most immediate circuit of communication when she literally feeds her infant in the nursing dyad, while this same fluid boundlessness means she speaks to the largest scale of being, and possesses the grandest purview, as feminine expression amalgamates humans in a vast network of literary community that has its source in the female body: those “paps we all have sucked” (5: 218).

The slandering of female physiological boundlessness during the mid-nineteenth century reveals an obvious blind spot in how female leakage could be alternatively coded as a feminine capacity for social outreach, an outward expression that is both literal (in her bodily fluids) and literary (in her language). Upset after discovering that Romney was jilted at the altar, Aurora wonders why women “weep as I do. Tears, tears! *Why* we weep?” (7: 204), alluding to a system of representation which posits that women, lacking sufficiently impermeable bodily boundaries, are more prone to outbursts of emotion. Frequent weeping is, of course, a function of this physiological and verbal incontinence – just as it is a trope of

²⁶ Luce Irigaray claims that this “feminine plural” stems from a woman’s plural sexual organs (pleasure points) compared to the unitary, male phallus, which results in the feminine text being “more diffusive than its ‘masculine counterpart’” because female language goes “off in all directions” (*This Sex Which is Not One*, 29).

female-authored sentimental poetry – and Aurora’s outburst of “Tears, tears!” literalizes her fluid leakage and attaches to it a shame at not being able to contain herself physically as linguistically, attributing it to her being a woman who “talk[s] too much” (7: 208), not to being a woman whose fluid expressions disclose a capacity for empathy towards others. Though Aurora weeps for Romney here, as she weeps for Marian later, she ascribes her tears to a negative boundlessness – her sex’s inability to differentiate between her own subject and the whole of humanity, saying women indiscriminately cry whether “we’ve shamed a life,/Or lost a love, or missed a world” since “we weep, as if both body and soul/Broke up in water ” (7: 204-205, 209-210). Aurora’s admission inadvertently exposes her own double vision that springs from a female body fluidly moving from herself, to a lover, to every stranger whose experiences she does not know.²⁷ Aurora finds herself negatively characterized by a rhetoric of gendered expressions that would sooner assign her physiological processes to aimless, sentimental seepage rather than to a feminine predisposition to expand towards others in sympathy. Her own growth into a productive, female poet, then, engenders a reimagining of this disempowering model of the leaky female body into one of physical, poetic, and social productivity, where the lactating breast becomes the emblem of a linguistic expression that flows from her body to communicate with others. Rather ironically, Aurora’s growth into a poet of her age requires a symbolic return to that most primary poetic expression of her infancy: the communication of milk within the nursing dyad.

²⁷ Romney will later commend Aurora for this boundlessness when he offers his respect for her empathy, positively remarking that she weeps for even the lowliest creatures: “for a mouse, [or] a bird” as well as for him (9: 575-576).

From Literal to Linguistic Milk

Instances of maternal breastfeeding in *Aurora Leigh* signify more than just a food transaction from mother to child. The nursing mother serves as the representation in miniature of a uniquely female poetry which, like breastmilk, is characterized by fluidity and, according to Virginia Steinmetz, is distinguished from an individuating and exclusionary tradition of male-authored poetry (355). The mother's milk within the nursing dyad takes on linguistic proportions as a mother's voice and song that she expresses to her infant. This collapsing of female fluid and female voice is epitomized in the lactational figure of Marian, a mother who effortlessly vacillates between breastfeeding her infant to put him to bed and administering words to him, so that he "took a score of songs/And mother-hushes ere she saw him sound" asleep (8: 252-253). The mother's milk and speech are intrinsically bound, and all poets are shown to have their origins in this dual feminine expression of the mother. Even Barrett Browning's fictional poet and Aurora's rival Mark Gage returns as an adult to the lap of his mother, where he once imbibed her milk-ink as he "peck[ed] the letters from her mouth" (5: 524-528).

Barrett Browning first points out the affinity between literal and linguistic female milk when Aurora's father and the weaned child seek out the symbolic nourishment of Pelago's breast-like hills. Aurora's father believes that this feminized landscape will make an adequate surrogate that he could not,

Because unmothered babes, he thought, had need

Of mother nature more than others use

And Pan's white goats, with udders warm and full

Of mystic contemplations, come to feed

Poor milkless lips of orphans like his own. (1: 112-116)

Recalling Barrett Browning's image of her milk-deprived Pen, the motherless Aurora experiences a deficiency in her very constitution, a physical experience of "mother-want" which Aurora fails to satiate with her father's love or later, his books on classics and mythology, which she can only ever "nibble" at "here and there" (1: 838). Neither her father's linguistic expressions of love, nor her forefathers' poetic tradition, are sufficient to fulfill her hunger for "white ink." Emphasizing the nursing metaphor, Zonana points out that because of "the patriarchal tradition [Aurora] has imbibed in her father's books, she envisages inspiration as elevation and transcendence of the senses" (245). Informed by this disembodied male tradition, her father's love unlike the mother's does not access the semiotic and is therefore expressed to the infant "not as wisely, since less foolishly" (1: 63) in something of a foreign tongue. The image of mother nature's feeding opens up the possibility of forging new metaphors for female poetic generation even when they have been absent in the literary lineage. In other words, the rhetoric of mother nature's milk offers Aurora a springboard for her new feminine poetics. Like the dual "milk" that a mother provides, literal and linguistic, what Olivia Taylor terms this "semiotic matrix of mother nature" (156) provides the "mystic contemplations" that Aurora imbibes as naturally "as a babe sucks surely in the dark" (1: 476). The child Aurora's mother-want – figured here in her "milkless lips" – is no longer a literal deficiency of breast milk as she is well beyond the breastfeeding years. Instead, the emphasis shifts here from imagery of the mother's breast to the infant's mouth, a gesture towards the infant's orality and its hunger for a new linguistic learning that paints a picture of its wordless – since milkless – lips. Aurora's mother-want,

then, is symptomatic of an absence of poetic foremothers and the unique expressions they can provide.

In our first chapter on the Victorian context of breastfeeding, we looked at how nineteenth-century gender discourse often unfavourably affiliated the middle-class woman with the figure of the infant by virtue of their shared physiological leakages. The corresponding literary trope of what Claudia Nelson terms the “arrested child-woman” was a manifestation of the perceived limitations of women’s bodily self-governance and the real limitations imposed on women’s political governance, including her lack of political and property rights (7). This woman/child conflation helped to naturalize women’s conceptual relegation not only to the domestic sphere but to the decidedly smaller, and non-canonical, subject matter of sentimental and motherhood poetry. Aurora herself alludes to the infantilization of adult women in cultural representations – in this case, clothing – when she states that unlike men women continue to wear swaddling clothes in adulthood, saying: “A woman’s always younger than a man/ At equal years, because she is [...]kept in long clothes past the age to walk” (2: 329-332).²⁸ Aurora expresses distaste at the sight of a mother with her children weighing on her skirts (2: 516) in part, because, like the fabric, the children would literally bring her down to the level of childhood subjectivity, “keep[ing] me low” (2: 517). The young poet’s reluctance to consider motherhood a valid avenue of creative expression reveals that she has internalized the idea that motherhood necessitates a furthering of this physiological inferiority. Paradoxically, those physiological expressions that signify a grown woman’s reproductive processes indicated a regression from adulthood

²⁸ Margaret Reynolds claims that, while Aurora is alluding to the “long-clothes” that the babies of both sexes were swaddled in, she is also “making an ironic comparison with the long, full skirts that all women wore” (48 fn. 8).

to childhood, and nowhere was woman's symbolic proximity to the child more evident than in a mother's literal proximity to her infant in the act of breastfeeding.

Barrett Browning departs from this tradition by literally and symbolically positioning the mother at the threshold of both adult and infantile roles as she simultaneously straddles both. Barrett Browning literalizes this subjective straddling in Aurora's only recollection of "my mother at her post/Beside the nursery-door, with finger up" (1: 15-16). With literally one foot in the nursery and one outside of it, the mother's unique "post" at the periphery of her husband and her infant permits her to communicate with her nursling while stationed at the fringes of an adult's marriage bed, and by extension, communication with men and a male linguistic economy. As a symbol of female fluidity, the nursing dyad encapsulates woman's plurality of being, expanding indiscriminately over not just adult and child, but also male and female. Since all humans are subject to the mother's primal song of infancy in the womb if not at the breast, female expression becomes an axis upon which all humanity revolves, and the first instance of language production.

Barrett Browning figures this maternal sphere of fluid subjectivities as a uterus-like body of water, with a maternal song of "waves" that intertwines what Cixous would later identify as the mother's fluid "Voice" and her "inexhaustible milk" (*La Jeune Née* 173). Aurora envisions that mothers and infants share in an exclusive language of this "outer Infinite" (1: 12),²⁹ a decidedly fluid language which resists articulation within an adult language that considers a mother's speech to her infant inaccessible because the sounds are a series of nonsense syllables. In an elaborate analogy of aging, Aurora envisions a person's

²⁹ Of course, Barrett Browning's "outer Infinite" is likely informed by the child's vision of pre-existence, the "immortal sea" in William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (line 168). But while Wordsworth attributes the child's vision to the abstract concept of a poetic spirit that is attained through the "soul's immensity" ("Ode" 110), I contend that Barrett Browning grounds her "Infinite" in very literal female fluids within the maternal dyad.

youth as being incumbent upon his or her proximity to (or distance from) the shores of an imaginary body of water – that fluid sea of the “outer Infinite.” As the tide is subject to the lunar calendar, the image conjures up those temporal rhythms traditionally aligned with the female fertility cycle, lending the water imagery a characteristically feminine and potentially maternal quality. It is only fitting that the sound of the Infinite’s waves are what “unweaned babies smile at in their sleep” (1: 11-13); these suckling infants, who are the epitome of transitory youth, first heard the shores of this “outer Infinite” in their own sea which was once the embryonic fluid, and now drink of its contents at the lactating breast. Barrett Browning’s affiliation of a woman’s linguistic expression and an infant’s primary utterances anticipates that pre-linguistic space of mother/infant communication that the French feminists term the semiotic – a mode of fluid, feminine expression that for Cixous forms the basis of all *Écriture féminine*. Importantly, Aurora relates how it is not only mothers but all women who retain a connection to this expressional framework, for all “women” possess that “knack” of “stringing pretty words that make no sense” and “kissing full sense into empty words” (1: 51-52). Since every woman has access to this fluid language, Browning suggests that the male infant may move further and further away from the Infinite’s shores in its literal weaning, but the female body is always at an axis to it, encapsulating both child and adult subjects. In psychoanalytic terms, while the male infant’s literal and linguistic weaning from the mother brings about a repression of this maternal language and entrance into a symbolic order, the girl child, by virtue of her identification with both child and maternal body, holds onto the remnants of this fluid, linguistic poetry even as she enters the symbolic order (and, by extension, a tradition of male-authored literature). Though a grown woman like Aurora communicates using what Marjorie Stone terms a “discourse of phallic

signifiers” (“Taste” 768), she nonetheless expresses the female semiotic in the poetical lactation she offers to her infant as well as in the lactational poetics of her poems, which are interchangeable.³⁰ This means not just mothers, but every woman, has access to the communications of the semiotic realm and can speak in the fluid language of “empty words” that “make no sense” (1: 51-52), one that Aurora comes to embrace.

While a number of critics of *Aurora Leigh* have linked Aurora’s new poetic expression to semiotic expression, none of these critics, to my knowledge, has explicitly connected Aurora’s return to this feminine sphere with the poem’s reoccurring lactation imagery. Looking at Aurora’s blood imagery as a feminine expression of ink, Olivia Gatti Taylor argues that it is “[o]nly by retaining her sense of the semiotic” that “Aurora can survive, and succeed as a poet” (157). Alternatively, and against my reading, Patricia Srebrnik has argued that the poem’s pre-verbal images of the semiotic, or female symbolic, do not successfully rewrite a phallogocentric literary tradition.³¹ While Joyce Zonana attributes Aurora’s new feminist poetics to her acknowledgment of a new “embodied muse” complete with the female body’s fluid expressions, this critic traces Aurora’s poetic inspiration back to a maternal “rhythm of blood” (252), stopping just short of what is an equally, if not more embodied reading of female poetics in Barrett Browning’s breastmilk imagery. In “Taste, Totems, and Taboos: The Female Breast in Victorian Poetry,” Marjorie Stone persuasively argues that Barrett Browning’s use of breast imagery contributes to her “revision” of phallogocentric male signifiers (767), but the lactational significance of Barrett Browning’s breast imagery goes beyond the scope of Stone’s ambitious survey. I want to

³⁰ I do not think it is insignificant, in this regard, that Julia Kristeva maintains that feminine, semiotic utterances often occur in adult language in the fluid expressions of poetry (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 29).

³¹ In what I read as a rather reductive interpretation, Srebrnik concludes that since “the patriarchal value system of the Victorian era repressed anything feminine, Browning [sic] could not have created a female Symbolic” (9).

look at Barrett Browning's rhetorical strategy in using lactation imagery to entertain the possibility that a woman's uniquely liminal embodied experience – occupying a space within and outside of her body in lactation, a space between adult and child in the Victorian imagination, and between male and female realms of language by Cixous's estimation – signifies that women have expansive subjectivities. By extension, the male poetic tradition of Aurora's father and poetic forefathers, which relies solely on abstracted metaphors of male expression, is shown to lack the "double-vision" that a feminine, embodied poetics can provide.

Now let us move from images of poetic lactation to those of lactational poetics. Once Romney is blinded and ironically given insight, as Barrett Browning posited in one of her letters,³² he discovers the social importance of poetry through Aurora's unique expression. He comes to characterize female expression – in the form of female poetry – as an emerging kind of sustenance for which he newly hungers. He admits that, in reading her "special" book, Aurora is administering to him; now he finds that his "daily bread tastes of it" and he has "wholly replaced his wine with that – which had a better taste" (8: 283, 266-268). Romney, like Aurora's symbolic infant of the "Outer infinite," realizes in his metaphorically seeing state that in his youth he had dismissed Aurora's womanly expression merely because she "had no beard to bristle through her song" (8: 332). Now, he finds her to be his "teacher, who has taught me with a book," his "Miriam, whose sweet mouth, when nearly drowned/I still heard singing on the shore" (8: 333-335).³³ This shoreline image positions Romney as a

³² During the drafting of *Aurora Leigh*, Browning wrote in a letter to Sarianna Browning, on November 1856, of Romney: "He had to be blinded, observe, to be made to see" (qtd. in Reynolds 336).

³³ Unlike Romney's original evocation of Aurora as the biblical figure, he now recognizes the authority of her poetry by characterizing Miriam's song as central to the salvation of the Israelites, a song that directs him like Moses to the figurative Promised Land, Jerusalem, which Aurora alludes to in the poem's final lines (9: 962-964).

babe who is lost without Aurora's semiotic song. Like an infant, Romney has taken in this easily digestible food, this embodied "white ink," but the "white ink" is not a lesser form of nourishment because it is base; it is foundational, bridging together different vantage points. This helps to explain why Romney says that Aurora's poetry breaks down his own boundaries of selfhood, enabling him to possess a double vision as an adult looking backwardly to the fluid articulations of his infancy. Once he was entirely inaccessible because he was "built up as walls are [...] each feeling ranged by line" (4: 353-354), but Aurora's expressions have dissolved his boundaries. Representing Aurora's poetry as a liquid infiltration of his being, he tells her that "this last book o'ercame me like soft rain [...] when the tightened bark/Breaks out into unhesitating buds" (8: 595-598). The image represents Aurora's liquid externalization of herself in the "soft rain" and her inward movement to break down the outer epidermis, that "tightened bark" of Romney's boundaries.³⁴ Aurora's new feminine poetry, like breastmilk, is destined to extend beyond her own subjectivity, and accordingly, while her earlier poems represent only herself (8: 599), her newest one reveals an outward-looking identity which Romney claims is "separate from yourself" and takes refuge in readers like himself who "bore to take it in/And let it draw me" (8: 606-608). The very image of consuming this feminine poetry provides the imaginative framework for social and ethical reform as it dismantles class boundaries. No longer disparaging her poetry as antithetical to reform, Romney now regards her embodied expression as an instrument of social change when he tells her to "press the clarion on their woman's lip" and "breathe thy fine keen breath along the brass,/And blow all class-walls level as Jericho's" (9: 929-932). Couched in terms of breastfeeding, Aurora's new feminine

³⁴ Appropriately, Romney describes how the words he spoke to Aurora in his youth created a boundary between them: "I built up follies like a wall/To intercept the sunshine and your face" (8: 381-382).

poetry offers a profoundly accessible and yet accessibly profound source of poetic inspiration.

An Age of the Udder: That “familiar thing/Become divine i’ the utterance”

After Aurora becomes disillusioned with the poetic tradition of her forefathers in England, she resolves to return to her motherland of Italy to find poetic inspiration amidst its breast-like hills, where she imagines that that this mother nature of her childhood will be cognizant of her presence “as sleeping mothers feel the sucking babe/And smile” (5: 1269-1270). But before Aurora can get there, she finds inspiration for her poetry in an unlikely source: the image of a fallen woman with “no book-learning” (3: 999) breastfeeding her illegitimate and pre-linguistic infant. Representative of poetical lactation, the nursing dyad of Marian with “a babe upon her breast” (7: 241) epitomizes the breakdown in the boundaries of self and other that will form the basis of the “completer poetry” that Aurora comes to produce (6: 207). Aurora’s initial judgement of Marian as a licentious woman whose immoral intercourse resulted in this corrupt product (6: 618-624) gives way to awe during two significant and overlapping instances of female expression: Marian’s retelling of her tragic story and the breastfeeding of her child as she “let the babe/Slide down upon her bosom from her arms” (6: 618-624). Marian’s expression of words and milk in this nursing scene is sufficient to dissolve Aurora’s own boundaries as she weeps uncontrollably, “broken utterly” into a “woman’s passion” (6: 778-779) and expanding herself outwardly to Marian by radically vowing to become a second mother to the infant and live with them as a family, which she does for some time. Drinking from this source, Marian’s babe with his “milk-fed lips” offers

Aurora the fluid expressions of a warbled name, “Alola,” and a “dewy kiss” that blends the two individuals so that Aurora claims “the whole child’s face at once/Dissolved on mine” (7: 956, 954, 948-950). Central to Aurora’s discovery of true poetry is a realisation that female expression is at once embodied and spiritual, lowly and elevated. As such, Aurora reconciles her harsh judgement of the illegitimate mother as “defiled” when she views the sleeping nursing dyad. She scorns herself, saying “Stoop lower, Aurora! [...] creep in somewhere, humbly, on your knees,/Within this round of sequestration white/In which they have wrapt earth’s foundlings, heaven’s elect” (7: 391-394). Within the image of the nursing dyad, Aurora reconstructs her initial disdain at the picture of a mother’s lowliness (2: 517) as representative of a new ethical order that breaks down the boundaries between all subjects in a comprehensive “white” circuit of communication. The fluidity within this nursing dyad serves as the basis for Aurora’s and Barrett Browning’s dual poetics – an embodied and divine source of inspiration.³⁵ The poet now recognizes in the nursing dyad an emblem of “completer poetry” – originating in the natural and amounting to the spiritual – that is absent in her canonical heritage.

While Aurora’s mother-want discloses the need for modern poets to adopt a new mode of feminine poetics, her father’s books represent the modes of an elevated, male poetic tradition that are incomplete renderings of the spirit of an age, which encapsulates both the bodily and the incorporeal – just as the word “spirit” refers to both a drinkable fluid and an intangible essence. Aurora maintains that modern poets’ rhetorical forms continue to imitate the poetic forefathers of a lost, drained age when she claims: “critics say that epics have died

³⁵ When Aurora later professes that “nothing’s small” for poetic representation, so that even within the “little tremor of the blood” in her vein, “The whole strong clamour of a vehement soul [...] utter itself distinct” (7: 713, 818-821), she demonstrates the contribution of her own physiological essence as a gateway into the infinite.

out/With Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods” (5: 139-140). While in her youth Aurora sought poetic inspiration from seminal, abstract sources, claiming that Zeus ravished her and made her into a cup bearer offering his liquid wisdom (1: 920-930), and that Jove had impregnated her as he did Danae with his golden showers (3: 126), as a mature poet, Aurora calls attention to the absence of complete metaphors for poetic generation which originate in immediate, female sources. Modern poets who appeal to the past, male tradition fail to capture the entirety of their own “live, throbbing age” (5: 203), portraying poetic generation in terms of spiritual truths at the cost of their own present, embodied experience, and the origins of that experience, not from the inspiration of the Greeks’ “goat-nursed gods,” but at the modern woman’s lowly breast. Instead, argues Aurora, “poets should/Exert a double vision” (5: 183-184), seeing the lowly and the divine, the immediate and the far-reaching, interchangeably – those “near things as comprehensively/As if afar they took their point of sight,/And distant things as intimately deep/As if they touched them” (5: 183-188). After bearing witness to Marian’s dual expression, Aurora comes to realize that an artist who separates “Natural things/And spiritual” as she once did in her poetry, inevitably “paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse,/Leads vulgar days” because human beings are “twofold” creatures (7: 777, 763-768). What is required of the modern poet is the invention of similarly “twofold” metaphors for creative production: just as the term “women’s *figures*” imparts both a woman’s physiological figure (her body) and the letters she uses to signify meaning (her text body),³⁶ so too does a woman’s liquid expression amount to her linguistic expression in a dually real and abstract “white ink.” Poetry that discounts the body

³⁶ Both meanings of the word “figure” would have been familiar to Barrett Browning and her readership; the OED shows the word as having a longstanding meaning both as “an embodied (human) form” (5.a) and “a written character” applying “to a letter of the alphabet” (IV: 18).

recognizes humanity only “By half-means, half-way, seeing half their wants,” like Romney’s failed attempt at social reform (9: 639).

Romney recognizes the modern disengagement from embodied experience when he characterizes modernity as “Some red colossal cow with mighty paps/A Cyclops’ fingers could not strain to milk” (8: 849-850). Just as Aurora relates that we can no longer source poetic forms from the ancient “goat-nursed gods” (5: 140), we may take Romney’s statement to mean that neither modern poets nor reformers can extract the age’s essence if they believe that it stems from an epic, inaccessible source. If, as Romney claims, “Genuine government/Is but the expression of a nation” as “all society [...] Is but the expression of men’s single lives” (8: 874-878), then Barrett Browning suggests that we ought to trace the origins of this “expression” to a human milk that encapsulates both the embodied and the abstract, feeding both body and spirit. After Romney returns to Aurora after his failed social reform, telling her that “There’s too much abstract willing, purposing/In this poor world” (8: 800), he admits he found a complete sustenance, and an antidote, in her poetry. His confession implies that new poetry like Aurora’s can remedy this age of symbolic hunger when people seek nourishment and “pitiful[ly...] walk like unweaned babes and suck our thumbs/Because we’re hungry” (5: 489-490). Aurora’s mother-want, then, bespeaks the mother-want of an entire generation, calling for a figurative return to the human (not the animal) breast: a movement to the past which simultaneously looks forward to a new feminine poetics.

As a young girl Aurora had to capture the memory of her mother’s lactational voice, and as an adult, double-seeing poet she must “catch”

Upon the burning lava of a song,

The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
 That, when the next shall come, the men of that
 May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
 "Behold, --behold the paps we all have sucked!
 This bosom seems to beat still or at least
 It sets ours beating: this is living art,
 Which thus presents and thus records true life. (5: 214-222)

It is perhaps surprising, given the critical interest in *Aurora Leigh's* maternal and breast imagery, that there have been few if no readings of this image of modern poetic expression as a metaphor of lactation.³⁷ I read this flowing, "double-breasted Age" as Barrett Browning's ultimate metaphor for a new female poetics that consolidates the material and the spiritual in a shared poetic expression of literal and linguistic milk. The image of the breast springing "lava of a song" for modern poets to imbibe recalls Aurora's desire to mediate between literal and spiritual milk as she writes with the "lava-lymph" that "trickles from successive galaxies" (5: 4). The lava song recalls Marian's embodied utterances to her suckling son, who consumes her breastmilk and her songs indiscriminately (8: 252-253). Like those "mother's breasts" that offer "multitudinous life" to suckling infants – providing both milk and heavenly "pure spheres" to the "new-made creatures hanging there" (5: 16-19), the white ink that flows from this "double-breasted age" is accessible to all poets who acknowledge their origin – and the origin of all poetry, in the most banal of feminine expressions – from those earthly "paps we all have sucked" (219) all the way to the spiritual,

³⁷ In her compelling reading of Victorian breast imagery, Stone argues that "the metaphor of 'the burning lava of song' appears first and from it the reader may infer that the source of the lava is the poet-singer" but is then confronted with a sexualized depiction of women's breasts reminiscent of a Victorian pornographic tradition (751).

“living art” of a new feminine poetics, not the dead male poets’ depleted metaphors of poetic production. Barrett Browning reveals how this “white ink” bridges intergenerational gaps between children and adults, and intersexual gaps between male and female, with her image of those future descendants of “men” who are corporeally bonded to their poetic foremothers, unsure whether this bosom “beat[s] still” or “sets ours beating.”³⁸

Critics have often pointed out that this metaphor of literary expression as a female bodily fluid is evidence of the poem’s innovation in professing a new poetic capacity for “women’s language” to release the bounds imposed on female sexuality, by “speaking all that is repressed and forbidden in human experience” (Kaplan 11). I would go further to suggest that Barrett Browning specifically constructs the modern age as a symbol of lactation for a generation of mother-wanting individuals who thirst for an expanded poetic vantage vested in the “multitudinous life” of the lactating woman, and the “double vision” of a new feminine poetics that joins multiple vectors of human experience – bodily and spiritual, child and adult, male and female, individual and collective – in a shared feminine expression.

The significance of Barrett Browning’s use of lactation metaphors of poetic generation cannot be overstated, because these “woman’s figures” call attention to a gap in physiological metaphors of women’s literary production. In this regard, unfavourable contemporary reviews of *Aurora Leigh* disclose a great deal about the male poetic tradition that Barrett Browning and Aurora were writing in, and the critical terminology used to determine whether or not works represented “good” poetry. Cora Kaplan recounts how in one review, the critic shows an extreme discomfort at Aurora’s metaphor of a “double-

³⁸ At the same time, the emblem of the flowing breast that “presents” and “records true life” (5: 222) testifies to a distinctly feminine poetics that is simultaneously forward- and backward-looking.

breasted age” spilling forth the lava of poetic inspiration (5: 216) as he remarks: “Burning lava and a woman’s breast! And concentrated in the latter the fullest ideas of life. It is an absolute pain to read it. No man could have written it.”³⁹ This reviewer picks up on the literary absence of valid, feminine representations of poetic generation with his shock at the image of a “woman’s breast” housing “the fullest ideas of life.” He argues that Barrett Browning’s metaphor of a “double-breasted age” is unsuccessful because its fleshly embodiment is unprecedented in an elevated canon of male poetry.⁴⁰ Devoid of a literary precedent of “women’s figures,” the reviewer is literally left without the terminology to adequately describe it, and as a man, he lacks the words to “have written it” himself. The review testifies to a mid-century gap in metaphors of female poetic production since the reviewer concludes that Barrett Browning’s vision of bodily, feminine expression is incompatible with the existing tropes of an elevated, masculine poetic tradition.

If this is the case, then Aurora’s “mother-want” certainly bespeaks more than the literal absence of a foremother; it stands for the modern poet’s predicament of being without a lineage of female predecessors within a male-dominated literary canon, one where embodied female experience and communication have been markedly neglected in both the canon and the critical rhetoric that reflects on it. In *Literary Women* (1976), Ellen Moers has recognized a gap in our modern critical terminology by which to discuss embodied female experience, where there is simply no corresponding female term for phallic symbolism, while Stone has pointed out her own difficulty searching for a “adjective to denote imagery

³⁹ Qtd. in Cora Kaplan’s introduction to *Aurora Leigh* (13). Stone connects the uncomfortable Victorian and modern response to the passage to Barrett Browning’s “deliberate rhetorical strategy” using “women’s figures” (752).

⁴⁰ Significantly, Barrett Browning also defended her poem’s inclusion of “plain words” about prostitutes and “stews” (brothels) in the poem (7: 101), which she claimed “a woman oughtn’t to refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition” (Kenyon II 254).

of the female breast” in her study of Victorian breast imagery.⁴¹ Certainly at the time of Aurora’s writing, in spite of a longstanding discourse which conflates phallic and linguistic proficiency, there was simply no female physiological equivalent of the male penis as an emblem of physiological and writerly potency. This absence of women’s metaphors helps to explain why in taking up a tradition of male poetry, Aurora can only ever “[play] at art” and make “thrusts with a toy-sword” (3: 239-240) in her poems. The young Aurora figures female physiological expression as a debilitating rather than productive force for poetry creation, that is, until she legitimizes “woman’s figures,” locating in the image of the lactating breast an emblem which not only supplants but expands upon an existing model of poetic generation.

Aurora comes to accept her use of female metaphors as a natural extension of her identification as female. When she says to Romney, “I’m a woman, sir,/I use the woman’s figures naturally,/As you the male license” (8: 1130-1133), she attributes a woman’s poetic authority to her own immediate experiences occupying a woman’s body, while a man’s poetic credentials are given, stemming from a long lineage of male poets within an established literary tradition. Aurora retrofits a dominantly male poetic tradition to include a female voice that stems from a female body and its own “figures” of bodily expression, replacing a symbol of phallic generation with a breast that issues forth poetic expression.

Aurora Leigh’s lactation metaphors subvert a dominant narrative of masculine poetic generation by enlisting human milk as the figurative ink of a new feminine mode of poetics. Barrett Browning foregrounds the lactation process in an innovative rhetorical strategy that reformulates a cultural devaluation of women’s physiological and verbal expression, moving

⁴¹ Stone links these “inadequacies in our critical terminologies” to Barrett Browning’s task of explicitly representing “women’s figures” in *Aurora Leigh* (“Taste” 753).

away from literal and linguistic leakage to the productive communication of “women’s figures” that represent a shared vector of human experience that is sourced in a primal communication with the maternal body. Aurora’s depictions of nursing dyads take on poetic proportions as a mother’s fluid offerings of milk are indistinguishable from her verbal offerings in rhyme and song. The image of those “Paps we all have sucked” figures as the zeitgeist or the spirit of the age because the dual liquid and linguistic “spirit” of breastmilk consolidates past and future, male and female, adult and child in a shared experience of poetic communication. Barrett Browning’s lactational metaphor of “a heaving, double-breasted age” calls for a new poetics that acknowledges the origins of poetry in an embodied, feminine expression. And where a literary heritage of female poetic foremothers is found lacking, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Aurora become the figurative mothers to the next generation of poets offering their own “white ink.”

The implications of Barrett Browning’s work call for another kind of “double vision”: a vision towards a future that recognizes female embodiment and poetic expression for its contribution to a new feminine poetic tradition, and a vision that looks backwards in an effort to unearth those contributions of female poems past that have eluded the authoritative literary canon because they were considered to belong to the inconsequential *matter* of female experience. It is a recognition of origin in that most base source of poetic inspiration – the pap, from which paradoxically springs that most far-reaching and comprehensive ink of human experience.

Chapter Three

Edible Women: The Liquid, Linguistic, and Lactational Exchanges of “Goblin Market”

At a year and five months, she was still being breastfed, a fact which caused her father some anxiety: and perhaps this goes some way to account for the extraordinary devotion to her mother which Christina was never to lose.

Frances Thomas, *Christina Rossetti, A Biography*.⁴²

After having engaged in a conversation and a transaction with the goblin merchants and “sucked their fruit globes” (128), Laura returns to the girls’ idyllic cottage dairy farm only to discover soon after that she can no longer hear the goblin men’s repeated cries of “Come buy, come buy” (4, 19, 31) nor can she, consequently, attain their juicy fruits. Laura grows deathly ill as a result of her rendezvous, yet she longs to hear the goblin words and yearns to eat their fruit, refusing to consume anything else. Eventually her sister, Lizzie, goes out in search of the goblin men and their fruits; she withstands an attack from the goblin men and brings back the fruit juices on her own body and mouth, offering herself to her ailing sister in that infamous line, “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices” (468), which Laura does, and is miraculously cured by imbibing the fluid. The two pivotal “sucking” scenes in “Goblin Market” have provided ample fodder for critics who, like Laura, have “sucked and sucked and sucked the more” (134) at Rossetti’s food imagery, coming away with such a

⁴² Thomas, ch. 1, para. 17. A number of Christina Rossetti’s biographers have noted the unusually long duration of Christina’s breastfeeding, a process that typically lasted nine months and that Beeton warns should never last longer than fifteen months, at the very latest, given the dangers of maternal depletion and infant malnutrition associated with prolonged feeding (2486). However, Jan Marsh also relates that “Our first recorded glimpse of Christina is in the country, aged eighteen months, when her father pictures his skittish baby daughter[...] It was time Christina be weaned, he suggested, though there was no other baby on the way” (3).

range of insightful interpretations so as to rival the varied fruits of the market itself. These readings of Rossetti's consumption imagery roughly correspond to two distinct camps whose theoretical frameworks may appear as incompatible as apples and oranges. There is a longstanding and authoritative trend of interpreting the sucking imagery for its multilayered symbolic significance. Religious readings capitalize on Rossetti's Anglo-Catholic devotion and her charitable work with fallen women in Highgate Penitentiary⁴³ as informing an allegorical tale of temptation and redemption, in readings which cast the "curious" Laura as Eve who succumbs to the "fruit forbidden" (479) and who is redeemed by Lizzie's Eucharistic bodily offering.⁴⁴ Also engaging with a symbolic interpretation of the fruit is a strand of feminist readings which focuses on how female expression and voice in the poem function as an allegory for an emerging women's literary tradition. These readings postulate that the consumable fluids in Rossetti's poem signify gendered literary expressions, where the goblin market is a stand-in for a male-dominated literary marketplace and the goblin fruits are a series of seminal "male texts" that Laura and Lizzie must adopt and adapt.⁴⁵ Departing from these symbolic readings, there has been an emerging trend to read the fairy tale food imagery literally by firmly implanting it in the context of a very real Victorian political consumerism, in criticism which, in Herbert Tucker's words, "[puts] the 'market' back in 'Goblin Market'" (117). These critics speculate that the goblins' poison is emblematic of the dangers presented by unchecked capitalist culture, figuring the goblin market as the microcosm for a real encroaching marketplace, and Laura and Lizzie as actual

⁴³ Rossetti volunteered at St. Mary Magdalene "house of charity" in Highgate from 1859-1870 (Packer 155).

⁴⁴ Some of the major contributors to such readings are Mary Arseneau, Linda Peterson, Albert Pionke, and Jill Rappoport.

⁴⁵ I am referring especially to the arguments of Catherine Maxwell and Sandra Gilbert.

consumers.⁴⁶ In this chapter I would like to try and bridge the gap between these often disparate allegorical and literal readings of Rossetti's food imagery by calling attention to the way that the sucking scenes evoke another food source that was as real to the mid-century Victorian imagination as market fruits but was simultaneously laden with symbolic meaning as a signifier of a uniquely female expression, and that is breastmilk.

This chapter picks up on critics who have linked female expressions in "Goblin Market" to female literary production in a male-dominated marketplace, where Laura and Lizzie struggle to find their own voice alongside what Catherine Maxwell terms the "male texts" (goblin fruits) of a male-dominated poetic tradition (the titular goblin market). I build on Maxwell's allegory by arguing that the emerging female poetic tradition is a decisively embodied poetry. Looking at the correspondence between liquid expressions of fluids and linguistic expressions of words in the poem, I read Lizzie's triumphant return and her offering for Laura to suck from her female body as a scene of figurative breastfeeding, whereby Laura's consumption of this new fluid is the impetus for Laura not only to recover, but also to engage in her own form of expression as she grows into a full-fledged mother and poet in the poem's final scene, communicating the story of Lizzie's miraculous cure to the next generation of nascent poets (557-559), and what Debra Cumberland refers to as a "female community based on the trope of reading and creating together" (208).

Critics interested in the trajectory of canonical women poets have often heralded Christina Rossetti as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's natural heir, the second in a series of women poets who occupied a respected space in a male-dominated canon but were also conscious of their place in a female poetic tradition established earlier in the century by

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Sean Grass, Elizabeth Helsinger, Victor Mendoza, Megan Norcia, Robin Sowards, Rebecca Stern, Deborah Thompson, and Herbert Tucker.

poets including Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.).⁴⁷ But few of these critics have considered how this historical phenomenon of a new, female poetic expression that deliberately negotiates with a series of male voices plays out within the narrative of Rossetti's most famous poem. Moreover, no critic to my knowledge has linked the poem's images of female linguistic expression to the physiological expression of lactation and its literal communication in breastfeeding. I would like to suggest a continuum between Barrett Browning's overt lactational metaphors for female poetic expression in *Aurora Leigh* and the more indirect, yet more developed, lactation imagery of "Goblin Market," written by the poet later hailed as Barrett Browning's undisputed successor (Peterson, "Rossetti" 429). Departing from readings of the female poetic tradition as enclosed and self-sufficient, Maxwell has persuasively traced the intertextuality of Rossetti's poem as having "its roots in male as well as female sources" (79). Looking at consumption as metaphor, Maxwell reads the poem "as an allegory of the woman writer's negotiations with her male precursors' texts," but, for Maxwell, "it also charts how individual male-authored writings are absorbed into the body of the poem," as are female-authored works like *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whom Maxwell singles out as Rossetti's female poetic precursor (78-79). Maxwell's interpretation figures Laura as Christina Rossetti, the less experienced female poet, who must imbibe inspiration from Lizzie, envisaged as Barrett Browning. I side with Maxwell's insightful reading of the poem as a negotiation of poetic sources, but I want to

⁴⁷ Hemans and Landon were important originators of a distinct female tradition of sentimental poetry and had achieved an immense following by the mid-nineteenth-century. In his study of the evolution of the elegy, Patrick Vincent relates: "By the time we reach the 1820s and 1830s, the Romantic and arguably masculine faith in the visionary power of poetry had run its course. Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon are the two leading voices of a new generation of women poets, forced to write for money and lured by the high-paying annuals. Both Hemans and Landon publish a seemingly endless stream of elegiac verse or effusions" (203). Hemans' and Landon's undisguised participation in a predominantly male literary marketplace has generated discussions of female authorship from contemporaneous and modern critics alike, too numerous to detail here.

look specifically at how those sources take the shape of gendered liquid and linguistic circuits.

My reading considers a previously unexplored interpretive possibility that the poem's preoccupation with symbolic fluid circuits speaks to very real mid-century anxieties about female physiological and poetic expression. Although Rossetti does not explicitly depict lactation or breastfeeding in the poem, the scene of Lizzie offering her bodily fluids for Laura to consume certainly begs for a breastfeeding interpretation, especially in light of recent critics who read Lizzie as a maternal figure to the infantile Lizzie,⁴⁸ and a recent critical trend to read the poem's consumable fluids in light of actual food and its adulteration, perhaps the most notorious of which was cow's milk.⁴⁹ I read the girls' food production and consumption on their rural homestead farm as an ideal transmission of female fluids that are free of cost and untainted by capitalist markets within a closed female community; in contrast, the dangerous goblin merchants offer their fruits for a monetary, moral, and bodily price. But Laura's transaction with the goblins and Jeanie's before her complicate Rossetti's separately gendered circuits by stressing the inevitability of female expressions entering into these masculine economies. Here, Lizzie's encounter with the goblins provides hope that women can adapt aspects of the male-dominated economy and the literary tradition for their own purposes. Lizzie adapts the masculine economy by mediating it on her body, reformulating the goblin fruit from her sister's poison into her sister's antidote, and transforming the goblin juice into a new, decisively feminine, expression. Like Laura and Lizzie, the Victorian woman poet was similarly compelled to

⁴⁸ Pionke reads Lizzie as a mother figure; Arseneau and Peterson point out her resemblance to the Virgin Mother.

⁴⁹ In his 1857 book, chemist Arthur Hassall devotes an entire chapter to explain to his readers how to detect adulterations in cow's milk, concluding that "there are few articles of food more liable to adulteration" (205).

enter into a masculine marketplace, where her poetic expressions competed with a male-dominated literary tradition along with what French feminist Luce Irigaray would later term the male linguistic economy.⁵⁰ It is easy to see how Rossetti's rendition of women on the market has inspired so many readings of the poem as an allegory for the lucrative Victorian prostitution trade, which marked the social (if not literal) death of so many women like Jeanie, but "Goblin Market" was written at a time when corrupted female expressions overlapped in profound ways. Given the prevalent mid-century construction of female authors as "public women," the affiliation of female authors with commercially-motivated prostitutes, and the accompanying denunciation of popular, female-authored texts as expressions of "moral contagion,"⁵¹ I would like to extend this allegorical reading to look at how Rossetti grapples with unfavourable constructions of women's expressions more comprehensively – from distressing accounts of the fallen wet nurse's expression of poisonous breastmilk to belittling characterizations of the female writer's expressions in her literary works.

Crying Over Spilt Milk: The Mid-Century Fantasy of a Closed Nursing Dyad

When Lizzie returns from the market, she offers a fluid from her own female body for Laura to suck. Even though Rossetti never bore or breastfed any children during her lifetime, her

⁵⁰ In her appropriately named chapter "Women on the Market," Irigaray posits that patriarchy necessitates a rupture in female community where women are torn from their mothers and implicated into an economic, linguistic, and sexual market as commodities passing between the hands of men (170-191). The restoration of women's own language, womanspeak, consists of women adapting male texts for their own purposes; in Irigaray's physiological analogy, this means that women must "*have a fling with the philosophers*" (qtd. in Grosz, *Jacques Lacan* 186).

⁵¹ Pamela K. Gilbert attributes this affiliation of female author and prostitute to economic changes accompanying the industrial revolution that led to a new conception of authorship. While writers once benefitted from wealthy patrons, in the mid-nineteenth-century they had to sell their works for profit (26).

interest in figurative breastfeeding in “Goblin Market” can be explained in part by a new highly symbolic construction of the breastfeeder from the late 1850s to the early 1860s, which I see as being symptomatic of a mid-century anxiety with women’s expressions entering into circulation with economic markets more generally. Significantly for Rossetti, whose work with fallen women began the same year as she began writing “Goblin Market,” the figures of the wet nurse, the fallen woman, and the popular female author intersected in troubling ways in the writing of this time, often representing bodies, and accompanying expressions, of moral corruption. These seemingly disparate occupations represented a shared threat to an established gender division of labor that was central to the mid-Victorian imagination, wherein women and their verbal expressions were imaginatively segregated to a private, morally-sanctioned, domestic realm apart from men and their voices, which occupied the space of a public, potentially corrupting, economic marketplace. Working with this spatialized and gendered distinction, Pamela K. Gilbert relates that the mid-century “image of the author-prostitute” was “so crippling to women” because while a male-authored text was considered to be detached from the author’s body even though it represented a “spermatic economy of inspiration,” a female-authored text was thought of as “an extension of the woman’s body,” so that, as we already saw, “it is the physical substance of a woman that is exposed in the marketplace” (25-27). The female “substance” of women’s literary production, then, was rendered into a profoundly embodied expression, so that even though male literary production was aligned with a man’s physiological production of sperm, only a woman’s embodied literary expression was thought to be subject to contamination by the market. Like Laura and Lizzie’s dangerous venture into the goblin market, the hired wet nurse, the prostitute, and the female writer all represent instances of women going beyond

the safety of feminine circuits and into the market, where their bodies and bodily expressions entered into circulation with overtly masculine economies - literal bodily fluids in the case of the wet nurse and the prostitute, embodied verbal expressions in the case of the woman author. This collapsing of women's liquid and linguistic expressions helps to illuminate why Christina Rossetti, who never had children, would be concerned with metaphors of lactation and breastfeeding. Moreover, the mid-nineteenth-century preoccupation with female expressions entering predominantly male economies helps to explain why sellable breast milk came to represent such a nexus of anxiety.

In those same years that Rossetti wrote, circulated,⁵² possibly revised, and published "Goblin Market," from 1859-1862, the process of breastfeeding in England was becoming more and more fraught with disparate, political meanings because that single fluid of breastmilk - like the beverages that Laura sucks - came to represent either an "antidote" or a "poison" to the imbibing infant (559, 555). While domestic manuals and medical publications celebrated a mother's careful breastfeeding of her infant as a nourishing communication incumbent upon a closed maternal circuit, wet-nursing was increasingly aligned with a transmission of corrupted milk that was "tainted" by its circulation in the market economy. Our friend Isabella Beeton, author of the widely-circulated serial publication *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1859-1862), espoused maternal breastfeeding as long as the mother was careful to keep her milk in an unadulterated state by restricting her diet to homely "animal food[s]" and limiting her activities to "indoor recreation" such as "music and singing" to her infant, meant to "amuse herself in the nursery" (2473, 2478). Beeton fashions the ideal nursing dyad as a self-enclosed unit,

⁵² John Ruskin famously read and commented on the manuscript of "Goblin Market" and argued against its publication (Hassett 22).

saying: “As Nature has placed in the bosom of the mother the natural food of her offspring it must be self-evident to every reflecting woman, that it becomes her duty to study, as far as lies in her power, to keep that reservoir of nourishment in as pure and invigorating a condition as possible” (2471). At the beginning of “Goblin Market,” Laura and Lizzie’s life on their dairy farm mirrors Beeton’s ideal of a closed nursing dyad. I call the rural homestead a dairy farm because, although the girls are occupied with a number of functions, their most frequently mentioned functions involve dairy production. They are shown variously to “tend” the cattle (293), “[milk] the cows,” “[churn] butter,” and “[whip] up cream” (203, 207), all while rejecting the fruits and conversation of the strange market men (65-66). Like the girls’ secluded life on the dairy farm, Beeton imagines the maternal nursing dyad as a hermetically sealed liquid and linguistic circuit, but as with Rossetti’s poem, Beeton’s idyllic picture discloses the possibility of outside influences adulterating that pure “reservoir of nourishment.” This preoccupation with contamination may help to explain why Beeton was so highly suspicious of the wet nurse, whom she acknowledges as a “necessary [...] substitute” (2438), but generally characterizes as selfish, greedy and appetitive on account of the economic basis of her work – she is seen to “feed with avidity” on unhealthy foods that sicken the suckling infant (2441) or to secretly dose the infant with dangerous narcotics so as to “insure a night’s sleep for herself” (2443).⁵³

This mid-century construction of an ideal nursing dyad that is sequestered from such outside, economic influences provides the fundamental assumption of the wet nursing debate that played out in the medical journal the *Lancet* in 1859. At this time, a number of prominent medical men contested the rehabilitative potential for fallen women to become

⁵³ Although Beeton claims that a wet nurse should be hired on the basis of her morality to prevent her from engaging in selfish and dangerous behaviors, Beeton admits that “The conscientiousness and good faith that would prevent a nurse so acting are, unfortunately, very rare” (2440-2441).

reputable wet nurses on account of their perceived bodily and behavioral corruption in immoral economic circuits. In 1859 Dr. C.H.F. Routh proposed that hiring fallen wet nurses would be morally detrimental to English society at large because doing so would effectively reward the wet nurses for their licentiousness (“On the Selection” 580). Given that these women were only lactating because they had engaged in intercourse and had born children out of wedlock, Routh condemned the fact that their immoral behaviour resulted in these wet nurses’ receiving of a higher salary than that of decent female servants who (at least visibly) abstained from such behaviours. It is worth noting that Highgate Penitentiary, where Rossetti volunteered, was devoted to rehabilitating fallen women for such respectable domestic work. By the time of Routh’s publication, he had written against the hiring of fallen wet nurses for years, and had an animosity towards wet nurses in general, believing it to be a mother’s duty to suckle her own children. Like Beeton, Routh envisages the immoral wet nurse as a greedy figure bent on financial gain. For Routh, the wet nurse contaminates the infant with a fluid that was corrupted by virtue of its being implicated in economic circulations. He writes: “Once the morbid cell has been developed, it will impart its nature to surrounding parts, and poison the whole blood [...] It is possible to sow a seed in the infant which shall contaminate the life of the man, taint his whole constitution, and influence his psychical power” (“Selection” 581).

Meanwhile, Routh’s major opponent, William Acton, who was well-known for his work on prostitution and who, like Rossetti, was a fervent proponent of restoring fallen women to their moral feet, held that these working-class women ought to be permitted to sell their milk as live-in wet nurses to prevent them from selling their bodies in the market

(*Prostitution Considered* 288).⁵⁴ While Acton's response ridiculed Routh's notion of "immoral milk" and looked to the social reformation of fallen women, it nonetheless prescribed a "regulated" management of live-in wet nurses ("Unmarried" 175) that shared in Routh's preoccupation with women's vulnerability to corruption when they entered the physical marketplace. Acton's proposal to hire fallen women as wet nurses posed troubling implications that actually furthered the construction of the economic woman as morally corrupt. The major critic of Acton's proposal, writing under the pen name of "Mater," declared that the women who were hired as live-in wet nurses would be obliged to get rid of their illegitimate infants by any means necessary with the result that wet nurses literally profited from infanticide through the lucrative baby farming trade (201). Beeton, Routh, Acton, and Mater all envision ideal, maternal breastfeeding as a closed circuit of energy, disclosing that a woman and her expressions come to harm if she is implicated in economic circulations. Victorian writers underscored this maternal quarantining as they frequently used the term "confined" to refer to a woman who was kept in the home over the course of pregnancy (Draznin 103), while writers like Routh extended the euphemism to refer to new mothers who were contained in the home for the duration of the breastfeeding period (*Infant Feeding* 125).

Laura and Lizzie's initial farm labour enacts Routh's and Beeton's ideal of the maternal nursing dyad that is cut off from economic circulations. Rossetti's poem opens with an image of two separate spheres with their own gendered liquid and linguistic economies: the milk "maids" of the girls' rural dairy and the "goblin men" of Goblin Market (2, 42).

⁵⁴ Given her work with fallen women, Rossetti may have been particularly sensitized to the concurrent wet nursing debates. Although Highgate records offer few details of the individual women's personal histories, it is conceivable that some of these histories might have included the birth of an illegitimate child and a turn to wet nursing for income (though neither of these would have been permitted to take place while a fallen woman resided at Highgate).

Sisters Laura and Lizzie live a secluded existence feeding off of the fruits of their own labour on their idyllic dairy, having occasional and peripheral exposure to the troupe of goblin men who advertise their “orchard fruits” in mouth-watering terms (3-31). At this early point in the narrative, the separate liquid circuits of the gendered food supplies mirror their separate linguistic circuits. Each day, Laura and Lizzie wake early to fetch water from the local stream (216), collect honey, and milk the cows (204) before returning to prepare their food while they talk together “as modest maidens should” (207-208) – never pausing to speak to, or engage with, the seductive goblin men who offer their juicy wares in elaborate verses.⁵⁵ Laura and Lizzie’s female expressions have no place in the male linguistic circuit that is epitomized in the goblin market with its goblin men who recite their eloquent verses. For the men themselves, the girls’ initial communication to one another is either unheard or inarticulate as Laura’s whispered speech blends into the fluid expression of the nearby brook (53).⁵⁶ Julia Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic chora provides a useful framework to illuminate how these gendered spheres operate not just on a liquid but on a linguistic level.

For Kristeva, the semiotic chora is a “nourishing and maternal space” characterized by the fluid expressions of a pre-linguistic form of articulation (Schippers 46). Kristeva identifies this feminine mode of communication with a series of pre-symbolic utterances that recall the mother’s fluid communication to her nursing infant, perhaps the most prominent being laughter (Fisher 130). For Kristeva, the fluid communication of infancy gives way to the rigid structures of a masculine symbolic order in adulthood. However, laughter emerges in adult conversation as a vestige of that fluid and feminine semiotic realm of the chora: a

⁵⁵ In light of the girls’ refusal to participate in economic transactions, it is significant that they are never shown to sell their own products, only producing food fit for their own “dainty mouths” (206).

⁵⁶ This parallels Irigaray’s notion that womanspeak naturally arises amongst communities of women, but vanishes in the presence of men (Moi 144).

surviving remnant of what is for Kristeva an explicitly feminine verbal expression, a verbal expression that Kristeva sees as intimately tied to the female physiological expression of breastmilk.⁵⁷ Rossetti's opening scenes correspond to these distinctly gendered circuits, and just as Laura and Lizzie's self-enclosed dairy production resembles a mid-century ideal of closed maternal breastfeeding, the evocation of lactation also helps to foreground Lizzie's role as a maternal figure to Laura, giving her "matronly" advice (Pionke 904) and eventually *nursing* her back to health. Rossetti later reiterates the maternal aspect of this feminine circuit by figuring the sleeping girls as "two pigeons in one nest," their bodies intertwined as they lay "Cheek to cheek and breast to breast/Locked together in one nest" (185, 197-198). Rossetti's brother Dante Gabriel's 1862 illustration of the girls capitalizes on the figurative maternity of the nesting scene by portraying Laura with her head resting on Lizzie's breast in an evocation of the nursing dyad.⁵⁸ While we might read Laura's internalization of the male "texts" as being analogous to the growing subject's entrance into a symbolic order and male linguistic economy, the grown woman abandoning an exclusive interaction with women as a "not-returning time" (551), Rossetti does not suggest we forgo these primary modes of female expression altogether. Lizzie's negotiation with this male economy yields entirely different results and texts: in her offering to Laura, feminine physiological and linguistic expressions not only survive, but prevail, in a new mode of embodied, feminine poetics that has its basis in the semiotic utterances of laughter and lactation, but more on that later. What is crucial here is that the opening scene of "Goblin Market" introduces a division separating

⁵⁷ Significantly for our purposes, Kristeva locates another, yet related, source in which these semiotic utterances are permitted articulation, and that is in poetry (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 29).

⁵⁸ See the original 1862 title page entitled "Golden head by golden head" from *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in Humphries, *Poems and Prose*, 103.

those feminine (semiotic) expressions of Laura and Lizzie from the masculine (symbolic) fluids of the goblin market.

At this point in time, Laura and Lizzie's food and language production is exclusively feminine because their creative production is exclusively sourced in the female process of lactation. The sisters' preindustrial labor on an idyllic feminine dairy corresponds to a Romantic English trope which Alicia Carroll terms the "cult of the dairy," which presents scenes of women engaging in cow's milk and cheese production as an extension of their own biological milk production in lactation. According to Carroll, this tradition "enclos[ed] women in the dairy, often with female family members [...] while cheeses and butters were made according to closely guarded regional recipes" (168). Carroll's affiliation of the milk products and the recipes "enclosed" within these dairies reinforces the imagined correlation between women's bodily and linguistic expression which Beeton imagines in the secluded mother giving milk and songs to her infant; just as these milkmaids were shown to produce milk products, they also contributed to a female literary tradition that was passed down inter-generationally from mother to daughter,⁵⁹ much like the imbedded narrative that Laura and Lizzie impart to their children in the poem's closing scene where storyteller Laura hands down the story of sisterly redemption to the feminized "little ones" (562, 547). But the final scene of the women with their children no longer represents an exclusively feminine mode of creative production, as Laura and Lizzie no longer presume to be hermetically sealed from

⁵⁹ Looking at the troubling nineteenth-century portrayals of human and animal lactation in *Adam Bede* (1859) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Carroll reasons that George Eliot and Thomas Hardy are undermining this fantasy of a self-enclosed feminine dairy by alluding to the inevitable incursion of market forces into mid-century lactation processes under industrialized capitalism, including increased processing of cow's milk, a rising infant formula industry, and a depreciation of human breastmilk by the *fin-de-siècle* (189-191).

the masculine influence of goblin men.⁶⁰ Although Rossetti celebrates this exclusively feminine production, she also portrays the merging of female and male expressions as an inevitable, and potentially productive, reality. While Rossetti's closing scene appears to restore the female circuit to its former self-containment before Laura succumbed to the goblin men, it is now markedly, and irreversibly, altered. The picture of the children "joining hands to little hands" (560) recalls Laura and Lizzie's closed circuit in Rossetti's opening scene where the girls are shown "crouching close together" with "clasping arms and cautioning lips" (36, 38), set apart from the liquid and linguistic economies of the goblin market and its men. But in the context of the adult Laura and Lizzie's survival and proliferation in the face of the goblin poisoning, the construction of the girls' self-enclosed dairy is revealed as being just that – a construction – while, in retrospect, the gendered boundaries dividing the liquid and linguistic circuits of the female dairy from those of the male goblin market appear tenuous at best.

This is because, while the girls ensure that both their literal production (of their dairy) and literary production (of their speech) are self-contained within their figurative nursing dyad, the goblin men abide by no such boundaries, so that their offerings and words speak to the girls in more ways than one. The fact that every evening, "Laura bowed her head to hear" the goblin verses while "Lizzie veiled her blushes" (34-35) attests to the draw of the goblins' verbal and alimentary offering for both girls, as Laura finds them openly enticing and Lizzie, secretly exciting. As Mary Arseneau has pointed out ("Incarnation" 85), Laura's command for the sisters to "'lie close'" against the goblins' offerings (40-41) is entirely inconsistent with her behavior as she "[pricks] up her golden head" to hear and see

⁶⁰ Some critics including Dorothy Mermin have interpreted Laura's integration of goblin fluids as a symbolic insemination, which resulted in Laura and Lizzie becoming mothers by Rossetti's final scene (114).

them (41), foreshadowing her later liquid and linguistic communication with them. Meanwhile, even Lizzie, obedient and maternal, recognizes that she is unable to resist this male temptation if she does not stop up her sensory organs from taking in the men's words and their foods, so she proceeds to "thrust a dimpled finger/In each ear, shut eyes and [run]" (67-68). Therefore, Rossetti sets up a picture of closed feminine circuit of expression that is segregated from a male economy only to reveal it as fundamentally fanciful, demarcating a boundary that is always-already permeable. In the lines that follow, Rossetti reveals the inevitability of males and females communicating with one another, both when Laura ineffectually interacts with the goblin men and when Lizzie more successfully negotiates with them (even though Lizzie's negotiation takes the shape of stealing). By rejecting the mid-century notions that, first, the female, private sphere ought to be kept from the male economy, and, second, that women and their expressions are always eventually corrupted by their integration with market forces, Rossetti undermines the fundamental assumption behind the image of the maligned wet nurse and the deprecation of breastmilk mid-century. On a symbolic level, if we are to read Rossetti's goblin market as an allegory of a literary marketplace, and the goblin fruit as an offering of male texts, we can understand Laura and Lizzie's intrigue with these male expressions as the irresistible draw for female writers who are bombarded by a male-authored literary tradition to incorporate aspects of male-authored writing in their own works, in an effort to be considered canonical in their own right. Just as we saw in *Aurora Leigh*, at the time that Rossetti was writing "Goblin Market," the female poetic tradition was still largely separate from a predominantly male poetic tradition, which was considered the authoritative canon. With the stories of Jeanie, Laura, and Lizzie, Rossetti narrates this struggle for female authors to retain their own expression while still

being cognizant of the influence of male-authored expressions, and she figures this poetic expression in profoundly embodied terms.

The Wet Nurse, the Prostitute, and the Victorian Woman Poet

Thus far I have attempted to demonstrate how “Goblin Market” was informed by a mid-century preoccupation with a number of literal and symbolic female expressions entering the marketplace – from the wet nurse’s milk to the female author’s words. Given Rossetti’s vested interest in fallen women, there is no shortage of criticism that links Laura’s sale of her “golden curf” (125) to the sale of a woman’s body in the Victorian prostitution market, where her tasting of the goblin fruit is analogous to her engagement in extra-/pre-marital sex, and her subsequent decline, the physiological and moral demise befalling fallen women: a metaphorical “poison[ing] in the blood” (559-560). Rossetti’s concern with the corruption of a woman’s bodily fluids was particularly germane in the years encompassing the poem’s writing and publishing, which saw a series of political writings warning of the unsanitary and unhealthy fluids transmitted by female prostitutes within England’s lucrative prostitution trade. One of the major figures spearheading this simultaneously pathologized-moralized rhetoric of dangerous female fluids was our outspoken friend William Acton, trained gynecologist and expert on venereal disease, whose highly influential *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and Other Large Cities* (1857) helped to consolidate the imagined correlation between a woman’s (im)moral behaviors and her production of good or bad physiological fluids. In his chapter entitled “Diseases the Result of Prostitution,” Acton painstakingly describes the inevitable physical

diseases brought on by the prostitute's immoral work, the most frequent being gonorrhea which presents as vaginal discharge. In conjunction with the mid-century correlation between the prostitute and the popular female author, the fact that Acton describes the female prostitute's vaginal cavity as a "throat" that emits the dangerous discharge is enlightening because it emphasizes how a woman's sexual and verbal organs were not only interchangeable but subject to the same contamination in the sex market.⁶¹ Even if a prostitute did not have gonorrhea, it was popularly believed mid-century that her other vaginal discharges (such as menstrual fluid) could incite the disease in the male partner (Walkovitz 54).

So far I have set out to establish a Victorian anxiety of female physiological expression entering economic circulations, by drawing a correlation between fraught, mid-century depictions of the wet nurse (with her saleable milk) and the female prostitute (with her diseased secretion). Now I would like to home in on how wet nursing can be seen as analogous to another paid occupation which would have been even closer to home for Rossetti than fallen women, and which represented another instance whereby a woman and her expression could be tainted by an implication in economic circulations: that is, a female author's linguistic expression of words in the literary market. Christina Rossetti's private life was often figured in terms of a closed domestic circuit cut off from market forces, not unlike Laura and Lizzie's prior to interacting with the goblins. Biographies by Rossetti's contemporaries maintain that she was entirely quarantined from the corrupting influences of the literary market. Alexander Smellie made Rossetti's life out to be a cloistered one, "spent,

⁶¹ Compared to the concubine, who he claims bears only a "moral" and not a contaminating threat to England, "The hardened common prostitute, when overtaken by disease" represents both, because she "pursues her trade, as a general rule, uninterruptedly, spreading contagion among men, in spite of her own pain, that she may live and avoid debt [...] It is from this class that society may be prepared for, if not expect, contempt and danger to public order and decency" (75).

not in the publicity of the market, but in utter quiet and seclusion,” a seclusion which permitted her to write the most pure poetry, since “her inspiration had its roots in her piety.”⁶² Linda Peterson describes Rossetti’s literary celebrity as a kind of non-celebrity, where her nineteenth-century reviewers “found an antidote to the professionalism of the late Victorian literary market, and an alternative to the writer with an eye on celebrity and commercial success” (“Rossetti” 422). This characterization of Rossetti downplays the extent to which she, like Lizzie, “braved the glen” of a literary marketplace and “had to do with [its] goblin merchant men” (473-474). This obsession with preserving the moral purity of popular female authors puts into relief how Rossetti’s female contemporaries, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Margaret Oliphant, could be so easily fall into a categorization as “public women” of the market, and helps to explain why Rossetti’s voluntary work with prostitutes, though commended, could still be regarded as “controversial” because these “‘pure’ women were exposed to the fallen” (Rawson 429).

Although Rossetti’s relatively privileged status meant that she did not publish out of necessity, she was still at the mercy of a male-dominated literary market. U.C. Knoepfelmacher emphasizes the process by which Rossetti’s literary expression was infiltrated by a number of literary men; her esteemed brothers Dante Gabriel and William Michael, prominent critics and publishers like Ruskin and Macmillan, and an overwhelmingly male set of reviewers contributed to “violat[ing] her textual integrity as much as the goblins had assaulted Lizzie” (325).⁶³ For Alison Chapman, Dante Gabriel’s intervention in Christina’s earlier poems amounts to censorship because “Christina

⁶² In her biographical essay on Christina Rossetti, Linda Peterson relates Smellie’s description of the poet (422).

⁶³ In her authoritative and extensively archival book, *Recovering Christina Rossetti*, Mary Arseneau relates how after Christina’s death, “William Michael Rossetti acted as her literary executor assembling, editing, and interpreting his sister’s work according to his own editorial principles” (96).

Rossetti's originally radical poetics are [...] repositioned into an unresisting equivalence with conventional notions of femininity" (79). Much like Beeton and Routh in their writings on breastmilk, Christina Rossetti's contemporary biographers and reviewers disclose a Victorian preoccupation with containing female expression in a circuit apart from the threat of corrupting economic circulations, while contemporary critics recognize the negotiations that Rossetti had to make with men in order to publish. But in spite of the many masculine forces on Rossetti's writing, including the indirect influence of her poetic forefathers in a male-dominated canon, "Goblin Market" is still largely considered to be, doubly, a subversive work of a characteristically female poetic expression, and a canonical poem from an author who acknowledged her male poetic heritage. Despite her reclusive reputation, looking at Rossetti's career as a female poet and as a charitable worker within the marketplace, we can see how her body and her expressions were indeed subject to the same rhetoric of purity and contamination as the seemingly disparate female occupations of the wet nurse and the prostitute.

Now let us turn to how Rossetti negotiates with this contamination rhetoric in the female expressions of her poem. As mentioned, instances of feminine expression in "Goblin Market" have already been linked to female literary production in the midst of a male-dominated marketplace (Susan Gilbert, Maxwell, Cumberland). Reading the liquids as gendered "texts," Maxwell sees Lizzie's stealing of the goblin juice as central for the girl to establish a new female poetic tradition, concluding that "stealing and appropriation" serve "as a positive strategy for a woman poet," especially one who, like Barrett Browning, lacks a heritage of poetic foremothers (86) who were also considered to belong in the same calibre as male canonical poets. Interpretations of the poem's female storytellers tend to center on

the two imbedded narratives within the poem: Lizzie's tale to Laura about Jeanie's consumption of the goblin fruit and subsequent death (147-162), and Laura's tale of Lizzie's venture into the goblin market and triumphant return bearing the "fiery antidote" (549-559). Though both stories figure the exchange with the goblins as potentially dangerous, the two narratives have opposite implications for women's expression. Transmitted through Laura the storyteller, Lizzie's story of redemption comes to represent a new kind of female-authored literature from women who, like the adult Lizzie and Laura, no longer imagine female poetry as being hermetically sealed from the male poetic tradition, but recognize female liquid and linguistic expressions as being in constant interplay and communication with market men and their male-authored texts. What remains to be seen is how Rossetti reconciles these gendered modes of linguistic expression in such a way that women's voices are neither cut off from, nor extinguished by, those men's voices of a male poetic tradition. The answer, I will argue, lay in Rossetti's explicitly lactational rendering of poetic expression.

Tempted by the Fruit of Another: "Hav[ing] to do with" Male (Text) Bodies

Laura is the first woman to survive after entering into verbal, liquid, and monetary exchange with the goblin men. Here, the goblins' literal offering of fruit is inextricable from their symbolic offering of male language, evinced in the goblins' equally seductive poetic verses *about* their fruit. The goblins' description of their juicy "plump unpecked cherries" and "pomegranates full" indicate that the goblin fruits are full of fluids (7, 21), fluids for the girls to internalize orally by consuming those syrupy and dripping "orchard fruits" to "fill your

mouth” with (3, 28). But in filling their mouth with only the fruit, the girls would correspondingly be filling their mouth with the goblins’ words that signify this fruit. Rossetti underscores the shared orality amongst the two types of consumption – of internalizing the goblins’ linguistic expressions (their words) and their liquid offerings (their fruits) – by figuring the goblins’ male language in alimentary terms as “sugar-baited words” spoken “in tones as smooth as honey” (234, 108). Understanding the goblin juice as *seminal* texts in the context of what Pamela Gilbert terms a “spermatic economy of inspiration” (25) helps to foreground a reading of Rossetti’s female poetic expression as similarly embodied.

For some time, feminist critics of Rossetti’s poem have recognized the potential for reading the goblin men’s fruit as a dual signifier for a masculine physiological and poetic expression. Sandra M. Gilbert’s foundational reading of “Goblin Market” is perhaps the first to affiliate the goblins’ male sexual expression not only with forbidden sexuality, but with a male lineage of poets that she argues Rossetti is obligated to imitate. For Gilbert, the goblin fruit alludes to a mode of writing from Rossetti’s male precursors – Keats, Tennyson, and the Pre-Raphaelites – which Laura, like Rossetti, is forced to internalize by “metaphorically eating [their] words” (569). Maxwell both furthers and complicates Gilbert’s reading by opening up the possibility that Rossetti may have been informed by this male poetic tradition, but she was also partaking in that female poetic tradition passed down from her literary foremother, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Maxwell envisions the goblin juice as both the expressions of a physiological male body and a linguistic male body of literature from the Old and New Testaments to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (81). Unlike Gilbert, Maxwell contends that Rossetti’s poem has “its roots in male as well as female sources” (79) because the experienced maternal figure of Lizzie, analogous to Barrett Browning, teaches her

symbolic descendent Laura, Christina Rossetti, how to negotiate with these male texts and refashion them for her own purposes in a new feminine poetic tradition. Both Gilbert and Maxwell link the goblins' literal offering of the fruit to both a male physiological expression (semen) and a male poetic expression (words). Reading the goblin fruit as a shared liquid/linguistic temptation helps to explain why Lizzie feels obliged to cover her eyes as well as her ears when she comes in close range to the goblin men and their wares (67-68); the movement suggests that she feels as vulnerable to the sight of the juicy fruit as she does the sound of the goblin words "Cooing all together" (78).

But "sweet-tooth Laura" (115), unlike her sister, wishes to internalize both goblin fruit and goblin words on the basis that their cooing "sounded kind and full of loves" (79) and their tones are "as smooth as honey" (108). Laura proceeds to engage in verbal and commercial intercourse with the goblin men, having not only "spoke[n] in haste" to them but having impulsively agreed to hand over a lock of her golden hair (115, 126) in order to incorporate this liquid and linguistic feast into her own person. She

...sucked their fruit globes fair or red:

Sweeter than honey from the rock,

Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,

Clearer than water flowed that juice;

She never tasted such before [...]

She sucked until her lips were sore. (128-132, 134)

Laura's first impression of the fruit as being superior to anything she has ever tasted discloses her new preference for this seminal, male expression over those fluid, female expressions of the feminine farm, where the collection of honey, cow's milk, and stream

water (203-209) represent the only consumable fluids that she had ingested. That Laura finds the goblin juice to be “sweeter than honey from the rock” (129) discloses her belief that it is capable of replacing that honey “fetched in” from the dairy (203), while the girl’s description of the juice as being “clearer than water” (131) reveals that the brook’s “gurgling water” (219) is no longer a match for this new, flowing juice. Laura’s relentless sucking of the men’s goblin juice “until her lips were sore” signifies her wholehearted internalization of this male poetic tradition just as she wholeheartedly rejects the feminine liquid and linguistic expressions of Laura and Lizzie’s characteristically lactational dairy. There is certainly a correlation between Laura’s acquisition of the goblin fruit and her casting off of the domestic tasks on the dairy; Laura appears in an “absent dream” when her sister attempts to talk to her (211), she exudes a “placid” look when Lizzie works with her (217), and eventually she transforms into a state of “sullen silence” when she realizes that she can no longer hear the goblin song (271). For the most part, critics have attributed Laura’s increasing passivity and exhaustion to her internalization of female silence as the only way of being for a female poet in a male poetic tradition and male-dominated economy.⁶⁴ Her assimilation of this juice accompanies an abandonment of female expression.

Laura is not altogether silent, but her remaining linguistic expression does tend to imitate a predominantly male-authored Petrarchan tradition that is characterized by verbose description. In her study of the influence of Tractarian poetics on “Goblin Market,” Mary Arseneau reads Laura’s proficient description of the goblin fruit to Lizzie as a kind of “gloat[ing]” that is reminiscent of the goblin men’s “proliferation of detail” in depicting their

⁶⁴ For instance, both Sandra Gilbert and Margaret Homans argue that female silence is problematic in the text.

wares (87, 84).⁶⁵ Maxwell picks up on this resemblance between the goblin speech of the opening scene and Laura's altered speech once she has ingested the fruit, specifying Laura's diction as a throwback to a male-authored mode of poetry where Laura's speech not only "now directly imitates the goblin men's persuasive cries," but also uses "Romantic poeticisms" like "pellucid," "odorous," "mead," and "velvet" (82). Read as allegory, Laura's wholehearted consumption of these male texts – literalized in her unmediated drinking of the goblin juice and rejection of her own feminine food that she "would not eat" any longer (298) – represents a woman poet's unsuccessful bid at poetic endeavour that denies the contribution of a woman's own embodied expression. But Rossetti imagines a third possibility for women aside from enclosing themselves off in a fancifully quarantined liquid and linguistic circuit, and giving themselves over to an unquestioning and unmediated consumption of male expression in the marketplace, leading to the death of their own feminine expression, if not themselves. Lizzie becomes the mouthpiece of this new, embodied feminine poetry.

Breast Is Best: A Re-emergence of Lactational Expression

As previously noted, critics have often identified Lizzie as a maternal figure to her infantile sister, and I extend that characterization by positioning Lizzie as not only figurative mother, but breastfeeder to Laura. Here I own that I am indebted to Maxwell's innovative reading of Lizzie (Barrett Browning) as the poetic foremother to Laura (Rossetti), and I certainly find her reading of Laura's final tale having "its origins in male and female sources" compelling.

⁶⁵ In contrast, Arseneau notes that "Lizzie makes sparing use of detail" in the story she tells Laura about Jeanie (89).

But although Maxwell considers Victorian authorship as a kind of genealogy, where originator Barrett Browning passes down a mode of female poetics to Rossetti, Maxwell's reading does not account for that original "female source" of expression that precedes a linguistic female poetry in the first place. In other words, although Laura comes to provide the early generation of a verbal, feminine poetic tradition to her offspring by the poem's end, when Lizzie (Barrett Browning) herself first enters the goblin market, she is devoid of a canonical feminine poetic tradition (and what Elaine Showalter might refer to as "a literature of her own")⁶⁶ by which to situate herself alongside and against a male-authored tradition. Barrett Browning must – and as I have attempted to argue in the last chapter, does – return to that primary source of the maternal breast to figure the female poet's primary inspiration. I read the "female source" that comes before literary poetry as that primal source of embodied, feminine, liquid expression – not a poetic foremother's words but a real mother's milk. If Laura cannot subsist on a diet of male texts alone (Maxwell 84) since she is dying of thirst, then Lizzie's offering cannot merely stem from an exclusively male heritage, but must also originate in an embodied, if not strictly poetic, female source.

Rossetti suggests that it is inevitable that women enter the market, however potentially dangerous the outlook may be. Despite having enclosed herself from the goblin market and even fleeing from the goblin men (67), "Tender Lizzie" (299) comes to realize that if she is going to redeem her sister from certain death, then she will have to enter it herself. As a result, "for the first time in her life/She began to listen and look" for the goblin men (328). When she does, the goblins' liquid and linguistic offering is much the same as it was with Laura; they catalogue their fruit and invite her to "pluck them and suck them" (361). But

⁶⁶ I am referring to Showalter's foundational study of a British women novelist tradition, *A Literature of Their Own*.

when Lizzie refuses to eat the fruit with them, wanting to take it home to Laura instead (383-384), the goblins launch a violent assault against her. Their “tones,” once as delectable as honey, are now entirely unpalatable as they “*waxed* loud” at Lizzie (396, emphasis added). Her refusal to embody their words mirrors her refusal to consume their fruit, in spite of the fact that they “Held her hands and squeezed their fruits/Against her mouth to make her eat” (407), so that Lizzie is a vision of “resistance” (438) while the goblins smash their fruits on her mouth and body. Even when the men

Scatched her, pinched her black as ink,
 Kicked and knocked her,
 Mauled and mocked her,
 Lizzie uttered not a word;
 Would not open lip from lip
 Lest they should cram a mouthful in. (427-432)

Reading the goblin market as an allegory for a male-dominated literary marketplace, Rossetti’s depiction of the goblin men pinching Lizzie “black as ink” is noteworthy. The allusion to writing reinforces the goblin market as a signifier of an authoritative poetic tradition pressuring Lizzie to incorporate male texts and words into her own person with their fruit onslaught, and forcibly imprinting “ink” onto her body by bruising it. For Margaret Homans, the ink provides the medium for Lizzie to redefine her own embodied expression: “Lizzie’s body becomes not only covered with juice but written upon,” and yet, Homans argues, it is “Not merely despite, but because of, its having been written upon by male culture” that “the woman’s body is nonetheless recuperated for women’s own purposes” (590). In refusing to internalize the fruit as the goblin men demand – instead,

carrying its juice on (rather than in) her body – Lizzie subverts the fruit’s textual meaning and purpose, refusing to be a mere consumer but engaging with it on (and in) her own terms. Unlike Laura, Lizzie does not wholeheartedly eat the goblin words, but refuses to open her mouth even to vocalize her protest, “utter[ing] not a word” (430-432).

Lizzie’s behaviour here has proven especially prickly for critics, many of whom have come to the conclusion that Lizzie’s silence represents the inevitable consequence for a woman, or a woman poet, who enters into a male-dominated (literary) marketplace that has historically been unfavourable to females and their verbal expressions. Sandra Gilbert interprets Lizzie’s silence as being both entirely consistent with the girl’s former role of obedience, and appropriate given what she considers Rossetti’s message of “censorious morality” (575). Alluding to Petrarchan scenes of female silence, Homans speculates that the scene is “Rossetti’s paradigm for the fate of women who attempt to manipulate as subjects symbolic systems that depend upon women’s remaining in the position of the silent object of representation” (588). Like her sister’s “sullen silence” (270), Lizzie has now become “the object of figuration, the silent and merely resistant body in a male economy” (588) for Homans.

While Gilbert and Homans read Lizzie’s silence as her assimilation of a male linguistic economy and a suppression of her own feminine expression akin to Laura’s mute stillness, I do not believe this to be the case. Not only does Lizzie’s closed mouth enable her to reformulate the texts for her own purpose, but Rossetti’s description of Lizzie’s silence discloses the re-emergence of the girl’s own embodied feminine expression in the midst of this “spermatic economy of inspiration” within the male-authored canon. Although, admittedly, Lizzie does not speak to the goblins, she nevertheless

[...]laughed in heart to feel the drip
 Of juice that syrugged all her face,
 And lodged in dimples of her chin,
 And streaked her neck which quaked like curd. (433-436)

Amidst the scene of the goblins pelting her face and body with fruit, Lizzie's laughter holds a twofold meaning as it signifies first, her "resistance" (438) as she refuses to thoughtlessly imbibe the juice that "[syrugs] all her face" and, second, her reluctance to give up her own mode of female expression.⁶⁷ In Kristeva's terms, this laughter is the remnant of a feminine mode of communication that survives in a masculine symbolic order, which goes some way in explaining why when Laura awakens after her transformation from the goblin market, the first thing she does is "[laugh] in the innocent old way" (538). The laughter is reminiscent of the maternal communication that, in *Aurora Leigh*, is set in contrast to the male linguistic economy, and is synonymous with the literally and linguistically nursing mother but emerges as a rhetorical strategy for Aurora's new feminine poetics within the canonical tradition: a female poet's "white ink." If Lizzie's laughter recalls a feminine, lactational utterance, then it is significant that her own body, not the goblin juice on it, "[quakes] like curd" (436), for this subtle evocation of dairy production suggests that Lizzie is re-enacting an overtly female physiological process of breastmilk production that is the embodied equivalent of the seminal expression originating from a male, "spermatic economy." Lizzie carries the goblin fluid alongside that semiotic feminine expression of her "inward laughter," which she also transports all the way home to her starving sister (463). Unlike Laura, who had come to reject those feminine expressions manifested in the liquid and linguistic circuits of the dairy,

⁶⁷ Importantly, Lizzie repositions lactational expressions here alongside, not hermetically sealed from, male liquid/linguistic expressions of the marketplace: her laughter at the "drip/Of juice" signals to the reader that she is now physiologically engaging with the goblins, but on, and in, her own terms.

Lizzie retains an element of this “white ink,” and I believe that this remnant of a feminine expression is a central component of the new fluid that she brings back to Laura to *nurse* her back to health, in both senses of the word.

Reading Lizzie’s new offering as emanating at least in part from her own female body represents a departure from the vast majority of “Goblin Market” interpretations. Although Maxwell argues that Lizzie comes to transform the goblin juices by mediating them on her body (85), she nonetheless concedes that these “male texts” still seem “very much a male property” for women poets to merely “steal” (83). Alternatively, for a number of critics, Lizzie’s self-offering mirrors Christ’s offering of redemption in the Eucharistic body and blood that similarly offers “Life out of death” (524). Although these interpretations of the poem are indispensable and well-grounded, I feel that the reading of Lizzie’s “fiery antidote” (559) originating exclusively from either male texts, or a patriarchal Godhead through a male Christ, threatens to diminish what I read as a distinctly feminine component which makes Lizzie’s “fiery antidote” – though derived in part from a male source – an altogether new fluid that contains a new feminine element of female embodied expression. I read Lizzie’s saving concoction that is “wormwood to her tongue” (494) neither as an exclusively male- nor an exclusively female-sourced fluid,⁶⁸ characterized by the seminal ink of a male poetic tradition tempered by an altogether female, lactational expression, offered to Laura together in a vivid rendition of breastfeeding. No longer silent, Lizzie famously offers herself to Laura in a twofold liquid and linguistic expression:

“Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices

⁶⁸ When I last spoke to D.M.R. Bentley about how the bitter antidote may allude to suckling, he rightly brought to my attention how wormwood was used on the breast to deter infants from suckling, which parallels Laura’s weaning from a diet of exclusively female or male sources. Refer to Gail Paster for literary depictions of this “aversion technique” including the Nurse’s weaning of Juliet using wormwood in Shakespeare’s play (215-225).

Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
 Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
 Eat me, drink me, love me;
 Laura, make much of me
 For your sake I have braved the glen
 And had to do with goblin merchant men." (468-474)

Here, Lizzie bears her own new offering for Laura to "eat" and "drink" which is a figurative, lactational fluid for Laura to "suck." Lizzie's bid for Laura to "suck *my* juices" (468, emphasis added) consolidates it as her own, distinct from the male liquid/linguistic expression of the goblin men, and Lizzie's emphasis on her own body when she tells Laura to "Eat me, drink me, love me" (471) further distances the drink from the strictly masculine expression that Laura imbibed earlier, and approximates it to Lizzie's own body and a new feminine poetics that consolidates both male poetry and female embodiment. I would like to consider the possibility that Laura can, and does, "make much of" Lizzie when she can make nothing of the goblin men because Lizzie has more to offer a female poet: Lizzie no longer attempts to exist in an enclosed liquid and linguistic circuit apart from the goblin market and its male texts. Instead, she acknowledges the inevitability of having "to do with goblin merchant men" (474), but this "having to do with" male texts does not necessarily imply that female poets must wholeheartedly internalize them as Laura and Jeanie do at the cost of their own female expression. Without a canonical poetic tradition of foremothers to speak of, Lizzie provides Laura with that most embodied feminine expression of a figurative mother's milk. And if Lizzie stands for Laura's poetic foremother, much like Barrett Browning was the poetic foremother to Rossetti, then Lizzie's own embodied expression serves as the

original and most primary source of inspiration that Laura can imbibe: a “white ink.”

Figuratively, this liquid can be read as the expression of a new female poetic tradition, an expression that circulates, communicating between bodies in Rossetti’s closing scene of Laura storytelling to the children.

That said, this new, lactational poetics is consciously engaged with male texts. In the final scene, Laura’s story of Lizzie’s interaction with the goblin men represents a female poet’s successful negotiation with a male poetic tradition, where Lizzie neither unconditionally internalizes nor hermetically seals herself from these male texts, but adapts them alongside her own female expression. Lizzie’s offering to Laura is a new kind of “white ink” that she uses to write an emerging feminine poetic tradition which stems as much from a lactational economy of inspiration as a “spermatic” one. After Laura and Lizzie’s farm is restored, the new masculine element within this feminine circuit of expression is hinted at by the fact that both girls are now “wives” to (albeit absent) husbands, while the new inclusion of male-authored texts alongside female ones is literalized in the possibility that the genderless children represent sons as well as daughters. In this new feminine poetics, a woman’s poetic expression comes about not by a rejection of – but a negotiation with – a tradition of male-authored expressions in a masculine marketplace. And by opening up the possibility that female liquid and linguistic expression can actually benefit from – and not be ruined by – its exposure to a masculine goblin market and a male linguistic economy, Rossetti fundamentally undermines a mid-nineteenth-century anxiety that a woman’s expression, be it breastmilk or poetry, has no place in the market – goblin or otherwise.

Chapter Four

[Milk of] *Mother* and [Blood of] *Daughter*:

Webster's Incomplete Sequence and Complete Communication

Upon first glance, Augusta Webster's posthumous publication date of *Mother and Daughter* in 1895, a year after her death, situates the poet at a remove from the breastfeeding anxieties which conceivably informed Barrett Browning's and Rossetti's works mid-century – but this is a dangerous conclusion to a rather deceiving date. I am deliberately including Webster as the third member of this breastmilk triad on the basis that Augusta, born in 1837, was considered to be a figurative daughter of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and also something of a poetic descendent (at the least a younger sister) of Christina Rossetti, just as her sonnet sequence bears a self-conscious intertextuality with the works of this female poetic lineage. Though Webster dates her first sonnet in the sequence as November 1881, this certainly does not preclude the possibility that some of the sonnets were written much earlier. In fact, a number of scholars have cited the immediacy of the passages on early motherhood to posit that Webster began writing the sequence from the time of her daughter's birth in 1864.⁶⁹ But even if Webster's writing process looks back retrospectively on her first years of motherhood,⁷⁰ her poem remains significant for our purposes as it imparts the poet's own reflective disclosures on those years surrounding the birth, rearing, and young adult life of her only daughter beginning in the mid-1860s, at the heels of the breastfeeding debate.

⁶⁹ Nicole Fluhr argues that Webster began writing *Mother and Daughter* at the time of her daughter's birth in 1864, meaning that Webster's sonnets "would have been written when she was in her late teens and early twenties" (54), while Jodi Lustig argues that Webster finished at least three of the sonnets "many years earlier [than the publication date], at the height of her prolific and multifaceted literary career" (207).

⁷⁰ Although biographical information on Webster remains sparse, critics have pointed to elements in the sequence (including the speaker's reference to her only daughter as a "pearl," meaning Margaret) which indicate that Webster wrote the poem about her daughter (Linker 54).

Whether or not Webster began writing at this time, *Mother and Daughter* is deeply engaged with Barrett Browning's and Rossetti's (proto-) feminist contributions to the Victorian sonnet revival movement, while the poem's frequent allusions to feminine and maternal fluids extend the lactational concerns of *Aurora Leigh* and "Goblin Market."

Given Webster's explicit distaste for biographical readings of literature (Sutphin, *Portraits* 13), I agree with Nicole Fluhr that a solely biographical reading would do a disservice to Webster as a poet capable of writing beyond her literal experience of motherhood to reach women's issues more inclusively (54). Webster's embodied experience as a mother was an undeniable reality that may well have translated into the messages of her deeply personal sonnet sequence, just as her lived experience as a woman may have informed those feminist messages in her writing more generally, but limiting our reading to one that assumes that the poem's mother/daughter bond can only be understood in the context of Webster's own maternity is to side with William Michael Rossetti's rather backhanded review in his 1895 introduction to the sequence, where he celebrates Webster's poem as "natural" insofar as it shows "A Mother [...] expressing her love for a Daughter"; he claimed, moreover, that if any female poet belittled it, it is only because "some of the poetesses have not been Mothers."⁷¹ Unlike many recent critics, William Michael does not acknowledge Webster's deliberate intertextuality, how maternity functions as rhetorical strategy in her work, how her intertwining of poetic and human production represents an engagement with a longstanding tradition of male sonneteers who similarly appeal to maternity metaphors to speak about poetic creation and communication.⁷² Instead, he compliments and disparages the themes of *Mother and Daughter* at once, as those "genuine"

⁷¹ The introductory note can be found in Sutphin, *Portraits* 336.

⁷² I am referring to Marianne Van Remoortel's innovative reading, "Metaphor and Maternity."

unmediated expressions of maternal love (336) – expressions that perhaps constitute motherhood poetry, but hardly represent the subject matter of the literary canon.

Early revival scholars of Webster's work in the 1990s tended to see her uncompleted sonnet sequence in much the same light, turning their interest instead to Webster's dramatic monologues – whose bold female speakers provided ample fodder for feminist interpretations about prostitution, female education, and the marriage market, which seemed more fitting given Webster's role in political activism.⁷³ For these scholars, *Mother and Daughter* was conservative, if not wholly unremarkable, in the treatment of its subject matter. It has not been until recently that the work's innovation has been readily acknowledged both within a female poetic tradition dealing with maternity and a predominantly male tradition of sonnet writing.⁷⁴ This chapter picks up on this recent acknowledgement of the poem's merit beyond the sentimental. It explores the possibility that Webster was not merely self-aware of the gendered and generic conventions that informed *Mother and Daughter*, including those of a male-authored Petrarchan sonnet sequence and female-authored motherhood poetry, but that Webster was intentionally reconstituting – we might say rehydrating – the liquid metaphors of inter-bodily communication and love between the speaker and beloved that figure so prominently in these poetic genres which so often relegate the male/speaker/lover to exhaustively expressive subject and the female/beloved/child to non-emitting object, or one whose emissions are not worth remarking upon. Picking up and building on the theme of women's poetical embodiment in

⁷³ Webster was politically engaged throughout her life. Having worked both in the London division of the National Committee for Women's Suffrage and as a poetry reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, she was the first female writer to hold elected office as a member of the London School Board in 1879 and 1885. For an authoritative reading of how Webster's political career influenced her writing, see Patricia Rigg's *Victorian Aestheticism and the Woman Writer*.

⁷⁴ The major contributors to this camp include Van Remoortel, Melissa Valiska Gregory, Patricia Rigg, Lee Behlman, Cynthia Turner Camp, and Laura Linker.

Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Rossetti's "Goblin Market," Webster's sonnet sequence centres on a reciprocal communication between women that figures as a profoundly embodied liquid/linguistic expression: a lactational utterance in speech.

Out of Milk? : Rewriting a One-Way Transmission of Love

Scholars have engaged in a thorough discussion of the amatory sonnet tradition from the Petrarchan sonnet sequence's beginnings in Francesca Petrarca's *Rime Sparse* to its nineteenth-century revival in sequences like Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life*. What we might call an exhaustive discussion of the genre takes on new meaning by a number of critics who have looked at how the male poet-speaker's pursuit of his beloved in the sonnet sequence is characterized by an interchangeably physical and poetic exhaustion. Mitchell M. Harris reads the male sonnet speaker's poetic expressions as being inextricably tied to his physiological emissions (72), while Heather Dubrow looks at how the Petrarchan speaker's physical expenditure manifests itself in poetic "representations of success and failure, agency and impotence" as he strives to capture an unattainable beloved (159). Looking at form, Emily Harrington reads the speaker's poetic expressions of love as a limited resource reflecting the formal constraints of the sonnet's meter (259-261). Webster certainly alludes to this trope of the used-up poet-speaker of Petrarchan fame, drained of love, in her allegorical figure of the "worn and footsore" Love who wears a laurel of "withered buds and leaves gone dry" as he trails after his illusory beloved (10: 1-3). This construction of the male poet-speaker's verbal expression as bodily expression is consistent with what I have identified in previous chapters as the Victorian "spermatoc economy of

inspiration,” but, crucially, Webster’s poet-speaker is female, and her relationship to her beloved is nonsexual.

Recent critics of *Mother and Daughter* have recognized that this familiar Petrarchan narrative of a poet-speaker expending himself in pursuit of a distanced, female beloved has a whole new set of implications when the traditional male poet-speaker is replaced by a mother and the romantic object is replaced by that mother’s only daughter.⁷⁵ In this regard, my argument that Webster problematizes a poetic tradition of speaker and beloved certainly owes much to recent, valuable insights into Webster’s poetic innovation in her depictions of the speaker/mother-beloved/child relationship. For Cynthia Turner Camp, Webster undermines speaker-beloved detachment in both Petrarch’s sonnets and those of his Victorian descendant Dante Gabriel Rossetti by figuring the speaker-beloved relationship as one of integration and inter-subjectivity (28).⁷⁶ Lee Behlman provides an insightful reading of how the trope of the Petrarchan poet-speaker spending himself for his beloved intersects with popular poetic and societal constructions of the ideal Victorian wife and mother, who professes her love endlessly to husband and child alike without expecting any love in return, like a bottomless well that never requires refilling.⁷⁷ Harrington and Behlman read both the Petrarchan speaker’s love and Webster’s speaker’s love as limited and unsustainable, and though I certainly agree that Webster’s image of allegorical Love reveals the models of Petrarchan courtly love and Victorian maternal love as false and untenable, I also read *Mother and Daughter* as presenting an alternative to this destructive model in the mother-daughter bond. This section takes a cursory glance at the often gendered and always

⁷⁵ Among these critics, Virginia Blain claims that Webster’s poem represented a new, “feminist” formulation of the sonnet (11).

⁷⁶ For Camp, Webster approaches “the issue of the development of the poetic self in a way which integrates, rather than objectifies, the poetic object” (2).

⁷⁷ Refer to Behlman in para. 8.

embodied underpinnings of the speaker-beloved relationship in the English sonnet tradition, where the male speaker's communication with his female love object typically figures in terms of a one-way liquid emission of poetic and bodily expression to a non-reciprocating, vessel-like beloved – whose own physiological and poetic expressions are shown to be markedly absent. Before we can launch into a study of the liquid and linguistic circuits of *Mother and Daughter*, it is helpful to situate Webster within a longstanding tradition of sonneteers whose speakers figure their poetic expressions as inseparable from their physiological ones.

Despite the sonnet's being ostensibly concerned with a poet-speaker's exposition of his beloved, the male poet-speaker is frequently introspective and self-absorbed to the extent that his expressions come to represent himself more than his lover. This introspection can be explained in part by a dominant narrative in the English sonnet tradition which collapses the speaker's poetic expression towards his beloved with his sexual expression of semen. In his piece on early modern English metaphors of poetic generation, Harris argues that at least two of Shakespeare's famous love sonnets, 1 and 129, exhibit a preoccupation with misdirected male "seed" that is intertwined with the speaker's fears of the wasted expression of ink in poor poetry (72). In both sonnets, the speaker expresses anxiety at the prospect of semen that is poorly directed; in the first, the speaker upbraids a young man for burying his "content" into his "own bud" while masturbating, while the speaker of the second mourns the death of his own soul after he has engaged in extramarital intercourse, punning on his own "spirit" (semen) that now resides in a lover who is not his wife (73). Both sonnets show poetic communication to be a one-way liquid emission on/into a physiologically unresponsive receptacle, where semen is a stand-in for a male poetic expression that did not reach a female

suitor in the first poem and did not reach the proper one in the second. This dual male physiological/poetic expression is self-referential, representative more of the poet-speaker's own interiority and dominance rather than a genuine picture of a beloved, and reflecting Michael R. G. Spiller's claim in his influential book *The Development of the Sonnet*, that the Petrarchan sonnet speaker merely projects himself onto his love object, so that the speaker becomes "the real subject/object of his or her own discourse" rather than the beloved (79). The speaker's discourse with himself is crucial here, for what is markedly absent in both sonnets – and a great majority of conventional sonnet sequences – is the speaker's acknowledgement of an analogous expression from the female beloved, who is often rendered silent and altogether inconsequential (Stone, "Sonnet Traditions" 61) – incapable of either a physiological expression or its verbal counterpart. Denying a space for female poetic and physiological expression, this formulation of speaker-as-transmitter and beloved-as-vessel is a trend in the tradition of the English amatory sonnet sequence until the mid-nineteenth century, at which time other literary formulations of "love at first sight" exhibited similarly one-sided expressions of male, heterosexual love.⁷⁸

Stone puts it aptly when she says that mid-nineteenth-century sonnet sequences like Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life* follow suit from a sonnet tradition "that obsessively focus[es] on ladies never given the chance to speak" (61), but that Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti first pose a challenge to this female silence in their respective sonnet sequences, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and "*Monna Innominata*" – both

⁷⁸ In his study of male heterosexual performance in mid-nineteenth-century Victorian literature and paintings, Christopher Matthews looks at how mid-century portrayals of love at first sight were often characterized not by "intimacy based on mutual knowledge" but "anti-intimacy," "brevity and ignorance" on the part of the male subject (435). In its poetic representations, love at first sight does not typically stem from the man's realization of his beloved's similarity and closeness to himself, but (ironically) his "heightened awareness of sexual difference and distance" from her (437). Webster's dyad stems from a mutual recognition of their sexual similarity to one another.

of which exhibit “a lady speaking (or rather writing) ‘for herself’” (61). I see Webster doing something analogous, and yet more radical, by presenting not only an expressive female speaker but an expressive daughter-beloved, undermining the one-way liquid and linguistic transmission between the Petrarchan poet-speaker and his own beloved. Jodi Lustig foregrounds Webster’s challenge to the sonnet mode when she says that the daughter figure is not an “empty vessel” content with merely being “filled with the desire of another (215). Instead, Webster ensures that her beloved possesses her own set of physiological and poetic expressions that she offers to her mother in return, and the poet reveals this liquid/linguistic communication between speaker and beloved as the signifier of this most complete – because the most completely reciprocal – form of intimacy.

Certainly there are instances in the sequence when the mother exhibits flickers of that Petrarchan speaker in her desire to define and control her beloved daughter. At times, the speaker struggles to recognize her daughter as a subject with a fledgling independence, wishing to dominate her when the young girl expresses a will of her own out of a fear that their intimacy will end with the girl’s entrance into adulthood. But arguments in the daughter’s childhood as well as those “gird[s]” of her adulthood (21: 13) function to highlight the linguistic back-and-forth as being intrinsic to a life-long mother/daughter bond. In conversation, mother and daughter resemble two permeable beings expressing themselves to one another, with occasional disruptions of one-sided speech. In the daughter’s early years the daughter resists her mother’s reproach, like “venturous children pacing with the sea,/That turn but when the breaker spurts behind/Outreaching them with spray” (6: 5-7). The scene positions the scolding mother as the sea trying to reach her vexing daughter who resists by turning away from the spray. But not long after having been dismissed, the young girl

returns to be once again bound linguistically and physically to her mother, the two fitting “lip to ear and heart to heart” (6: 12) – unclear, and irrelevant, whose lip or whose ear belongs to whom as the relationship returns to a conversation rather than the mother’s one-sided admonishment, and the daughter’s love becomes “newly strong” out of the disagreement (13).

Even in the midst of her urges to dominate, the speaker demonstrates that she recognizes her daughter’s subjectivity by including the girl’s own speech without adulteration, which for Behlman makes Webster’s sequence “bracingly new.”⁷⁹ While I agree with Behlman that the mother’s occasional attempts to exert herself over her daughter represents “a familiar Petrarchan pattern of amatory success and failure” (para. 20), I see the daughter’s resistance to this control by talking back to her mother as adding a layer of linguistic reciprocity that is generally absent in a male heterosexual address to a lover. I look at how Webster’s back-and-forth exchanges of bodily fluids operate as a useful metaphor for linguistic reciprocation within the adult nursing dyad, where female physiological and poetic expressions are not only granted recognition in the “white ink” of both mother and daughter, but are allowed to engage in communication with each other in a vivid imagining of female poetic community. Here, the two bodies and minds are mutually informed by the other in a two-way fluid exchange of milk, blood, and words. And in contrast to the self-absorbed speaker of the conventional sonnet sequence, Webster’s speaker readily acknowledges that she absorbs her daughter, just as her daughter in turn absorbs her. Webster’s reformulation of poetic voice in the sonnet sequence is twofold: first, she figures a woman, specifically a mother, as the poet-speaker whose linguistic expressions are inextricable from her physiological communication of breastmilk, and, second, she positions that woman’s

⁷⁹ Refer to Behlman para. 12.

daughter as a new kind of beloved who is capable of reciprocating that expression on account of her own embodied experience as female.

Feedback/Feeding Back: Mother/Daughter Love as Symbiotic Exchange

The newfangled depictions of female voice in *Mother and Daughter* attest not only to Webster's engagement with, but furtherance of, a heritage of woman poets. As mentioned, Webster was certainly not the first woman sonneteer to take issue with the gendered speaker/beloved discontinuity during the sequence revival movement beginning mid-century. Barrett Browning's famed 1850 sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese* undermines the trope of the expressionless beloved by casting a woman as the poet-speaker, while Rossetti's "*Monna Innominata*" (1881) figures both speaker and beloved as poets. But Webster alone grounds the possibility of female poetic voice in a maternal dyad rather than a romantic one, and through evocations of breastfeeding rather than those of sexual exchange. Among female-authored motherhood poems, Webster's poem is not unusual in its figuration of breastfeeding as a mother's intimate offering of life energy to her child; it is not even unusual in its suggestion that the "primary libidinal bond" in the breastfeeding process extends well beyond the nursing period (Thaden 8). But it is remarkable in its insistence that this communicative expression is reciprocated by the child's – crucially the daughter's – offering of language and life energy in return. Webster envisions the eponymous mother and daughter of her sequence as two parts in a closed circuit of fluid exchange, one where the life-giving breast milk that passes from mother to child in the daughter's infancy is recompensed in the daughter's figurative offering of her own life blood to her aging mother.

Taking as its first precedent a shared embodied experience, and extending organically into linguistic expression, this feedback loop refutes a tradition of sonnet speakers whose bodily and poetic expression goes only one way. As the beloved matures in Webster's narrative, the nursing dyad of mother and daughter continues to re-enact the fluid interplay of breastfeeding in an increasingly sophisticated and symbolic conversation between bodies, to the extent that the daughter's "thoughts, incomplete/Find their shaped wording happen on [...her mother's] tongue" (17: 3-4) – put differently, the adult daughter figuratively sucks words from her mother's mouth as she once suckled milk from her breast.

Given that Webster ranked Elizabeth Barrett Browning among her most important poetic influences, it is hardly surprising that Webster's sonnet sequence should speculate on those same modes of mother-infant communication which are so much a concern to Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*. Like Barrett Browning, Webster envisions the mother and her newborn as the speakers of a private dialect, inscribing personal meaning onto otherwise unintelligible vocal sounds. What Barrett Browning imagines as a mother's secret language to her baby – those "nonsense syllables" only registering to her infant – Webster adopts and then adapts. First, Webster duplicates this secret maternal language in the speaker's *mother tongue* that only her daughter understands, and, second, Webster shows this linguistic expression to be reciprocated in the infant's babbling speech that its mother alone discerns as "music of my heart" (1: 9). While Barrett Browning focuses on the child's retrospective discernment of that pre-symbolic order, with the grown Aurora grasping at her early memories of her mother (1: 51), Webster, in making her speaker a narrating mother, capitalizes on the mother's unique ability to translate that experience as it happens – capturing not only the immediacy of the two-way exchange, but the special intimacy offered

by the nursing dyad. In our interpretation of “Goblin Market,” we reencountered the image of the nursing dyad in Laura and Lizzie’s fluid communication on the dairy, where I argued that Lizzie’s lactational utterances are a central component of the female poetic tradition of Rossetti’s final scene. So far I have attempted to link Barrett Browning’s and Rossetti’s maternal communication not only to a semiotic communication within the nursing dyad, but also to a new feminine poetics, where the metaphor of lactation operates as a rhetorical strategy legitimizing an emerging female-authored poetry. Taking a cue from Barrett Browning and Rossetti, Webster foregrounds the nursing dyad as engaging in a fluid dialogue that is distinct from a male sexual and linguistic economy.

In this respect, it seems significant that Webster excludes sons from this representation, imagining only the nursing dyad of mother and daughter as a lifelong bond where the adults come to represent “sister womanhoods” (20: 10); for I believe this female community of mother and daughter is central to Webster’s argument for a new female poetic communication. Julia Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic chora provides a useful framework to shed light on the complexities of Webster’s lifelong, nursing dyad, a dyad operating outside of male relationships and language. As outlined in previous chapters, Kristeva portrays the maternal figure as a kind of wellspring which supplies the semiotic component of language (like breastmilk) to her infant, who returns it in the same fluid articulation. Not only does this picture of the chora stress the analogy between a mother’s (liquid) milk and her (linguistic) words, but it underlines how the infant contributes its own semiotic expression back to the mother, making the nursing dyad a two-way communication that for the female infant is a permanent liquid and expressive heritage. While a male infant’s growth into an individuated subject necessitates a clean separation from the mother, whom he recognizes as

a horrifying “other” (the abject), the daughter retains a lifelong affiliation to the chora’s fluid expressions and semiotic language. The mother and daughter undergo a continual process of subject formation and reformation as the mother struggles to exert her dominance over her growing daughter and that daughter struggles to become her own subject. While Barrett Browning and Rossetti fashion the nursing dyad as a political emblem of ideal communication between women, Webster paints a more nuanced picture of the often fraught communication originating in a real mother/daughter dyad. But while the female speaker and beloved may sometimes experience a fracturing that is reminiscent of the Petrarchan dyad, they always return to the complete bodily and linguistic reciprocity that is vested in the chora.

The mother’s occasional efforts to dominate her daughter can be explained in part by her fear that the maternal communication originating in their libidinal bond is fleeting. Webster’s first line of her first sonnet opens with the poet-speaker’s celebration of her daughter’s incomprehensible but (to her) meaningful articulations, those “Young laughters, and my music” (1: 1) that evoke the mother’s rhythmic syllables to her infant in *Aurora Leigh* and recall the feminine, lactational laughter of “Goblin Market.” Like the semiotic utterances of the chora, this music operates outside of the discernable logic associated with symbolic language: the mother relates that this “spring joy [...] has no why or how,/But sees the sun and hopes not nor can fear” because “Spring is so sweet and spring seems all the year” (1: 5-7). While Marianne Van Remoortel recognizes in this spring a “season of closeness, presence, and profusion” (477), the mother nonetheless anticipates an end to both the springtime of her daughter’s infancy and the intimacy of their shared language – the music of the “spring bird” as it “learns the later song” (1: 10) of adult language and love.

The mother mourns the eventual loss of this pre-linguistic song, knowing that “Too soon!” it will be replaced by the “sadder sweetness [that] slays content” (1: 11-12). The speaker’s concern that time will bring an end to her closeness with her beloved represents a conventional anxiety for the Petrarchan sonnet speaker, and in this regard, Webster’s first sonnet resembles the aptly named “Broken Music” sonnet of *The House of Life*. In it, the male speaker mourns his beloved’s lost voice, which he once longed to hear like a mother who hears her infant’s first words. This mother “will not turn, who thinks she hears/Her nursling’s speech first grow articulate” but “sits, with open lips and open ears,/That it may call her twice” (“Broken Music” 1-5). Mirroring the speaker whose lover’s voice leaves him over time, this mother’s elation in hearing her infant’s voice discloses an undercurrent of sadness at the prospect of eventually losing the bond with her “nursling” (2) as it is weaned from her, not unlike Webster’s speaker who fears that she will lose the bond with her daughter once she “learns the later song” (10). But while the male speaker’s fear of un-relation stems from a tradition of amatory love that bends towards an “othering,” distancing, and losing of the beloved, Webster’s speaker comes to learn that this speaker/beloved detachment is unsuited to an altogether different pair of lovers who can continually re-access the reciprocity of the nursing dyad over different stages of their lives.

The liquid and linguistic conversation between mother and daughter survives the beloved’s infancy and consolidates in the adult women’s relationship, where it takes the shape of an embodied language that, as Nicole Fluhr relates, “includes both the corporeal communication that precedes speech and the purely abstract signification process of symbolic communication” (55). What sets Webster’s poem apart from the majority of sonnet sequences of her time, and a tradition of motherhood poetry where the communication is

necessarily limited because the child is “typically of an age that allows only for smiles, gesticulations, coos and giggles” (Behlman para. 3), is that her poet-speaker permits her beloved an unmediated voice by including her own quoted words in the text (4: 13-14, 8: 3-4, 13: 5-8). The speaker’s allowance of her beloved’s genuine voice, even (perhaps especially) when it challenges her own, testifies to the mother’s recognition of her daughter’s burgeoning identity. In the seventh sonnet, the speaker defends her “chiding” of her daughter that her husband calls too “hard” (1-2) by aligning the verbal scrutiny with a lactational expression that will provide sustenance for her “dawning rose” (9). When she says of her critical observation: “I watch one bud that on my bosom blows” (13), she imagines her linguistic offering as a kind of figurative breastfeeding. Although this instance of linguistic transmission appears one-sided, the mother wholly accepts that her daughter’s verbal offerings can equally inform her identity, especially as the mother grows older. In the next sonnet, the speaker recalls such an integration of her daughter’s words. When the “little child” approaches her, “Reasoning her case,” and says, “I cannot mind your scolding, for I know/However bad I were you’d love the same’,” the mother acquiesces to the claim, admitting: “What countering answer could I frame?/’Twas true” because “each rebuke has love for its right name” (8: 1-8). Just as the daughter can recognize even the mother’s harshest tongue-lashings as expressions of her love, the mother can recognize even her daughter’s most confrontational words as the reciprocated communications of that love. The speaker’s inclusion of dialogues like this one reveals her recognition of her beloved as an individual subject capable of expressing her own unique, if antagonistic, voice. But rather than amounting to an inevitable distance between beloved and speaker, these disagreements

help to consolidate the mother/daughter bond as one that provides continued nourishment for both.

Over their lifetimes, the mouths of mother and child sing a two-part song of separate, yet complementary voices, and their linguistic circuit points simultaneously backward and forward in time to a bodily integration of the other. Early in the sequence, the mother finds a sweetness on her young daughter's mouth (2: 10), a mouth that is as yet incapable of speech, suggesting that the raw, pre-linguistic emotion the infant exhibits is readily consumed by its mother – tasted by her in a sense, not unlike Marian's drinking in of the image of her suckling son (6: 600). Here, Webster underscores the reciprocal nature of the nursing exchange, symbolic and alimental; just as the infant feeds with its mouth from the mother's breast, so too does the infantile mouth return a kind of sustenance, love, to the mother's figurative breast: her heart. Love is transmitted, then, as an analogously internalized fluid. The daughter describes her mother's "music" as holding a "secret" meaning for her as it enters her body like a fluid, "As though thy song could search me and divine"(13: 1, 5, 8). Later on, when the mother struggles to articulately express her love to her daughter, she falls back on familiar semiotic utterances of the chora that only the mother and daughter can understand, in an expression that "takes for language laughing ironies" (21: 8). This fluid, pre-linguistic laughter appears as "some foreign tongue" that seems to be "empty sounds alone" to "ignorant ears," but to the mother and daughter it is so "familiar on our lips and closely known" that both "feel the purport of each word" (21: 9-12).

Similar to Barrett Browning and Rossetti, Webster reveals the communication within the nursing dyad as manifesting in the embodied communication between women, but Webster alone expands the nursing metaphor of female expression from milk to blood. Early

on, Webster's speaker describes her daughter as being as "buoyant" as a spring bursting forth (4: 3-4), and the metaphor is made complete with the mother's admission that her child is something of a fountain of youth who "keeps me young by her young innocent ways" (4: 8). Here, the inversion of breastfeeding situates the babe as the source of the mother's life energy. This image of drinking in another's life, as with the sequence's later invocation of blood transfusion, certainly has the suggestion of vampirism, but far from Beeton's position that the infant drains the unsuspecting mother of her life energy (489), here we have the mother figuratively drinking from her infant as a positive emblem of a self-sustaining bond. The sharing of blood between mother and daughter symbolizes the continuation of their reciprocating bond over their lifetimes just as it gestures towards a physiological likeness among women that is absent in the heterosexual romantic pair.

Sharing Blood: The Mother/Daughter Dyad as Self-Sustaining Bond

In English writer Anna Letitia Barbauld's 1825 poem, "To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible," a pregnant woman imagines nursing her future baby as an extension of the ongoing liquid transactions passing between the two in utero. The soon-to-be mother "longs to fold to her maternal breast" the fetus that is "Part of herself, yet to herself unknown;/To see and to salute the stranger guest,/Fed with her life through many a tedious moon" (21-24). Subscribing to a notion of the Victorian wife and mother as a self-effacing, ever-flowing source of nourishment and love (Behlman para. 9),⁸⁰ this apparently innocuous poem features a fetus that vampirically feeds on the "life" of its host over the

⁸⁰ Behlman cites Barbauld in a series of prominent women poets who portray mother-love as inexhaustible, including Joanna Baillie, Charlotte Smith, and Felicia Hemans (para. 3).

months of gestation just as, presumably, it will come to feed on the milk of its mother's "maternal breast." Barbaud's well-known motherhood poem discloses a Victorian familiarity with maternal energy circuits that, by Webster's time, had become well-established: even before the breastfeeding stage, the mother's fluid circuit with her child originates within the womb, through the umbilical cord which passes food and energy to the fetus.⁸¹ In Barbaud's poem, as with many motherhood poems that figure maternal feeding, the mother's freely given life energy is inextricable from her maternal expression of love. Webster boldly reimagines that circulation of blood, milk, love, and language between a mother and her daughter as an interactive one. The compatibility between this speaker and beloved, vested in their experience of shared blood as well as their shared experience of blood as women, allows them to communicate in a reciprocal circuit that is grounded on genealogical and physiological similarity. In contrast to a poetic tradition of the Petrarchan speaker who vainly gives all his love over to an unresponsive beloved, and an idyllic mother who expends her love to both husband and child, this feedback loop of mother and daughter – variously – provides the consolation for a stale amatory love, offers up a model of sustainable love between women, and lays the groundwork for an altogether new formulation of poetic love.

In Webster's eleventh sonnet entitled "Love's Mourner," the speaker disparages the way that men and their poetry envisage women's love as an unending outward flow that is not drained, but fulfilled, when it is not returned by loved ones. The speaker bitterly laments the death of woman's love when it enters an economy of "men[']s" poetic expression and cultural expectation, saying:

'Tis men who say that through all hurt and pain

⁸¹ Victorian physicians recognized the umbilical cord as passing energy from mother to fetus; by the second half of the nineteenth-century, overeating during pregnancy was popularly linked to complications in labor due to a larger baby (Winick 169).

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. (1-4)

This idyllic, and inaccurate picture “That men call woman’s love” resounds “in a thousand voices” of male-authored poetry, where this “dear patient madness [has] been retold” (5-7). Parasite-like, these men figuratively ingest women’s love and, instead of returning it, keep it, and contain it in faulty representations. While these male voices represent woman’s love as an outward expression of life-giving “breath” that requires no breath in return, the mother sees the one-way offering amount to the suffocation and death of women’s love (8). This male-constructed female love is sacrificial, feeding its loved ones with its own blood, and “by the pardoning dies” (11: 10), Christ-like. This image of a mother “pierced through the breast” (11: 11) evokes the medieval Christian emblem of the “Pelican-In-Her-Piety,” an image of a mother bird who tears at her own breast to feed her starving young the blood flowing forth, thus saving her young.⁸² The Eucharistic blood of Christ and the breast milk of a mother conflate in this replenishing spiritual fluid of the idealized woman’s love. But Webster resists the poetic glorification of the poet-speaker’s and mother’s love: unlike Christ’s ever-flowing blood, women’s earthly offering is subject to earthly limitations. Behlman reads Webster’s speaker’s mourning as a hopeless critique of unrealistic patriarchal expectations of women’s suffering in marriage and motherhood – maternal love as unwavering, when in fact, “female sympathy is a limited resource, and the well is running dry” (para. 8). I side with Behlman’s reading of this female sympathy as a critique of the

⁸² In her study of Victorian Emblematics, Heather McAlpine locates the image of the pelican-in-her-piety as a Christian motif that continued to influence English iconography well into the twentieth century (39); interestingly, she suggests the need for reading “Goblin Market”’s Eucharistic scene in light of this symbol (135 fn. 18).

destructive model of Victorian womanhood, and I am certainly fascinated by her visualization of this feminine expression of love as a well that issues fluid for others to drink, but I do not believe that Webster paints a picture of all love as a non-renewable resource. What is implicit about this mother's blood offering is that although it extends to both husband and child (11: 2), it is only shown to be reciprocated by the female child, while the male recipients of this love – husband and son alike – are apt to “bold[ly]” misconstrue it (11: 7-8), reminiscent of the Petrarchan lover's misconstruction of his female beloved by expending himself for this unobtainable other. It is telling that when this misrepresentation of Love dies, what survives to “stand pityingly in Love's void place” are two things: “Kindness of household wont familiar-wise/And faith to Love – faith to our dead at rest” (12-14). While the speaker acknowledges we pay our respects to such ideal pictures of Love, she also insists that this dead Love ought to be, fittingly, laid to rest. What remains is the “Kindness of household wont familiar wise” (13) – the unassuming, domestic, feminine love of the Victorian household and, perhaps, the “familiar” love between mothers, sisters, and daughters that comes of authentic intimacy. The love that rises from the ashes of an outdated, drained, poetic love is the love that sustains itself, for the well of a mother's love never becomes empty when water is continually returned to its depths. Here, Webster gestures towards the possibility that women's love when it is shared amongst women outlives its faulty representations.

In Sonnet 17, Webster draws on this blood imagery to showcase the mother and daughter's love as positively vampiric, yet this vampirism is markedly different than men's parasitic feeding on women's love in “Love's Mourner.” Instead, this sonnet homes in on the symbiotic quality of the female nursing dyad, which functions in a kind of symbiotic circuit

where the daughter's blood revives her aging mother – returning the sustenance which was once vested in the mother's milk. The speaker's declaration that her daughter's "heart sets time for mine to beat/We are so near" (17: 2) reverses the initial direction of the exchange by which the mother gave life to her baby, her body providing life energy to the fetus, and later feeding it the life energy of breastmilk.⁸³ These literal fluids take on symbolic proportions as the mother's love supplying rhythm to the fetus's heart, and the linguistic offering of milk to the infant's mind. Now the daughter provides the blood and the beat, the figurative music of milk, to its mother. Invocations of this cannibalistic tendency appear in earlier manifestations than this one, such as when the speaker tastes the expression on her daughter's mouth (2: 10), or uses alimentary language to describe how her daughter's "sweet will" reverses her aging process (16: 14). In the sequence's most blatant evocation of cannibalism, the narrator imagines herself as an aging vampire sucking the life energy out of her younger (but now adult) daughter

And there are tales how youthful blood instilled
 Thawing froze Age's veins gave life new course,
 And quavering limbs and eyes made indolent
 Freshly eager with beginning force:
 Breathes impulse. Were my years twice spent,
 Not burdening Age, with her, could make me chilled. (17: 9-14)

This image of the mother drinking her daughter's life energy cements the female nursing dyad as an eternal communicative circuit, even though the transferred medium may change from literal to symbolic bodily expressions, and the flow may change directions. Joined

⁸³ The two fluids of breastmilk and blood were certainly not mutually exclusive according to the Victorian imagination, as Beeton believed that "when a woman suckles a child she undoubtedly communicates to it the distillation, as it were, of the vital essence of her own blood" (580).

together in this intimate embrace later in life just as earlier in life, this feminine dyad of adult mother and adult daughter represents a bond which surpasses stale constructions of amatory love, for this poetic love is rooted in the physiological similarity of speaker and beloved, not their bodily difference and distance. As female adults, the pair reach an intimacy that a heterosexual pair could not possess – just as their secret language in youth sprang from shared lactational expressions, their intimacy in adulthood is based on their shared physiological experiences as bleeding women. When the speaker stresses that her daughter is “Dearer [...] to-day, dearer and more;/Closer to me, since sister womanhoods meet” (20: 9-10), the shared experience of womanhood where mother and daughter “meet” suggests this bond is exclusive to the female parent and child, and what is present in these womanhoods but is absent between a mother and her husband is the same thing that sets a genealogical relation apart from a marital partner: blood. A mother and daughter share not only the same genealogical blood, but share the same experience of blood in menstruation, meaning that on some level, the daughter gives her mother’s “life new course” (17: 10) because the two engage in the same physiological expression that binds them together in one communication of blood – “course,” of *course*, being the vernacular for menstruation. And this complete circulation between subjects arrives at its ultimate conclusion with the possibility that “Child and Mother” and “Mother and child” are interchangeable, a bond which, as Behlman notes, originates in that “recent experience of containing the child within her [the mother’s] body” (15), and which, I have argued, resurfaces in both the liquid and linguistic communications of a lifelong nursing dyad.

In *Lives of the Sonnet*, Van Remoortel acknowledges the Kristevan undertones of this blood-feeding scene as simultaneously “reclaim[ing] women’s birthright to give life” and

“hermetically seal[ing] the mother/daughter bond from male intrusion” (157). Focussing on how the daughter’s sharing of blood is an inversion of the mother’s milk offering, Van Remoortel argues that in this “powerful image, the mother turns their relationship into a completely self-sufficient union” (157). Though compelled by this reading, I would go one step further to suggest that at least in part, the mother “hermetically seal[s]” her relationship with her daughter because she finds the amatory union in marriage – and the poetic tradition that informs it – to be an altogether unsatisfactory form of intimacy. I venture that Webster’s speaker finds a more complete, because reciprocated, bond within the nursing dyad over the romantic one.

[*M*]other and Daughter: Casting the Male Lover from the Nursing Dyad

“Love’s Counterfeit” follows a male, personified Love as he literally expends himself trailing after his beloved, whom he can never catch (10: 10). As we saw, this Love has the appearance and gives the performance of a fraught, Petrarchan poet-speaker, his crown of “withered buds and leaves” recalling a poet’s laurel wreath, and, like the failed poet-speaker, he is not reimbursed with a lover’s expression of love but “with only tears himself lets fall” (2-4). Yet this figure is not real Love, who lay asleep and “smiling” under a cover, but Love’s shadow, Memory (5,7). Mimicking the false Love’s futile chase are those people who look at their own shadow and mistake its “pursuit” as genuine Love, claiming: ““This *must* be Love that wears his features still”” (13). Of course, their shadow is an illusory lover of their own creation, who despite their pursuit, can never love them in return, making the allegory one about false creation. Those who worship this construction of Love, and expend

all of their energy in trying to attain that which will not love them back, are as dehydrated as the false Love, who has cried all of his tears to the extent that his crown is now only “withered buds and leaves gone dry” (2). I side with Van Remoortel’s reading of the scene as an “obituary” of “the language of love and the amatory tradition since Petrarch,” where Webster’s allegorical Love “signals the complete exhaustion of the sonnet’s generic conventions” (“Metaphor” 478). Van Remoortel’s reading of the conventional poet-speaker’s pursuit of a non-reciprocating beloved as “exhausting” certainly captures the dehydration that I have read as the inevitable result of such a one-way expression. But while Van Remoortel sees the outcome of Webster’s own poet-speaker somewhat negatively, eventually “substitut[ing] for Petrarchism an artistically regrettable turn to a pre-linguistic silence” (482), I read this “pre-linguistic” lapse not only as ultimately positive but intrinsically connected to the exclusive communication that passes between mother and daughter in the nursing dyad, that lifelong circuit of the chora that does not distinguish between liquid or linguistic, literal or figurative expressions of love. Instead of seeing the adult mother/daughter relationship as ending in a series of “regrettable” poetic non-articulations, I read Webster’s reciprocated nursing dyad – with its expressions of love from mother to daughter and daughter to mother – as a vestige of true love in the midst of unsustainable conventions of maternal and amatory love.

Webster’s sophisticated allegory of false Love and its futile expressions functions as a twofold critique of the poetic conventions that inform an unsustainable picture of Victorian love: the Petrarchan poet-speaker who pursues a false construction of a beloved that does not return his love, and the wife-mother who expends her love endlessly without requiring love returned.

Moreover, the people's devotion to Memory is akin to those "Poor mothers that look back" and mourn their grown children as though they have died with the passing of their "frank childhood" (9: 1, 12). These "weary" mothers speak of a past with their infants; they "dare no 'is' but tell what's o'er": memory (11). They refuse to see the continually reciprocated love with their adult children as Webster's speaker comes to see in her grown daughter. For mothers like Webster's speaker, the real Love is very much alive in the reciprocated love offerings passed to and from her adult daughter, and I do not think it is insignificant, in this regard, that the true Love of the parable who smiles sleeping in a shawl resembles – not the speaker's markedly absent husband – but Webster's young daughter as she lay sleeping, smiling, tucked in her bed (5: 12-14). Despite not having the elaborate verbal "features" of this tradition of Love, this unassuming mother/daughter love is real love in all of its bickering and linguistic silence. Though the false Love's "withered buds" may point to the possibility of a husband's non-fulfillment in marriage if his wife's love for him runs dry, the speaker's own "bud" will never go thirsty so long as it remains, literally and figuratively, on its mother's "bosom" (7: 13). But Webster's beloved, unlike the husband and child of motherhood poetry and unlike the beloved of the traditional sonnet sequence, is not merely a vessel to be filled. The mother's sole daughter offers up her own poetic expression to her mother in return, with a love that is sufficient and self-sufficient all by itself – barring the mother's need for any other beloved including, I hazard, her husband.

Webster's speaker devotes the entirety of her last four sonnets to arguing that having only one child is best, characteristically using a liquid metaphor to describe a mother's expressions of love as a spring that flows outwardly to be reintegrated into the bodies of her offspring (25: 6). Comparing her love for her only daughter to that of other mothers, the

speaker portrays mothers with more than one child as unfaithful lovers as they do not contain the fluid circuit of love to a single beloved child, saying of them: "I give the river, you [give] the separate springs" (6). Unlike these mothers, Webster's speaker directs her nourishing bodily expressions towards a single body in breastfeeding and analogously directs her poetic expressions of love to fulfilling the needs of a single, beloved daughter in the sonnet sequence, hermetically sealing the maternal liquid circuit so that "None takes the strong entireness from her: none" (8). We have already looked at how the mother's expression of love to her daughter is reciprocated in the daughter's own liquid and linguistic expressions to her mother, and this new two-way dyad also informs a characterization of the daughter as the mother's new "lover." If Webster's sonnet sequence is a reformulation of troublingly one-sided conventions of speaker and beloved, then the daughter who reciprocates those expressions of love becomes the ideal beloved above all others, and the mother's "sole desire" (26: 2). Beyond the mother's explicit message here that one daughter is sufficient to fulfill her need for love as a mother is the suggestion that female community is sufficient to fulfill her need for all types of literal and linguistic expression, in love and poetry. This would represent Webster's major thematic departure from both Barrett Browning and Rossetti. Although *Aurora Leigh* certainly opens the way for new poetic representations of women who may achieve both poetic fame and success in love, the promising literal and linguistic homosocial community of Aurora and Marian does give way to a conservative, heterosexual pairing in Aurora and Romney's marriage, suggesting the female poet's necessary acquiescence to some conventions of a male poetic tradition. The final scene of "Goblin Market" reveals how female poets can effectively subvert the meaning of such male texts by figuring a new literary community blending male and female expressions, but this

new feminine poetic tradition still necessitates a continued reliance on, and communication with, those male expressions of a male-authored literary market. In *Mother and Daughter*, Webster articulates a more radical message of women existing in a communicative network that is hermetically sealed from the incursion of men and their expressions. I would like to entertain the possibility that Webster's speaker, as mother, excludes the father figure from the "strong entireness" of her single, maternal expression (8), and, as wife, casts her husband out of the role of amatory beloved in favour of the more complete intimacy that the daughter offers.⁸⁴

What we might read as a radical message of closed female community may be informed by Webster's own disdain at the social and literary formations of heterosexual love. In her well-known collection of *Examiner* essays, *A Housewife's Opinions* (1870), Webster boldly questions whether the institution of marriage is necessarily based on a relationship of real love (237). Webster openly criticizes the social ideal of marriage as the final end of love, and the romantic convention that assumes all women should see "wifedom as the hope and purpose of their lives" (234). Pointing to the current legal and social limitations imposed on women as wives and mothers, Webster imagines true love to be an effortless and fundamentally reciprocated exchange between equals, that "love at its ease, as statutory affection with its reciprocal rights, content to have given and have got and to have done with it, is a good-tempered purblind humour that has nothing to desire and takes its response for granted" (201). This innovative formulation of symbiotic love undermines the dominant Victorian poetic and social narratives of the poet-speaker and mother-wife expending their love for naught, presenting an alternative pair of lovers who are "content to

⁸⁴ By the same token, when the speaker claims to need nothing other than that "solitary bird [which] had my heart's nest" (27: 8), she excludes the possibility of her husband occupying that nest along with any other potential fledglings.

have given and have got,” and instead of expecting no love in return take the “response for granted” as the precondition of their lasting bond. But I do not think it is mere coincidence that Webster’s vision of a union based on “reciprocal rights” more closely resembles Rossetti’s image of sisterly devotion in “Goblin Market” than any Victorian legal constitution of “man and wife.” Insofar as the “sister womanhoods” of mother and daughter were thought of as constitutionally equal according to the Victorian imagination,⁸⁵ it may not be altogether surprising that Webster could conceive of the mother/daughter dyad taking the place of those heterosexual, amatory lovers of the conventional sonnet sequence within her experimental one.

The two final sonnets of *Mother and Daughter* consolidate the potential supremacy of the mother/daughter pairing over that of the husband/wife, showing the daughter’s offering of intimacy eclipsing the husband’s which, in retrospect, appears illusionary as it is informed by “men[’s]” false conception of “woman’s love” (11: 1-2). The mother declares that the intimate mother/daughter dyad does not just exclude all other subjects from its closed circuit, but makes all other subjects nonexistent: “Oh! Child and mother, darling! Mother and child!/And who but we? We darling, paired alone?” (26: 9-10). Here we reencounter the speaker’s signification of her daughter as her “darling” from Sonnet 3, but in the context of this monogamous love, the nickname calls attention to the husband’s not being (and perhaps never having been) an analogous darling. The reciprocal circuit of mother and daughter has granted the daughter, not the husband, sole access to her mother’s body and poetic expression, and the mother in turn benefits from exclusive access to her daughter’s expressions of love; the mother shows both sides of this give-and-take when she tells her

⁸⁵ I am using the word “constitutional” on two levels, referring to legal constitutions of women’s rights under the law (i.e. voting, property) as being informed by widespread conceptions of women’s physiological constitution.

daughter: “Thou has all thy mother; [and] thou art all my own” (26: 11). Even though Webster’s speaker insists upon the legitimacy of her relationship with her only daughter by allusion to monogamous, heterosexual marriage, she simultaneously undermines the integrity of that romantic institution – and the poetic tradition that informs it – by privileging the mother/daughter dyad over the amatory pair. Moreover, Webster discloses the possibility that the mother/daughter dyad not only resembles – but replaces – the romantic partnership of marriage as the ultimate end of a woman’s love.

Given Webster’s embodied renderings of female poetic expression throughout the sequence, it is not insignificant that her final sonnet should open with an evocation of one of the most primary – and yet one of the most representative – forms of liquid communication: the mother’s initial experience of breastfeeding her infant. The speaker’s admission that “Since first my little one lay on my breast/I never needed such a second good” (27: 1-2) reiterates once more how mother/daughter love passes back and forth in a closed feedback loop – communicating literally through breastmilk, figuratively through blood, and linguistically through female song and poetic expression. The humble love that the beloved infant offers her mother surpasses the most ornate trappings of a male poetic tradition, filling and fulfilling this poet-speaker, who declares that since the birth of her daughter, she has never “felt a void left in my motherhood/She [her daughter] filled not always to the utterest” (27: 3-4). Bound up with the mother’s offering of breast milk is the child’s returned feeding of its mother’s heart, which is “filled” to “the utterest” with a nourishment that appears in the same liquid articulation as the girl’s later offerings of words and blood. This last depiction of the breastfeeding experience, conjured up when the daughter is an adult and the speaker is an older woman, is Webster’s final evocation of the reciprocal, fluid exchange between mother

and daughter that originates in the female body's physiological expressions and expands into the fluid expressions of a new feminine poetics.

The implications of Webster's liquid, female circuit go well beyond the maternal love passing between a mother and her daughter. This literal nursing dyad gestures towards the possibility of sisterly, platonic, and homoerotic (if not homosexual) love amongst women as not merely a valid but the most complete form of intimacy; it is an intimacy that stems from a shared physiological expression and binds all women together in a linguistic, if not literal, feedback loop of communication. And with the dehydration and death of a poetic tradition of women's sexual and maternal love – by which “men” have assumed that “The woman's love, wife's, mother's still will hold” even if (perhaps especially if) expressions of love are not given to her in return (11: 1-2) – Webster's sonnet sequence demands a fundamental reworking of the relationship between the poet-speaker and the beloved in English poetry that entails an accurate reformulation of women's love and poetic expression in Victorian society. Until then, heterosexual relations may function as a means to an end in forging relationships between women. Webster's daughter-as-beloved construction opens up the possibility that a closed female circuit of exchange – whether within the figurative “sister womanhoods” of mother and daughter or any number of relationships within the figurative sisterhood of all women – is more sustainable than a current, heterosexual union because the exchanges within the female community are reciprocal, sustainable, and everlasting. If it is indeed Webster's intention to show this female dyad as the final feat of love and highest matter for poetic endeavor, how apropos that her sonnet sequence remained unfinished at her death when its central message is the never-ending – and always unfinished – love between a mother and her daughter.

Conclusion

Getting It off of Their Chests

These three poets employ breastfeeding imagery in innovative and subversive ways which resist categorizing the process as either an uncomplicated private transmission or a threatening contamination, instead developing this breastfeeding into a sophisticated metaphor for an emerging female poetic tradition. In *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning constructs the young poet's mother-want – her yearning for the literal and linguistic milk of a female predecessor – as a figure in miniature for the Victorian female poet's plight, writing in an overwhelmingly male poetic tradition in which “women's figures” are rendered inferior if not omitted altogether. Countering this trend by presenting the modern day metaphorically as a “heaving double-breasted age” (5: 216), Barrett Browning opens up the possibility that a female poet's double-vision, epitomized in the expansive subjectivity within the breastfeeding process, allows her to capture the truth of the age with a new brand of feminine poetics. In “Goblin Market,” Christina Rossetti takes up *Aurora Leigh*'s lactational metaphors of feminine poetics and expands them into a figurative communication of breastfeeding, within which passes a new concoction sourced in both male and female expressions. In *Mother and Daughter*, Augusta Webster ameliorates a tradition of male-authored amatory poetry by suggesting that the feminine dyad is more fulfilling and symbiotic than a heterosexual union that is informed by false poetic constructions of women's love. Webster reveals that the complete intimacy between mother and daughter stems from the reciprocated network of fluid exchange between the two in the expressions of breastmilk, blood, song, and speech. Webster's evocation of women's blood

as well as milk gestures towards the possibility of reading other female physiological processes within and about women's writing that have so far escaped our critical detection because we still lack the adequate terminology to discuss them – a gap in our language that is telling as it discloses something of the continued discomfort, shame, and taboos surrounding women's bodily expressions. But within this discourse of negatively coded leaky bodies these three poets represent sites of resistance, employing images of lactation and breastfeeding in a rhetorical strategy that reformulates nineteenth-century tropes of female expression and communication.

Given their propensity for maternity metaphors, it is perhaps fitting that these three poets are often thought of in terms of poetic progeny who passed down their literary innovations to the following generation of female poets – Barrett Browning the poetic mother of Christina Rossetti, who was in turn something of an elder sister, if not an outright mother, to Augusta Webster, since both Rossetti and Webster shared in Barrett Browning's teeming poetic offerings. And while this characterization of poetic maternity certainly attests to the possibility of a distinctly female poetic tradition, it also discloses the possibility of representing all poetic essence and expression as an intergenerational milk that – just like the milk-filled pap in *Aurora Leigh* which “presents, and thus records true life” (5: 222) – may stand for both poetic generations past and present, but always originates from a mother's flowing breasts. In *Aurora Leigh*, “Goblin Market,” and *Mother and Daughter*, literal and symbolic depictions of breastfeeding reveal the possibility of a distinct but valid system of feminine representation, poetry, and literary community that refashions a conventionally negative construction of female expression. While mid-nineteenth-century England oversaw the private, unseen practice of breastfeeding playing host to a number of public,

increasingly-observable anxieties related to human identity and constitution, these female poets help to remind us of the constructive and creative possibilities of a process that may have been out of sight but was most certainly not out of mind.

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