

The Sonnet, Subjectivity, and Gender

Diana E. Henderson

The Sonnet is a little poem with a big heart—and at its core lie subjectivity and gender. Both words are grammatically basic yet surprisingly slippery. Although people usually think they know what gender means, subjectivity is a more specialized term, a word that puns on the tensions it captures: whether or not one is familiar with the subject/object split (a basic philosophical problem associated with epistemology since Descartes), the essence of the matter is that the subject of a sentence is also ‘subjected’ to forces beyond itself. Moreover, the human grammatical subject, the self that is supposed to be ‘one’, also knows itself to be multiple and unruly—if ‘one’ is inclined to a modicum of introspection, as poets are wont to be. What does it mean poetically, then, to express one’s own subjectivity, to speak (metaphorically) in one’s own voice?

The sonnet form originated in an age when poets were also political ‘subjects’ to princes, when emotions were perceived as external forces pressuring internal spirits, and when earthly experience was deemed subject to heavenly will; the sonnet allowed poets a 14-line space in which they could at least articulate, if not exert, their own will. As Europeans in a hierarchical world that presumed male superiority even if exceptional virgins were subjects of veneration, writers of the first love sonnets expressed the cultural and social paradoxes their desires engendered, as well as their personal experiences of emotional contradiction. Out of this maelstrom arose the split personalities that would become models of great art, and the richly expressive vocabularies that would allow

centuries of poetic followers—including women and non-Europeans—to make the sonnet their own, adapting it to capture vastly different perspectives, needs, values, and definitions of selves.

A Brief History of the Subject

Whatever else it has become, the sonnet as a literary mode began as a means of staging the desiring self and its objects of erotic desire. When the fourteenth-century Italians Dante and Petrarch pursued their ladyloves in sequences of exquisite sonnets, they launched a poetic movement that quickly came to signify modernity, including the artistic emergence of vernacular European languages rather than Latin; the self-consciousness of a lover aware of the gap between his actions and his wishes; and the paradox of fleshly sensibility confronting metaphysical yearning. Beatrice and Laura, their respective beloveds, were both real women and symbols invested with resonant names and allegorical fates. Dying young, they were useful to the poets as means to express the passionate struggle of life in the body and the attempted sublimation of carnal love into Christian spirituality, leading from the lady to the Lord. Across their sonnet sequences as a whole if not within individual poems, a gendered hierarchy was ultimately restored.

During the 16th century, poets such as Ronsard, Marot and Louise Labé in France, Camoes in Portugal, Lope de Vega and Cervantes in Spain, and Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey in England famously adapted Petrarch's model to different social, and especially courtly, contexts—an early modern example of cosmopolitan internationalism. At Henry VIII's post-divorce court, the political side of subjectivity

understandably induced anxiety; a translation of Petrarch's 'Una candida cerva', which established the oft-used metaphor of love as a hunt, allowed Sir Thomas Wyatt to express the strain he must have felt as a former intimate of Anne Boleyn, before she became Henry's second wife. The sestet of Wyatt's beautifully wistful 'Whoso list to hunt' seems to reiterate the poet's initial despair of pursuing his 'deer' but then concludes with a disjunctive addition (signaled by the grammatically extra-logical 'And') both presuming an arresting new level of visual proximity and eventually introducing a third specified person:

Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
 As well as I, may spend his time in vain.
 And graven with diamonds in letters plain
 There is written, her fair neck round about,
Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
 And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.¹

The hunter hovers close, the grammatical 'I' shifts from himself to the lady, but the lovers are not united. Flitting from the Biblical Latin to imperial possession to the enduring wildness of the deer figuring the beloved lady, the couplet moves away from easy resolution or acceptance, while the poet's direct address to other would-be male lovers is itself aptly displaced by layered citation to more powerful men. Wyatt's biography encourages us to interpret the conclusion as referencing an earthly royal Caesar in Henry, rather than Petrarch's spiritual Lord who synthesizes Christian and classical allusions. The propriety of ownership becomes suspect, self-erasing rather than enabling for the poet-hunter, while the female figure remains paradoxically deceptive—

only *seeming* tame—rather than elevating or edifying. We have come a long way from Dante’s sublime Beatrice.

The uneasiness of this Lordly displacement epitomizes a shift in English sonneteering from the Italian, where the ‘ladder of love’ logic that moved from women to God had been more consonant with religious ideology, and especially with the role of the Madonna. By the time of the great sonnet sequences written during the reign of Henry’s daughter Elizabeth I, the difference of Protestantism as well as a female ruler and an emergent national sensibility led to new dramatic tensions within the sonnet, and new desires and aims for the poetic speaker. With a brash bluntness that dares the reader to challenge him, Sir Philip Sidney, darling of the international humanist intelligentsia but from the Queen’s perspective a Protestant hothead to be sidelined, writes repeatedly in his 100+sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* of his frustration or indifference regarding courtly norms of behavior. He recasts his ‘star-loving’ speaker’s desires as very much an earthbound affair, for all his awareness of its philosophical impropriety:

So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
As fast thy Virtue bends that love to good:
‘But ah,’ Desire still cries, ‘give me some food’.

(sonnet 71; Levin, p. 25)

The conflict between reason and desire, between ‘should’ and ‘want’, would soon become a standard theme-for-variation among the many non-aristocratic poets who would follow in Sidney’s footsteps, a theme capacious enough to embrace political, professional and philosophical as well as erotic desires.

Literally hundreds of poems show the influence of Sidney's aristocratic self-presentation and struggles with amorous subjugation, even as the sonnet moved from courtly manuscript circulation to the emergent world of print publication. Among the generally skeptical 'Idea' poems by Michael Drayton, for example, is an exquisite poem that reverses the tonal shift within Sidney's structure in sonnet 71 while drawing on many of his other techniques (as well as his sometimes jocular distress at male subordination to female power). Beginning with the colloquially pragmatic 'Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part;/Nay I have done, you get no more of me', and moving through an extended personification allegory at love's deathbed, the poem ends by using the English couplet to imagine desire overcoming 'rational' complaisance despite his initial assertion that 'so cleanly I myself can free':

Now if thou wouldst, when all have given him [love] over
From death to life thou mightst him yet recover.

(Hirsch and Boland, p. 91)

Drayton's lively dramatization and present-tense suspense shows how the sonnet could both build upon and depart from the kind of internally focused meditation often associated with lyric, be it Petrarchan or, later, Romantic.

It had been part of Sidney's remarkable achievement that he both excelled within the metrical boundaries and experimented with novel adaptations, such as composing his opening sonnet in alexandrines. Furthermore, he played artfully with the gaps and doubleness allowed by adopting a named persona, Astrophil, who is and is not identifiable with the poet Sidney. In so doing, Sidney (and his followers) helped make the sonnet a more overtly dramatic device: less wonder, then, that it became a resource for

the remarkable playwright who would both mock the courtier-poet by staging sonneteers as foresworn amateurs in *Love's Labour's Lost* and pay him homage by extending the theatrical possibilities for such poems in the more enduringly popular story of star-crossed courtly lovers, *Romeo and Juliet*.

Edmund Spenser, by contrast, preferred directness in using metrical regularity, his biography, and temporal logic as signs of his accord with a Protestant ordered cosmos in his *Amoretti*, pursuing subtler shades of personal distinction. Some would say his continued use of Petrarchan metaphors such as the hunt and devices such as the blazon (cataloguing the beloved's body parts and, arguably, thereby dispersing the threat of her powerful, independent wholeness) marks a male-dominant model of subjectivity; however, as in his epic *Faerie Queene* Spenser also displays an ability to shift his 'subject position' to allow greater mutuality as well as mutability across gender. In Sonnet 75, 'One day I wrote her name upon the strand', he incorporates both nature's physical challenge to his writing and his beloved's vocal criticism of his 'vaine assay/A mortall thing so to immortalize', unusually (*pace* Wyatt's poem above) allowing the female access to language. In this case the woman's perspective occupies the entire second quatrain: while the poet will counter-argue in the sestet for the appropriateness of his praise as a means to 'eternize' her virtues (constructing a Protestant version of a ladder to the afterlife by projecting his writing itself into 'the heavens'), the effect of the dialogue is to allow the final assertion of 'Our love' a credibility and weight that stands in contrast to the projections and self-involvement of many a loving sonneteer (cited from Hirsch and Bolland, p. 84; see also Spenser's remarkable use of syntactic self-subordination in #67).

The Protestant spirituality that allows Spenser to find a rare happy conclusion to his love affair as well as his sonnet sequence, in sacramental marriage, would become a standard device in narrative forms. Most English poets, however, continued to exploit the sonnet's associations with the writing subject's internal contradictions, oxymora, and erotic struggles. Fulke Greville's tortuous *Caelica* sonnets, and more famously Donne's *Holy Sonnets* such as 'Batter my heart, three-personed God' juxtaposed sensory immediacy and delusion with spiritual longing, without the satisfaction of a calm resolution. In Donne's case, the poet assumes a traditionally feminized position as the object of ravishment, and in desiring subjection to God calls attention to the paradox of willing submission inherent in Christianity. The all-male drama here stands in contrast to—or in reflective dialogue with—his 'profane' love poetry addressed to women. Tellingly, the unconventional Donne would rarely write in 14-line sonnet form to his earthly beloveds, nor would most 17th-century writers who followed. Perhaps with the print publication in 1609 of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence—successfully incorporating both an idealized male 'master mistress' and a tormenting 'dark' female beloved and ringing the changes that time and desire could provoke—the worldly love sonnet was perceived by most to have run its course.

It had not, of course. Nourished by changes in the conception of loving behavior and the circumstances surrounding it, as well as assumptions about what the subject might say and be, there were many generations of love sonnets still to be written. One direction was signaled by the man who would also initiate a whole new universe of possibilities through deployment of a public political voice in the sonnet form: John Milton. His lyrics, like his epic writing, serve both as a culmination of the Renaissance

and a beacon of a new republican self, supremely confident of the right to voice its particular situation directly. ‘Methought I saw my late espoused saint’ builds on the more affectionate, wistful tonalities in Spenser and Shakespeare, using the sonnet form to memorialize his dead wife. Milton typically incorporates classical Greek mythology and Hebraic religious reference into his octave’s Christian dream vision of her return, then breaks through with the stark simplicity of an entirely monosyllabic final line to mimic his harsh, heart-breaking awakening to both his physical blindness and love’s loss: ‘I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night’.

Two centuries later, American Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s sonnet ‘The Cross of Snow’ would similarly capture the poignance of a wife’s early death, this time by fire, and her haunting ‘white’ soul in the night. However, the difference of his titular allusion to the natural landscape of a ‘sun-defying’ ‘mountain in the distant West’ captures both national difference and one of the most notable additions of the intervening Romantic movement: the first-person subject’s explicit desire for correspondence with and through Nature. To have such a desire, of course, presupposes the recognition of distance or lack—directly addressed in sonnets such as Keats’s ‘Bright Star’ or Mary Locke’s ‘I hate the Spring in parti-colored vest’. Certainly earlier poets had recognized the poetic potential of disrupted similitude between the self and the elements (as in the Earl of Surrey’s ‘The soote season’, for example), and Shakespeare was hardly alone as a lover ‘all in war with time’ and thus the natural order of mortal being. But the new attention accorded to the natural landscape as itself an object of desire would inspire a wide range of sonnets, including some valuing mutability *per se* as well as the capacity of sensory associations to evoke memories (see Wordsworth’s ‘The River Duddon, A Series of

Sonnets’ or Coleridge’s ‘To the River Otter’); the aesthetics of the sublime, recognizing the power of time and nature to dwarf human values and achievements, would prompt new versions of paradox in compact masterpieces such as Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ or Horace Smith’s lesser known poem of the same name. Like the love sonnet, the nature sonnet lives on, in verbally extravagant observations such as Amy Clampitt’s ‘The Comorant in its Element’ and a goodly number of post-Romantic poems that simultaneously shame and inspire the writer by comparison, such as Richard Wilbur’s ‘Praise in Summer’, or Robinson Jeffers’s ‘Love the Wild Swan’.

Romanticism’s increased attention to the natural world accorded greater importance to sensory cultivation and types of sensibility at least theoretically accessible to all. While the print revolution had enlarged the circulation of texts, and 17th-century Britain’s political upheavals catalyzed what were already increasing numbers of those who felt entitled to self-expression, the combination of democratic impulses with the sonnet form truly came of age in the wake of the French Revolution. Working class poets such as John Clare and women struggling to make a living such as Charlotte Smith found a way to participate in what was now a substantial poetic tradition, but one that did not require a classical education or extensive allusiveness to arcane knowledge. At the same time, a gendered ‘outsider’ such as Anna Seward used the Petrarchan rather than English form to make a case for her own learnedness and metrical mastery (in her *Original Sonnets*, 1799).

Moreover, many sonnets followed in the alternative public rhetorical tradition of Milton’s ‘To the Lord General Cromwell, May 1652’ and ‘On the Late Massacre in Piedmont’ to address contemporary outrages and praise martyrs of conscience, as would

Wordsworth's 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture' (the imprisoned leader of the Haitian slave revolt) or Shelley's 'England in 1819'. The latter poem's righteous anger follows in the path of Wordsworth's direct address to Milton in 'London, 1802', even as Shelley and other younger Romantics felt betrayed by Wordsworth's retreat from progressive politics. In an era when individualized ode stanzas and 'organic' forms accorded with a Rousseauian desire to venerate natural man, the sonnet now might be seen as more constraining than in its paradoxical past, and yet that very formality could be turned to advantage as a public voice with some definitiveness. Shelley exploits the potential to build one grammatical sentence across the sonnet's entire length to pile up a monstrous weight of appositives testifying to England's corruption from the top ('An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king') right through to 'A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field' and back around to the government, only to pronounce them 'graves' and conclude with the possibility of release through resurrection-as-revolution ('from which a glorious Phantom may/Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day'; Levin, p. 104). Vive la Révolution.

In addition to the overt connections between many Romantic poets and progressive, even revolutionary, thinking that embraced more rights for women, the age-old gendering of Mother Nature suggested a symbolic feminine importance. However, as feminist critics such as Margaret Homans have delineated, such associations of nature with the maternal implied a poetic narrative in which the (male) poet finds his voice by distancing himself from the mute, unlearned feminine. Even Wordsworth's beloved sister Dorothy is positioned in his work as closer to unreflective nature, the sweet naïf whom the poet subsumes and transcends precisely through his meditative artistry. The most

famous example of this dynamic occurs in ‘Tintern Abbey’, but it appears in his sonnets as well. Furthermore, the sublime elements of nature are often gendered male and associated with a traditional patriarchal deity, distinct from the picturesque or beautiful feminized attributes. In ‘It is a beauteous evening, calm and free’, for example, ‘the mighty Being’ is masculine, ‘his eternal motion’ making ‘A sound like thunder—everlastingly’, whereas the divinity of Wordsworth’s female addressee is unconscious:

Dear Child! Dear Girl! That walkest with me here,
If thou appear’st untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine;

concluding with the comfort of ‘God being with thee when we know it not’ (Levin, p. 91). She may be no less divine, but she certainly lacks the kind of discursive awareness that a verbal artist needs.

A gender gap of another sort becomes the stuff of sonneteering in George Meredith’s sequence ‘Modern Love’, its title announcing its ironic difference. Far from the saintly lost wives of Milton and Longfellow, here the poet charts the unhappy dissolution of a bourgeois marriage using the established tradition of paradox in a disturbingly fresh way. In Victorian England, ‘subjectivity’ has become not only the perspective of the poet but the prisonhouse from which he cannot escape, nor can his sophisticated perception of parallelisms between their mental states reanimate their domestic bond as anything other than a spectral mockery.

The sequence opens with a sadly intimate bedroom scene described with a novelist’s third-person combination of detachment and direct knowledge:

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes;

That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
 The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
 Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
 And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
 Dreadfully venomous to him.

(sonnet I; Levin, p. 130)

Gradually moving from the starkly descriptive to the figurative, Meredith also reveals this as a marriage horrifically soured—and his own. The traditional love sonneteer's conflicting internal emotions are now transformed to dramatize the tension between bourgeois propriety and private suffering, often shifting to a cold, sardonic key that is therefore all the more haunting:

At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.
 Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
 The Topic over intellectual deeps
 In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.

Finding a temporary bond of fellowship and admiration in their false performance of domestic bliss, he becomes part of a marital 'we' who 'waken envy of our happy lot' before cutting through in the final turn, the work of what is often formally called the sonnet's volta:

Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.
 Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine.

(sonnet XVII; *ibid*)

So much for the angel of the house, or domesticity as a refuge from the depersonalized alienation of the masculine Industrial Age workplace.

Be the arena domestic, societal, or cosmic, from the mid-nineteenth century onward the sonnet became a form in which skepticism and fear increasingly contested modern notions of progress and certainty. Some poets of course continued to capture the confident, normative, or idealized public subject in sonnet form: notable examples include Robert Browning's 'Why I Am A Liberal', Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' ('If I should die, think only this of me;/That there's some corner of a foreign field/ That is for ever England') and Emma Lazarus's 'The New Colossus', which concludes with the oft-quoted lines now inscribed upon the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. In a related vein, the sprung rhymes of Gerard Manley Hopkins' radically experimental sonnets testify as much to his 'dare-gale' soaring faith ('how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing/ In his ecstasy!') as to his bouts of soul-rending spiritual doubt ('cliffs of fall/Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed'). But from Edgar Allan Poe's 'To Science' to Thomas Hardy's 'We are Getting to the End', the sense of a hostile modernity increasingly dwarfed the poetic subject. The voice of patriotism was as likely to be parodied (see, e.g., e. e. cummings's 'next to god America i') as it was to be upheld. By the time Robert Frost produced 'Design', the prospect of a metaphysical plan could 'appall' just as surely as does the sensation of emptiness enveloping the lonely wanderer in his hauntingly beautiful 'I have been one acquainted with the night'.

The preponderance of twentieth-century sonneteering faced the erosion of faith and the rejection of universals head on. Nowhere was this more shatteringly evident than

in the poetry produced by World War I soldiers Siegfried Sassoon and especially Wilfred Owen—himself killed on the battlefield, with numbing irony, after the official declaration of the Armistice. Sonnets such as Sassoon’s ‘On Passing the New Menin Gate’ typify their sense of betrayal and outrage. The Great War demonstrated to many the failure of Europe’s claims to ‘advanced civilization’, as technological progress became a means of mass slaughter, the quintessentially perverse use of scientific knowledge being the military deployment of chemical gas. In his stunning double sonnet ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, Owen vividly recaptures the horror of experiencing a gas attack as well as the unheroic desperation of war’s routine that precedes it, using shifting perspectives and pronouns to construct a complex rhetorical argument. Beginning as part of the soldierly collective as ‘we cursed through sludge’, and ‘All went lame; all blind’, the poet’s ‘I’ emerges through separation at precisely the moment (and in the 14th line) when he can do nothing but witness the ‘someone’ who, amidst an ‘ecstasy of fumbling’ does not get his mask on in time:

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, and drowning.

Building on the horrible irony of the subject’s emergence through impotence and isolation, he then turns to address directly the ‘you’ who does not share his dreams and memories, one with whom he posits only a hypothetical bond which allows the climactic expression of an all-embracing political anger and the poem’s titular irony:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

(Levin, p. 192)

In recasting the Latin praise of dying for one's country as 'the old Lie', Owen addresses not only the 'friend' who is not his friend but also a masculine poetic tradition that does not capture his experience, for the classical line derives from Horace's Odes. His 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' similarly evokes familiar sonnet techniques (the blazon become a litany of mourning) and echoes ('shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells' rather than Shakespeare's merely belated 'bare, ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang') to capture the cost of war. He again mixes these literary gestures with a precisely observant eye for physical detail—as in the gentle sadness of the sonnet's and the day's conclusion, in the home of the dead soldier's loved ones: 'And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds'. For this male subject, the past—communal and poetic—is a lost world.

Although this brief history has focused primarily on the dominant Anglo-American tradition (and appropriately so, given the audience for this volume and the importance of reading poetry in the original language), the sonnet developed rich traditions in other tongues as well, producing such innovators and masters as Alexander

Pushkin in Russian, Baudelaire and Mallarmé in French, Rainer Maria Rilke in German, and, later, Pablo Neruda in (Chilean) Spanish. By the twentieth century, the European internationalism of the sonnet's first centuries expanded to embrace the globe, with imperial traces and diasporic histories generating creative hybrids across political boundaries.

Among the more audacious examples of this new cosmopolitanism is Indian-born Vikram Seth's 'novel in verse' about California yuppies in the early 1980s, made up (entirely, including acknowledgements, dedication, contents and author's note) of tetrameter sonnets modeled on 'Pushkin's masterpiece/In Johnston's luminous translation:/ *Eugene Onegin*' (5.5; Seth, p. 102). The nineteenth-century Russian's hybrid rhyme scheme (ababccddeffegg) allows it to function like either the Italian sonnet's 8-6 or the English 4-4-4-2 model, depending on where the poet chooses his pauses and turns; Vladimir Nabokov compared its movement to 'that of a painted ball: you see the pattern clearly at the beginning and at the end of its movement, but in mid-spin all you get is a colorful blur' (Levin, p. 344). This variety and unpredictability is well suited to lengthy narrative but also to the type of story Seth chooses to tell: of a modern world in which choices and random chance destabilize lyric's putative assertion of a stable subject.

Asserting the value of using the 'dusty bread molds of Onegin/ In the brave bakery of Reagan', Seth mixes such flippant couplets with serious psychologizing, social satire, and musings both philosophical and aesthetic. The San Francisco Bay area and a Silicon Valley ex-workaholic named John provide the unlikely starting place for his epic-novel vision (complete with invocations of both the muse and Dear Reader): Seth gradually shifts and enlarges the perspective to embrace those with East Asian, African-

American and Midwestern backgrounds, with straight and gay and bisexual orientations. As to his line length, he declares his reason for distress at the degenerated fate of the four-foot line in English in a sestet (with a nod to Marvell's tetrameter masterpiece of *carpe diem* mannerism 'To his coy mistress', not in sonnet form):

But why take all this quite so badly?

I would not, had I world and time

To wait for reason, rhythm, rhyme

To reassert themselves, but sadly

The time is not remote when I

Will not be here to wait. That's why.

(5.4; Seth, p. 102)

With mortality at his back, the poet returns to the work of his poetic fiction, reclaiming that which has been viewed by many as (artistically or socially) degenerate, trivial, or out of fashion. In an America where, as in W.B. Yeats's iconic sonnet of modernist entropy 'The Second Coming', 'the center cannot hold', Seth captures the double potential of the sonnet to dramatize subjective contradictions and to place those individual struggles within a long, allusive history that can either dwarf or enlarge them. Gesturing at everything from pop jingles and Arnold Schwarzenegger back to both Wyatt and Astrophil-like doggerel ('Thus the young yahoos coexist/ With whoso list to list to Liszt' [13.32]), Seth provides a brave new world of possibilities, a cosmopolitan polyglot style that befits the variety of his characters' sexualities, desires, and disappointments. The comic associations of the tetrameter couplet allow the admittedly quotidian nature of their emotional traumas, careerist and family priorities, and even a shattering premature death,

to resonate without maudlin or disproportionate importance: he balances everyday losses as well as cosmic and political rudderlessness with a sense of formal order and artistic control.

In Seth's novel, the once courtly, putatively patriarchal sonnet has become the vehicle for an overtly democratic, non-sexist vision of the late twentieth century. Nor is he alone in finding the sonnet a capacious vehicle for progressive, experimental expression. Yet given the ironies briefly noted earlier regarding the place of the feminine in Romantic poetry, as well as the sonnet's deep involvement with culturally formative metaphors such as the hunt, the woman as animal or a collection of body parts, and models of masculinist sublimation ranging from Catholicism to Freud, this enduring love affair with the sonnet form may continue to surprise. To understand better how and why this happened requires looking back again, somewhat more selectively, at the form's history—this time, with a difference.

The Difference of Gender

The history of the sonnet provides an excellent entrée into the world of gender studies as a contemporary discipline, and conversely that field's methodology has transformed the history of the poetic form. From the start focusing on heterosexual desire as a destabilizing force within a world of gendered hierarchy, the early sonnet both attended to women and presumed identification with a male subject. What would happen if viewed with an eye to female subjectivity, or with different forms of desire in mind? The picture that emerges includes a set of complications and competing narratives that help explain both the form's endurance and the variety of approaches and priorities that

have enriched the domain of gender analysis. Indeed, the effects of this reconsideration have now become so enmeshed in the literary field that even my attempt at a ‘straight’ history here bears traces of what feminist analysis has recently revealed. Nevertheless, if gender is made the central category of analysis, the voices absent above radically revise the story.

Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), among the most important foundational texts for feminist literary analysis, suggested many of the questions and approaches that would later be elaborated within academic discourse. At the same time, the fact that Woolf does not discuss the sonnet form in her wide-ranging essay indicates just how much our account of female authorship and poetics has been transformed by subsequent scholarship. Granting that she cited selectively to build an argument about the historical exclusion of women from access to privileges including self-expression and literacy, it is less her agenda than the normative literary history of her day that led her to imagine that the earliest notable female writers appeared only in the mid-17th century, after the first flourishing of English Renaissance sonneteering. We now think otherwise.

The first stage of analysis with the rise of academic feminist inquiry during the 1970s and 1980s involved looking for the ‘missing women’ who had fallen from, or never been included in, the canon of literary study, as well as bringing to consciousness the male biases of the seemingly ‘universal’ poetic speaker. Anthologies such as Betty Travitsky’s *The Paradise of Women*, Katherina M. Wilson’s *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* and Germaine Greer *et al*’s *Kissing the Rod*, and archival efforts that culminated in online resources such as the Brown Women Writers Project, revealed that there had been numerous female sonneteers, many of whom had written

more than a few poems. Consequent analysis of these poems uncovered instances both of equality (in craft and wit) and difference (in topics, emphases, and modes of circulation).

Take a particularly striking example from the reign of King James I: Lady Mary Wroth, unnamed by Woolf, wrote an epic romance, closet drama—and a sonnet sequence to rival in length that of her uncle Sir Philip Sidney, while reversing his gendered address. Selections from *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* are now a part of standard 21st-century poetry anthologies. Wroth had long appeared in such verse collections—not, however, as the subject but rather as the object of poetic address by Ben Jonson, and as a patron of the arts like Lucy, Countess of Bedford. Despite the rarity of a sonnet in Jonson's poetic corpus and of his explicit praise of her writing, the authorial dimension of his tribute was long dismissed as mere flattery, perhaps in part attributable to Jonson's light touch in using what are known as 'feminine rhymes' in the opening quatrains:

I that have been a lover, and could shew it,
 Though not in these, in rithmes not wholly dumb,
 Since I exscribe your sonnets, am become
 A better lover, and much better poet.
 Nor is my Muse or I ashamed to owe it
 To those true numerous graces...

(Levin, p. 64)

Yet Wroth's own poetry was far from light and gay, instead emphasizing the suffering and passivity in great measure demanded by her sex within a social order that privileged activity as masculine. Drawing on a common trope punning on leaves (of trees, of books), she presents herself as 'distressed' among 'leafless naked bodies' of trees with

‘dead leaves’ (P22, Roberts), conflating in a sorrowful parody the conventional sonneteer catalog of the female body and the inadequacy of literary imitation. Calling attention to herself as a site of pity, darkness, and limited agency, she dramatizes female subjectivity as the position of comparative powerlessness and passivity, awaiting her errant but sunny male beloved (see Henderson 1997). Tellingly, Wroth takes a particular interest in the oxymoronic juxtaposition of presence and absence, an opposition found as well in Sidney and Shakespeare and crucial to much postmodern (especially deconstructionist) reading—but her female subject usually remains in the shadows, aligned with darkness and pain.

Arguably Wroth is consciously illustrating the cultural situation of the female writer even in so privileged a family as the Sidneys, in which her father Robert as well as more famous uncle had composed sonnet sequences and she had the gendered precedent of an aunt Mary who wrote psalms and translated plays. Natasha Distiller has recently reminded us that Wroth’s gender conspires against seeing her (as she claims Christopher Warley and others have) as aligned simply with conservative class distinctions; Distiller returns our attention to Wroth’s exceptional desire to publish, which prompted others (notably one Lord Denny) to view her as ‘a hermaphrodite and a monster’. Denny, whose own ox had been gored by her allegorized topicality in the romance *Urania* (1621) to which her sonnet sequence was appended, no doubt had his allies in so judging Wroth. Nevertheless, Ben Jonson was not alone in indicating that some viewed her ‘public speaking’ more positively—including those who had nothing to gain from her patronage, such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury. In a poem that may attest as well to the surprising sexual latitude within some Jacobean circles, he playfully hails Wroth’s maternity of two

children out of wedlock (by her cousin William Herbert) alongside her poetic making: she ‘can, as everybody knows,/ Add to those feet fine dainty toes’ (Roberts 1983, p. 26). Even if advantaged by her aristocratic birth, Wroth did defy conventions repeatedly in her life, and in her poetry she shows a consciousness of gendered assumptions that indicates serious scrutiny, if not explicit critique of masculine norms and dichotomies.

To discuss Wroth’s poetry in terms of the difference encouraged by her gendered subjectivity is to engage in what Elaine Showalter dubbed gynocritics, another fundamental approach within 1980s feminist criticism. The value of this technique has not faded any more than has the archival recovery of female writers, although the difficulties of attributing the cause for particular techniques or emphases to gender became obvious as more texts became available: the field soon recognized the varieties of female experiences, prompted by analysis of the intersections between gender and other categories such as class, race, period, sexuality, and region. Moreover, more sophisticated application of linguistic, literary, and social theory unsettled any easy attribution of ‘voice’ to poetic speaker, of verbal stance to biographical subject. To take a Victorian example: even if Robert Browning would call Elizabeth Barrett Browning ‘his little Portuguese’, her ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ were not in fact translations, nor could their rhetoric be translated back into a literal portrait of their marriage without denying layers of craft, convention and indeterminacy. Despite the understandable desire to recover the lost experiences of ‘real’ women (and other socially disadvantaged groups), then, such poets were no more easily equated with the lyric ‘I’ than had been Sidney with Astrophil—and, given cultural restraints on their public speaking and the habits of subterfuge thereby encouraged, often far less so.

Such skepticism about the relationships between authorial subjectivity and poetic voice accorded with practices of literary criticism in the late 20th century, and also allowed the third formative strand of gender studies—critique of masculine normativity—to become more suggestive than just clichés about Dead White Men. Nuanced analyses of Renaissance sonnets by Nancy Vickers helped call attention both to implicit sexism in what had previously seemed apolitical artistic devices (such as the blazon of female beauty or the hunt for love referenced earlier). Vickers showed how the myth of Actaeon and Diana, with its rending or *sparagmos* of the young man who unwittingly gazed upon a goddess, enacted a gendered role reversal that revealed the threat implicit within the quotidian cataloguing of female beauty (the eyes, the lips, the breasts) by the male poet. More recently, Judith Haber has argued that the involvement of lyric in the erotic narrative of *Romeo and Juliet*, leading to consummation as death, creates a master-narrative that other dramatists interested in subjectivity had to twist and bend if they wished to create a productive rather than fatal space involving female desire. Whether this account fully credits the complexity of Shakespeare’s love story or not, it does capture the trajectory of the sonnet form within Romeo’s tragedy, as (following the fatalistic prologue sonnet) he moves from Petrarchan vacuity to witty exchange in the “pilgrim sonnet” at Capulet’s ball—but finally to the climactic blazon over Juliet’s seemingly dead body before his suicide.

The three initial strands of feminist criticism described above have in combination provided a rich repertoire for use in analyzing the sonnet, and as a result the story of the sonnet has been altered. The first Elizabethan sonnet sequence used to be a given, Thomas Watson’s *Hekatompathia*; now some say Anne Lok’s holy sonnets of the 1560s

should be the origin, moreover preceding John Donne in that religious subgenre—and they would also note the New World innovations of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in the later 17th century, in Mexico. Tracing the writing of Sor Juana’s contemporary noblewomen in England led to similar complexity, in that ‘progressive’ gendered assertion seemed to cohabit with conservative royalist politics. One way to view this was, as Catherine Gallagher put it, to see the ‘roi absolu’ providing a precedent for the ‘moi absolu’, the self as sovereign. More recently, analyses of republican and commonwealth women writers have led to some questions about the very presumption that privileged classes led the way in constructing a female poetic canon. Notwithstanding these debates within the early modern field, the juxtaposition of class and sex clarified that literary history was neither exhausted nor definitive. Reviewing our narratives of artistic production through the lens of gender analysis radically altered assumptions, and perforce led to epistemological as well as historicist revisionism. This presented a thoroughgoing challenge to traditional critical practice, upending presumptions about what was known and valued in ways that made space for new voices, new conceptions of authorial success, and new motivations to read poetry.

Virginia Woolf began her account of female writers with Margaret Cavendish as an oddity, among the first great ladies to express themselves however awkwardly. Now, by contrast, we may read Cavendish’s sonnets on atoms as remarkable contributions at the beginning of the scientific revolution (from which the gendered protocols of her day attempted to exclude her, as Woolf had duly noted). Where we first saw the English Romantic poets as a great men’s club of six, and then noted the objectification or symbolization of the female in Nature, now Charlotte Smith, Anna Seward, and Mary

Robinson are all read alongside and in dialogue or alliance with the former masculine canon. And whereas *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* once provided a sentimental frame for reading the sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, now we can see that ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways’ is but one of the many remarkable voices of a ‘Victorian Sappho’: classicist, feminist epic romancer, and formally adept sonneteer.²

The gendered change of perspective also prompted another look at poets once deemed odd, quaint, or passé—a fate no doubt shared by many male poets, but befalling exceptional women writers at an alarming rate. Christina Rossetti, for instance: while it could hardly be denied that the author of ‘After Death’ and ‘Dead Before Death’ has a morbid streak, the meditative beauty and craft of her haunting sonnets has only recently been recaptured. Revealing the many layers of reflection involved in portraiture (in this case, seemingly her brother Dante Gabriel’s painting of his ill-fated wife, Elizabeth Siddal), she wonderfully triangulates the gaze as well as the subject ‘In an Artist’s Studio’:

One face looks out from all his canvasses,
 One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
 We found her hidden just behind those screens,
 That mirror gave back all her loveliness.

His obsessive ‘selfsame’ mirroring contrasts with her ‘hidden’ self ‘behind those screens’, and the dynamic grows more disturbing as ‘every canvas means/The same one meaning’. ‘He feeds upon her face by day and night,/ And she with true kind eyes looks back on him’, perceives the witnessing writer (who had also served as a model to Dante but here becomes the mediating ‘third term’, a positionality absent in earlier poetic

meditations such as Marvell's "The Gallery"). The sad cost of artistic objectification and time's passage comes to a climax in the final couplet, though with a delicacy and apparent pity for all involved that dwarfs judgmental conclusions:

Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;

Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

(Hirsch and Boland, p. 167)

'Lizzie' died young, of a drug overdose, but the poem's poignancy is not reliant upon or confined to one biographical relationship. Formally, Rossetti's sonnet resembles Elizabeth Cobbold's *Sonnets of Laura* a half century earlier, which re-imagined the original Petrarchan beloved's perspective using third-person description, but the stark yearning here remains far more broadly resonant—almost anticipating Woolf's argument about women serving as looking-glasses reflecting men's idealized selves.

It would take a 'flapper' to turn the tables, and while Edna St. Vincent Millay was far more than that, she did break through the conventions inhibiting female expressions of sexual desire with modernist bravado:

I, being born a woman and distressed

By all the needs and notions of my kind,

Am urged by your propinquity to find

Your person fair...

Not only would Millay take the position of the active desirer, she would also frankly decouple sex from love and sentimentality:

...let me make it plain:

I find this frenzy insufficient reason

For conversation when we meet again.

(Levin, p. 186)

Ouch. Although more formally experimental modernists might disdain Millay's use of the sonnet (as well as her popularity), one must imagine that just as many male readers were startled if not put off by this unconventional frankness.

Millay would likewise refuse the 'one and only' romance of the Petrarchan idealist, admitting 'What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,/ I have forgotten...' Was this the beginning of what it truly meant to speak freely as a woman, as Natasha Distiller (working in a Lacanian feminist frame) asserts? Certainly Millay addresses sexuality in a way rarely seen, with the possible exception of some of Aphra Behn's racier Restoration lyrics—though Millay also has her melancholy inheritances, resembling Lady Mary Wroth when she asserts, 'Night is my sister' and waxes wistful for her fading youth. Millay's is a self-consciously gendered performance of self-assertion, full of memorable declarations such as 'I will put Chaos into fourteen lines/ And keep him there' and 'I drink—and live—what has destroyed some men'. What indubitably had changed between the 17th and 20th centuries, however, was the size of a public audience willing and eager to hear this bold a female subject. Comparing herself to a cat in heat, Millay challenged and dared successfully, emerging as a best-selling poet and making the sonnet fit for a 'fast' era, a jazz generation.

But Millay did not confine her attention to the love sonnet alone: she also composed an elegiac sequence capturing an unhappy rural couple's estrangement (no doubt drawing on her own upbringing in Maine), and an apocalyptically inflected *Epitaph for the Race of Man*. She wrote a tribute 'To Inez Mulholland', her teacher and

onetime beloved, and (along with Louise Bogan among others) enlarged the spectrum of female sexuality to embrace same-sex desire. In any number of ways, then, Millay played an important role in further ‘queering’ the sonnet, challenging its still-conventional masculine heterosexual subjectivity and thereby making it new—and making it the kind of flexible instrument that would later appeal to Vikram Seth and others wishing to give voice to a range of once-marginalized poetic subjects.

Most overtly, Millay provided a precedent for other women to use the sonnet sequence to capture new angles on female desire and on new forms of American experience. Julia Alvarez, for example, would choose the form to tell, in 33 and later in 44, what it felt like to be a bilingual Latina immigrant at those resonant ages. These are sonnets by and for women, rather than the blossoming youths of *carpe diem* lyrics and suicide pacts. And by the turn of the millennium, such voices could be heard as authoritative, even etched in stone. At the New York Public Library’s poetry walk, the path quotes Alvarez’s line 14 assertion: ‘Who touches this poem touches a woman’. Of course, time is and is not a forward march, and the triumphalism of concluding with Alvarez’s sonnet belies the mixed messages and doubts her poems express, especially for one caught within and between multiple cultural locations. But then, the subject of the sonnet has always been paradoxical.

Endless Monuments

In the space of this essay it has not been possible to do justice to the theorists as well as practitioners who helped describe, but also shape, new directions for the sonnet. From Roman Jakobson to Joel Fineman to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the sonnet has

provided a fruitful object for theorizing, and serious students of the form (and literary studies more generally) would do well to read their influential analyses. Summary paraphrase cannot do justice to many of these readings. For example, Fineman's work melds awareness of the classical tradition with deep immersion in Lacanian psychoanalysis: he begins with the recognition that Renaissance love lyrics were categorized as 'epideictic' rhetoric focused on praise or blame in the present tense, and then considers how Shakespeare complicates both that motif and the congruence between the poet's gaze and poetic object in order to create a shiftily modern verbal subject of analysis. But this description does not capture the nuanced readings (nor the dense prose) that continue to make his criticism vital. Sedgwick's radical reconsideration of the sonnet as a form *Between Men* opened up new horizons of political interpretation and helped found queer studies, not as another form of identity politics but as an inclusive, critical, dynamic understanding of verbal and embodied relationships, a way of reading that led in unexpected directions and allowed the personal to become fluidly transformative without losing its bite.

The sonnet was, for these theorists as it has become for modern poets, a supremely social form, the litany of great sonneteers having constructed a tradition that straddles lyric, drama, and narrative, and allows each generation to remake it in their own image, with their own versions of gender, their own subjectivities. Whereas other chapters in this volume will explore the particular sensibilities in greater depth within an age, an equally important way to think about the sonnet is across time, comparing and contrasting the possibilities of a particular poetic form, vocabulary and set of techniques as they redound across centuries. Be it Milton lauding Shakespeare, Wordsworth

invoking Milton, or John Berryman recalling Sidney, the conversation across generations now allows what began as a radically internalized form to create communities of sense and sensibility, to be both individualized and in dialogue, to tear down and reconstruct identities. From 14 lines to infinity: the sonnet carries on.

¹ Throughout I cite modern spelling and standard anthologies as much as possible, for ease of access and pithiness of citation: here, see Hirsch and Boland, p. 79. The reader should be aware, however, of the interpretive role of the editor and the effects of regularization on early modern writers' spelling, punctuation, and metrics.

² I borrow the phrase from Yopie Prins' deeply learned study of 19th-century women poets.

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