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THE DISCOURSE OF DESIRE IN VICTORIAN POETRY

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of

Ph.D.  
in  
English

at Massey University, Palmerston North,  
New Zealand.

Sarah Lee Frost

2004



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**Candidate's Name:** Sarah Frost

**Signature:** 

**Date:** 3.12.03

**Supervisor's Name:** E.W.Slinn

**Signature:** 

**Date:** 3.12.03



3 December, 2003

### SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that the research carried out for the Doctoral thesis entitled "The Discourse of Desire in Victorian Poetry" was done by Sarah Frost in the School of English and Media studies, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. The thesis material has not been used in part or in whole for any other qualification, and I confirm that the candidate has pursued the course of study in accordance with the requirements of the Massey University regulations.

Professor E. Warwick Slinn





### CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that the research carried out for my Doctoral thesis entitled "Discourse of Desire in Victorian Poetry" in the School of English and Media Studies, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand is my own work and that the thesis material has not been used in part or in whole for any other qualification.

**Candidate's Name** Sarah Frost

**Signature** 

**Date** 3.12.03

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the representation of desire in seven Victorian poems: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese; Coventry Patmore's The Angel in the House; Augusta Webster's Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet Sequence; Arthur Hugh Clough's Amours de Voyage; Alfred Tennyson's Idylls of the King; Robert Browning's Fifine at the Fair; and George Meredith's Modern Love. It focuses on desiring subjects, objects of desire, the pursuit of desires and the question of desire and its satisfaction.

Traditionally, Victorian love poetry has been schematised as a "poetry of relationships", and located within a matrix of conflict between duty and desire. This thesis argues that an enriched conception of desire, drawn from a range of theories that have been developing over recent years, can, when brought to bear on Victorian poetry, disclose new insights into and common interests between these poems that have not been apparent within the traditional interpretative matrices.

The picture of Victorian desire that emerges from this exploration is one of desire expressed in acts of self-creation and self-articulation. Affinities between the expressive, dramatic, and narrative poetry of the period appear. New tones, ironic, rueful, and humorous, are audible alongside the restrained and sincere avowals that have been argued to constitute the discourse of Victorian lovers. Desires are self-consciously pursued and performed within a context in which self-interest — both interest in self and according to that self's interests — predominates.

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## NOTE ON EDITIONS USED

The following editions of the poems have been used unless otherwise noted:

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. Sonnets from the Portuguese. 1850. In The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ed. Karen Hill. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1994.

Browning, Robert. Fifine at the Fair. 1872. In Robert Browning: The Poems. Ed. John Pettigrew. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.

Clough, Arthur Hugh. Amours de Voyage. 1858. In Clough: Selected Poems. Ed. J. P. Phelan. London: Longman, 1995.

Meredith, George. Modern Love. 1862. In The Poems of George Meredith. Ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett. Vol. 1. New Haven: Yale UP, 1978.

Patmore, Coventry. The Angel in the House. 1862. In The Poems of Coventry Patmore. Ed. Frederick Page. London: Oxford UP, 1949.

Tennyson, Alfred. Idylls of the King. 1886. In The Poems of Tennyson. Ed. Christopher Ricks. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 3 vols. Harlow: Longman, 1987.

Webster, Augusta. Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence. 1895. Introd. William Michael Rossetti. Mother and Daughter (1895): (a machine-readable transcription). Ed. Tara Wright and Perry Willett. Online. Victorian Women Writers Project. 1 June 2000. Available <http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/vwwp-links.html>.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION: VICTORIAN POETRY OF DESIRE

*Language is indeed a machine that continually amplifies the emotions.*

Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary

*(Mr Casaubon) determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and perhaps was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was . . . and he concluded that the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion.*

George Eliot, Middlemarch

*I talk, then, now and to all eternity about you with myself, about the most interesting subject with the most interesting man.*

Søren Kierkegaard, "Diary of the Seducer."

## I

In The Central Self (1968) Patricia Ball said that Romantic poets were "very ready to observe the phenomenon of the creating self . . . [and to take up the] variant possibilities of creative power" (5); she went on to discuss the Romantic ideal of "self-realization by way of the data of experience" (7). However, she says, during the Victorian period "close grappling with the problems of creative integrity in a context of intense psychological exploration dwindles to a naïve desire for the poet to be sincere" (154). The result, she says (with a few exceptions including Browning, Arnold and some of Tennyson), was a "trend to flabbiness" (156) such that the "implications [of emotion] shrank to meet a domestic and conservative estimate of what constitutes human feeling and its permissible range" (157). Ball's later book, The Heart's Events, in which she first described Victorian love poetry as "the poetry of relationships" (1976 1), refocused this argument specifically on love poetry.

In fact, as the three epigraphs to this chapter illustrate, during the post-

Romantic period of the mid to late nineteenth century there was indeed a great deal of self-examination, with a particularly sharp focus on the desiring subject and the relation of desire to creativity, that spanned not only English literature, but also European, and not only the novel, but also poetry, as this study shall show. But why should this fact surprise us, when, after all, in Matthew Arnold's celebrated phrase, the nineteenth century was the age of the "dialogue of the mind with itself" (1853, in Arnold 1993 115)? For a start, I would suggest, it is because, following Ball, we have come to characterise Victorian love poetry as a "poetry of relationships", and, moreover, as a poetry of a very specific and limited sphere of relationships. For instance, in his recent study, Supreme Attachments (1998), Kerry McSweeney acknowledges Ball's formulation, and also a similar point made by Isobel Armstrong in 1993, and proposes that a distinguishing feature "of Victorian love poetry follow[s] from the emphasis on relationships: the principal site — present or prospective — of love relationships is marriage" (8). A brief glance through the titles listed in the notes to this chapter reiterates the widespread critical emphasis on marriage in the poetry.<sup>1</sup>

However, in The Heart's Events (1976), Ball says that "the requirements for a profound emotional experience, as the Victorian poets see them, are simply two people moved by each other" (3); she adds later, in a discussion of Amours de Voyage, that "interaction with other people and unpredictable circumstance are seen as the norm of significant personal experience" (54). It appears, in view of these comments, that Ball was using the term "relationship" very loosely, to characterise any form or degree of interpersonal interaction, including "abortive" (55) and imagined relationships, in which case it is clear that *all* love poetry, which necessarily involves a relation between two (or more) people, is the poetry of relationships. Ball's "dramatic actuality of a relationship" (1), itself a suggestive phrase, turns out to involve more drama and less actuality than it has been taken to mean.<sup>2</sup>

While Ball's comment was intended to demarcate between the thematic concerns of Romantic poetry (and to a lesser extent courtly love poetry) and Victorian poetry, her demarcation is mirrored in the splitting of Victorian poetry into two critical 'fields': relationship poetry (narrative poetry concerned with marriage) and psychological poetry (particularly monologues concerned with the dramatisation of identity). It is my view that the heuristic construct "the Victorian poetry of desire" can span both of these fields, disclosing both what is psychological or intra-subjective in relationship poetry, and what is interpersonal in psychological poetry, and thereby produce new insights into the poetry. At the same time, the poetry of desire is not necessarily love poetry. S. H. Clark (1994) argues that the term 'love poetry' invokes certain assumptions: "it idealises, celebrates, deals in elevated but universal human emotions" (6).<sup>3</sup> Conversely, love poetry excludes "cruelty, denigration, repulsion [and disavows] the very possibility of their existence within the erotic" (15). According to these criteria, a poem such as Fifine at the Fair (which I discuss in Chapter Seven) is not a love poem; however, it might be described as a poem of desire. Desire, unlike love, need not presuppose a benevolent or even benign attitude towards its object (nor even towards its subject), but rather only characterises a disposition of wanting on the part of its agent. However, although Fifine at the Fair is a dramatic monologue, and thus a 'psychological' poem, it is at the same time directly concerned with interpersonal relationships, in particular with Don Juan's relationships with his wife Elvire and the acrobat Fifine.

Nevertheless, while a focus on desire discloses affinities among poems typically characterised as diverse, there is also an overlap between poems that have been considered to be love poems or relationship poems, and the poems that I have characterised as poems of desire in this study. In respect of these poems (such as Sonnets from the Portuguese, for instance), my project can be described as accretive: it adds to rather than rejects the insights obtained in earlier interpretations by asking different questions about some of the same poems. For instance, analysis of Sonnets from the Portuguese has concerned itself with the contours of the relationship



proposed between the protagonist and her beloved; my focus on desire leads to an analysis of the protagonist's intra-subjective consideration of her own self-fragmentation and reconstruction.

In many ways an exemplary Victorian poem of desire is Alfred Tennyson's Maud, which has been discussed as both a love poem and a psychological poem. However, Maud seems to exceed the parameters of each category, and its status as a relationship poem is certainly problematic (the poem is, after all, a *monodrama*).<sup>4</sup> It might be argued that Maud is concerned with the dramatisation of the antecedents to a relationship that never attains actual existence, and the consequences of the failure to actualise the desired relationship. What Maud dramatises is a state of acute self-consciousness and yearning (both desire, in Part One, and nostalgia, in Parts Two and Three), which for the most part is directed towards an erotic encounter with Maud herself, but which never quite reaches its goal. In other words, in Maud the "dramatic actuality" of the relationship between would-be lover and his beloved is staged not in the social world but in the protagonist's mind, and involves not Maud herself, but Maud imagined — Maud "[n]ot as she is, but as she fills his dream", to borrow Christina Rossetti's particularly apposite line (from "In an Artist's Studio" in *Higonnet* 356).

Just as the protagonist's attention in Part Two of Maud is randomly drawn to a particular small shell on the beach, which is subsequently invested with the import of a "work divine" (II.ii.i, II.ii.iv), his attraction to Maud stems from small, random encounters experienced against the backdrop of an already fraught emotional state: a glimpse of her face as she passes in the carriage (I.ii), the sound of her voice singing (which he says "hardly leaves [him] a choice / But . . . to adore" her [I.v.iii]), a touch of her hand (I.vi.iii), and a meeting of eyes (I.viii). The protagonist takes these minutiae and elaborates them into vast vistas of desire:

From the meadow your walks have left so sweet  
That whenever a March-wind sighs

He sets the jewel-print of your feet  
 In violets, blue as your eyes,  
 To the woody hollows in which we meet  
 And the valleys of paradise. (I.xxii.vii)

Rather than scenes of containment, which one might expect from Victorian poetry given its domestic relationship characterisation, the reiterated imagery of lovers' dreams and fantasies is expansive. What begins as

. . . a delicate spark  
 Of glowing and growing light  
 Through the livelong hours of the dark  
 [Keeping] itself warm in the heart of my dreams,  
 Ready to burst in a coloured flame . . . (I.vi.iii)

is willed and fanned into an all-consuming conflagration. If the natural world is "work divine", imaginative elaboration and fantasy is the divine work of the desiring subject, for whom meetings in drawing rooms or churches become material to be re-presented as epic encounters whose intensity reverberates throughout the cosmos ("Rosy is the West, / Rosy is the South" [I.xvii]). Through and in fantasy, old certainties are disestablished in favour of future possibilities ("If / be dear to someone else, / Then . . ." [I.xv]). If, in Maud, the devastating effects of such imaginings can be attributed to what Tennyson called the protagonist's "morbid, poetic soul" (McSweeney 1998 50), the same minutiae and processes are implicated in the non-pathological experience of desiring, both in life and literature, rendering all lovers more or less morbid and poetic.

John Maynard speaks of Victorian poets' "individual versions of universal and ubiquitous concerns of humans and their cultures" (1993 37); among these concerns, no doubt, is the ubiquitous experience of falling in love. If Maud's power derives from the dramatisation of the protagonist's "passion so intense" (II.ii.viii) and his "overwrought" (II.ii.viii) response to Maud, intense and overwrought passion is not necessarily always dignified or moving. Take this passage from The Angel in the House:

. . . . then to my room  
 I went, and closed and lock'd the door,  
 And cast myself down on my bed,  
 And there, with many a blissful tear,  
 I vow'd to love and pray'd to wed  
 The maiden who had grown so dear; (I.iv.3)

Vaughan, self-locked in his room and writhing on his bed, suggests comic rather than heroic passion.

Through its manifold representations of characters who fall in love and, moreover, who fail at love, Victorian poetry normalises the desiring subject. Even those, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's protagonist of Sonnets from the Portuguese, who "looked only for God" (xxvii), can be overcome when their eyes happen to meet another's, while those, like Patmore's Felix Vaughan, who "never went to Ball, or Fete, / Or Show, but in pursuit express / Of [his] predestined mate" must still await "the happy chance" (I.ii.4), not only of falling in love but also of being fallen in love with. As these examples show, in Victorian poetry falling in love is not limited to an experience apprehended by the unique faculties of a poet, but is a means by which any individual may poeticise him or herself. However, the ubiquity of the experience calls the value of such poeticising into question, engendering a specific set of anxieties. Maud highlights both the beneficial possibilities of falling in love, through the speaker's representation of his revivification under its influence (for instance, "And suddenly, sweetly, my heart beat stronger" [I.viii] and "never yet so warmly ran my blood" [I.xviii.I]), and also some of the limitations and perils of this experience (for instance the poem speaks of the "honey of poison-flowers and all the measureless ill" associated with the "madness of love" [I.iv. x] and tells of the speaker's fears that he "should grow light-headed . . . [or] fantastically merry" [I.xix.x]).

In other poems anxieties coalesce around the inter-relationship of love, desire and language.<sup>5</sup> There is concern about fantasising and the seductive appeal of the imaginative appetite; thus, we have a *sonnet* that begins, as Alice Meynell's "Renouncement" (1882) does, with the self-adjuration, "I

must not think of thee” (Higonnet 450). There is fear that the experience of love is nothing more than an echo of language’s self-perpetuating and self-referential processes: thus, “I hear thy voice and vow / Perplexed, uncertain” (*Sonnets from the Portuguese* xxx). There is the fear that love is no more than a story one tells oneself or someone else: thus, Claude, the protagonist of Arthur Hugh Clough’s *Amours de Voyage* asks, “After all do I know that I really cared about her . . . After all perhaps there was something factitious about it” (V.viii.156-164). (This point suggests Ball’s phrase “dramatic actuality” has a perhaps unintended validity in pointing to the discursive hence constructed nature of the romantic experience.) There is a fear that the self-serving rhetoric of desire might produce a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially if one says what one does not mean or what one should not have said: thus, “ ‘Ah, yes! / Love dies!’ I said: I never thought it less” (*Modern Love*). Finally, perhaps as a result of the normalisation of this experience, there is also, as Kerry McSweeney observes, “a self-consciousness about romantic love in Victorian poetry” (1998 20), and this self-consciousness sometimes reveals itself as cynicism (for instance, as one might discern in George Meredith’s *Modern Love*) and as embarrassment (either at falling in love or at the knowledge that one’s romantic passion is neither especially rare nor necessarily ennobling).

These anxieties disclose, however, the intensity and breadth of exploration of the desiring subject in Victorian poetry, and this exploration is not limited to the sphere of heterosexual love. Some of the desiring subjects discussed in this thesis fall in love, but others do not. Of those who do not, some wonder why they have not, and whether they will: to fall in love becomes the object of their desire. Others seek to excite and experience intense passion through engagement with some other activity. The consequence is a rejection of social codes of permissible desire, which frequently fail to provide satisfaction, in favour of a commitment to an introspective and imaginative cultivation of personal fantasies and desires. Writing this personal vision then becomes the enactment (not the sublimation) of desire. Moreover, where relationships exist there is always

some excess or withheld proportion of passion, not expended in that love relationship with some other, but expended on the self, and, more often than not, on those creative acts of self-realisation that Ball failed to detect in Victorian poetry (but which we will see so clearly in the poems of this study).

## II

Desire is the grand concept that post-structuralism has addressed in recent years. Consequently, as a term it has accrued both some glamour and an “elusive density”, to borrow Leo Bersani’s phrase (1976 5), characteristic of post-structuralism’s will both to elaborate and to destabilise the things (including concepts) it studies. In this thesis I have chosen to focus on moments when the poems’ protagonists are aware of themselves as desiring subjects, that is, on their self-conscious experiences of desiring, rather than to adopt any particular theory of desire’s broader origins or ends. This choice has been an attempt to stake out an interpretive space somewhere between the hard ground of narrow formalism and the rock of reductionism.<sup>6</sup> I have asked: when people want in Victorian poetry, how is that wanting characterised, what do they want and how do they go about obtaining it? Thus this study is inductive: I have preferred to point out connections between the poems discussed in this study, to suggest the ways in which the poems themselves constitute a discourse of desire, and also, albeit to a lesser extent, to point out connections between these poems and other studies of literary desire, rather than to filter the poems through a single, externally-derived theory of desire derived from philosophy or psychoanalysis, the two fields which, along with literature, have most frequently addressed the topic. Nevertheless, while this study is not concerned specifically with desire as an abstract proposition or as an extra-literary phenomenon, it is informed by and has developed its parameters in relation to recent analyses of desire, including those discussed below.

Most of the sub-fields of the humanities and social sciences, as well as many of the influential thinkers of our generation have something to say about desire, and for some of them desire has assumed the import and

magnitude of Casaubon's "Key to all Mythologies". Arguing for a precise and restricted use of the term, Annette C. Baier says:

Desire is of most interest as a psychical phenomenon when it, with its variant of intentionality, is seen in relation to all its mental relatives with their variants, to pleasure, to satisfaction, to love, to beliefs about the good and how to get and sustain it, to discontent, to hopes and fears for the future, to confidence and to lack of confidence, to a sense of ability and to ignorance of the extent of one's ability; to depression, grief, despair, homesickness, nostalgia; to longing, craving, lusting, itching, wanting, preferring, and intending. Desire is what it is, and not these other things, and they are what they are, and not desires. It will be understood best, philosophically, when it is seen in clear relation to all of its many relatives among the actions, passions, and the mixed active/passive states of our complicated, variegated, self-complicating and self-diversifying souls. (in Marks 1986 59).

Joel Marks' edited collection of essays on desire, The Ways of Desire, from which Baier's comments are taken, is representative of one philosophical pole of the study of desire; the other pole is represented in and by Patrick Fuery's Theories of Desire (1995). Fuery's work provides summaries of the various positions and meanings desire takes in the works of several "giants of critical theory" (back cover), including Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. As this list indicates, these theorists are linked not only by their interest in desire, as Fuery notes, but also by their nationality: they are all French (a circumstance that may in part account for the glamour which has accrued to the concept of desire). Collectively, and despite the differences between their theories, these philosophers constitute a philosophical school of desire that stands in sharp contrast to the Anglo-American approach to understanding desire, represented by the Marks essays: the French school seeks to understand desire itself, while the Anglo-American school seeks to establish the parameters and functions which define the use of the term desire (an orientation that accounts for the rigour and specificity of Baier's definition above). Where the former speaks of *jouissance*, the unconscious, signification and discourse, the latter speaks of intentions, roles, propositional attitudes and actions. The

differentiated vocabularies of desire indicate the profound influence that psychoanalysis has had on the French academy, even upon those whose works are grounded on opposition to what is viewed as an institutionalised psychoanalysis (most notably, of course, Jacques Deleuze).<sup>7</sup>

Despite the evident heterogeneity of analytical method and interpretation, however, many of the French philosophers of desire arrive at the same unhappy destination. For instance, Elizabeth Grosz (1994), in a discussion of the relevance of Jacques Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "desiring machines" to feminism, suggests that conceptions of desire may be sorted by their orientation to lack. Psychoanalytical formulations of desire, she says, rely "on a notion of desire as a lack, an absence that strives to be filled through the attainment of an impossible object" (1994 165), while the "desiring machines" conception of desire views desire "as what produces. . . . [this] desire aims at nothing above its own proliferation or self-expansion" (165).<sup>8</sup> In Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis lack is ontological, or as Lacan says, "*pre-ontological*" (1973/1977 29; original italics). Alienation and division are the conditions constitutive of subjectivity, as it is achieved both in the mirror stage (producing the subject of the Imaginary Order) and by means of the Oedipal crisis (producing the subject of signification or the Symbolic Order). The subject formed in these processes is the subject of an unsatisfiable desire, which Lacan calls "the desire of the Other" (1994 38). Lacan distinguishes between need (that which is required for life), demand (the appeal for recognition and proof of love), and desire, which is desire for that which is lacked, such as that which comes into existence only when it is lost (for example, the desire for primordial unity with the mother lost at birth, and the desire for the desire of the mother, unavailable as a result of the intercessionary "No-of-the-Father"). Fuery quotes Lacan:

[T]he subject exhausts himself in pursuing the desire of the other, which he will never be able to grasp as his own desire, because his own desire is the desire of the other. It is himself whom he pursues. (1995 22)

The subject not only exhausts himself in this pursuit, but he lives in it, as it is the very condition of being.

If the Lacanian subject lacks an imagined plenitude (union) that never was and would negate his subjectivity if obtained, the Deleuzian subject also lacks, in this case a (potential) plenitude — multiplicity — which has never been realised or whose potential has been stolen from him by the codification of his desire within social forms which institutionalise lack. The forms of organization Deleuze attacks are capitalism and Oedipal psychoanalysis, which Deleuze claims have resulted in the “perversion of the desire of the masses” (1983 29).<sup>9</sup> Deleuze’s desiring subject is Spinozan, in the sense of being a “determinate being [which] is ‘caused’ by something external to it, which defines its limits . . . and characterizes its powers to act” (Wartofsky in Grene 1973 334). For the Deleuzian subject, this external is the whole of the social world; thus, the Deleuzian subject ‘meets’ the Lacanian subject at the site of its cultural and linguistic formation. In practice, as a consequence of the universality of language and the inescapability of the social, the Deleuzian subject is no less subject to an ontological lack than the Lacanian subject; however, for Deleuze the origin of this lack is the social field, which (he argues) has a capacity to be re-configured into “some other sort of organization” (*Anti-Oedipus* 8), whereas for Lacan, there is no “appeal to tomorrow” (in Butler 1987 190).

If the influence of Lacan on the philosophy of desire is inestimable, it is not unavoidable. Michel Foucault proposes a different way of understanding the desiring subject, and also somewhat manages to straddle the gulf between the French and the Anglo-American approaches to the study of desire.<sup>10</sup> Foucault’s well-known argument in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1976/1978; hereafter 1978), that sexuality is the internalised/embodied effect of historically specific discourses of sexuality and the deployment of power, has affinities to the Anglo-American philosophical approach to analysing the semantics of desire through the emphasis on the articulation of desire, or how desire is spoken of. While



clearly psychoanalysis also foregrounds the articulation of desire, especially in the analytic encounter, it is oriented to the articulation and interpretation of the unconscious. Foucault's interest is quite different. Foucault does not propose a "headquarters" (1978 95) of power or desire, either in the sense of the Lacanian Other or in the sense of an apparatus of the state, but rather proposes a field of power relations and local tactics that form "comprehensive systems [whose] logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them" (1978 95). Specifically, desire and desiring subjects are both produced and regulated through the identifiable and analysable local efforts and effects (production and regulation) of various discursive domains.

Foucault explains in Volume Two of his History of Sexuality that his project is to "analyze the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire . . ." (1984/1985 5; hereafter 1985). Clearly this historical project authorises literary analysis as an investigation of desire, when literature is understood to be one such configurative node, impacting at both the level of the individual and also at the level of the social body. For instance, literary characters, as postulated desiring subjects, represent roles with which readers can identify, and on whom they may model their own behaviour and interpret that of others, while literary narrative suggests ways of organising and understanding experience that also shape readers' conceptions and interpretations of their own histories and futures.<sup>11</sup> (The local conditions of the production and dissemination of literature, who has access to it and what uses they are able to make of it are also important determinants, but these are not typically functions of literary analysis, at least in its recent non-Marxist incarnations.)

Both Lacan's and Foucault's theories of desire postulate a force anterior to the individual's self-conscious (or conscious in psychoanalytical terms) articulation of desire: in Lacan it is the unconscious, in Foucault it is a

nebulous “power”. Their formulations evoke the humorous proposition that human beings were invented by desire as a means of transporting itself from one place to another: in the big theories of desire, such as Lacan’s and Foucault’s, the subject sometimes seems little more than the site upon which desire enacts its own guerrilla war against itself. However, if, as Foucault claims, individuals “recognize . . . themselves as subjects of desire” then individuals have a self-conscious experience of desire/desiring, and a discussion of desire that does not consider this aspect or meaning of desire is, in my view, incomplete.<sup>12</sup> If the subject is in a more or less perpetual state of desire, as suggested by both Deleuze and Lacan, there are times when he is more aware of being in this state. In fact, Baier suggests that the term desire should be restricted to these instances of “*consciousness of [the] forward-reaching restless life-force [that is desire]*” (in Marks 58; my emphasis). As an analytical formulation, moreover, conscious desire is both an inclusive term — broad enough to extend from the “level of every day’s / Most quiet need” (*Sonnets from the Portuguese*, xliii) to the “vile hungering impulse” (*Amours de Voyage* III.viii), which might or might not, thereupon be disclosed as a comment on an underlying (or ontological) desire — and a phenomenon identifiable to both the desiring subject and the reader of literature.<sup>13</sup>

The manifestation and experience of conscious desire is well theorised in the social science disciplines, particularly in psychology and anthropology, in which it is taken as a component of human life rather than as *the* constituent or defining characteristic of it. William Jankowiak (1995 1-19) summarises research on desire as types of social, bio-cultural, evolutionary, biochemical and psychological phenomena.<sup>14</sup> Consciousness of desire is, as he observes, particularly acute during the liminal stages of falling and being in love (although one might also propose that consciousness of desire is particularly acute at the point when a desired object is lost: when valued relationships end or when the desiring subject perceives that desired relationships will not eventuate). The self-conscious experience of romantic desire (at either end of the experience) involves the

subject as an agent of intense attentiveness, being conscious of both his desire and, usually, of the thing he desires (although he may mistake it for something other than what it is or might not want it once he gets it). The subject is an agent of desire, in the sense (that he knows) that it is he who desires, but the desiring subject does not necessarily feel like a free agent in control of his desire(s), because he knows that desire is “contingent, relative, and unstable” (Marks 5).

How does one desire in love? Research suggests that fantasising is the defining activity of the early stage of being in love. Again drawing on the work of Dorothy Tennov, Helen Fisher (1992 38-40) describes what she calls the “characteristic pattern” of infatuation, a process that begins when another person begins to take on a special meaning for the subject. Typically the first consequence of infatuation is “intrusive thinking”, which then develops into “sustained mental attentiveness” or “doting” (also called by Robert Solomon adoration and devotion [1981 54-55]). Fisher uses Tennov’s term “crystallization” (39) to describe the orientation of this special attentiveness, which involves aggrandizement rather than idealisation of the beloved one, the distinction being that the infatuated person does perceive the weaknesses or flaws of the beloved but either simply ignores them or persuades him or herself that these defects are actually part of the beloved’s charm or appeal (for instance, Maud’s protagonist is captivated by the “least little delicate aquiline curve in [her] sensitive nose” [I.ii], and later he persuades himself that Maud is “only the child of her mother” [I.xiii.iii]). A significant aspect of crystallization is the elaboration of memories of encounters with the beloved, in which the beloved’s characteristics and behaviour are mentally replayed, re-enacted and invested with special meaning. The thinking process is typically accompanied by a constellation of emotional and somatic processes including hope, uncertainty, fear, relish, shyness, trembling, a sensation of awkwardness and “above all . . . the feeling of helplessness, the sense that this passion [is] irrational, involuntary, unplanned, uncontrollable” (40).

One need not be in love to desire. In the absence of a specific object of

desire, however, subjects may also be conscious of a 'desire for desire' (which is, in any case, desire), a yearning to experience or re-experience the turmoils and highs of intense passion (as, for instance, Emma Bovary is 'addicted' to romantic love). Such desire may be pursued not only in the context of romantic love, but also in such phenomena as asceticism, aestheticism, religious devotion and intellectualism (the pursuit of knowledge).

This discussion has, I hope, suggested that desire has been and can be conceptualised in a number of ways. All these conceptualisations of desire, however, pay close attention to language: desire as an unconscious text, desire as a discursive object, desire as fantasising. Language is a bridge between the desiring subject and the thing it wants (even where language is contended to be the cause of the alienation of subject from desired object). While my procedure in this thesis is to focus on the self-conscious or conscious experience of desire, this approach is not incompatible with those propositions that desire operates or is constituted in ways not necessarily apprehended by individual subjects, and reference to those processes and explanations can illuminate the self-conscious experience of desire. Thus, from time to time in the readings which follow I have recourse to various discussions of desire in various theoretical contexts (for instance, I refer to Jean Baudrillard's reading of Kierkegaard in Seduction [1990] in my reading of Fifine at the Fair, and I refer to Julia Kristeva's discussion of motherhood in Desire and Language [1987] in my reading of Mother and Daughter).<sup>15</sup> However, the aim of this thesis is not to evaluate or promote a particular theory of desire, and reference to such theories is always (I hope) subordinate to the reading of the poetry and its own formulations of desire.

### III

The study of desire in the broad cultural context of Victorian England is well advanced. We know that desire was discussed in a variety of contexts, including in biological and medical science, in psychology and psychiatry,

and in various religious contexts. We know that desire was also discussed in the debates on gender and prostitution, and informed certain aspects of the debate on and development of educational programmes as well as population control programmes. We know desire itself was conceptualised in a range of ways, including as cellular energy, as psychic energy, as active and/or passive, as masculine or feminine, as an aspect of sex and sexuality and in relation to a mind/body split. Important Victorian institutions can be understood as aspects of desire production and management: marriage, the family, the separate spheres, the prison, the school, the industrial revolution, colonial expansion and capitalism itself. Victorian conceptions of and attitudes towards desire were continually being constructed and contested in an ongoing discussion of desire that was being played out in multiple discursive and social contexts.

As far as the exposition of desire in the Victorian literary context is concerned, the focus has predominantly been on the novel. There is a trend in criticism to a broadly Foucauldian conception of desire as a culturally produced and mediated phenomenon, and of literature as a productive and mediating force (among others). Nancy Armstrong's (1987) analysis of the construction and dissemination of 'domestic woman' is notable among many feminism-oriented accounts of the construction of femininity. Armstrong describes the processes by which a particular configuration of femininity, domestic woman, became perceived as a desirable wife during the nineteenth century. The discursive economy (understood as a system for the production and distribution of knowledge) she analyses includes conduct books, domestic novels, Chartism, the spread of literacy and the Malthusian doctrine for population control. In addition, Lloyd Davis (1993) has edited a collection of essays which deconstruct the 'natural' category of virginity; Andrew Miller and James Eli Adams (1996) consider the processes involved in the construction of Victorian sexualities, including medicalisation, normalisation and the entrenchment of a model of cultural progression along evolutionary lines; Herbert Sussman (1995) and James Eli Adams (1995) analyse the construction of masculinity within models of manly behaviour, in particular asceticism and dandyism. David

Musselwhite (1987) has analysed the way narrative forms and concepts such as ‘character’, ‘life’ and ‘family’ in the Victorian novel related to other normalising discourses of the period, and, in conjunction with them, produced specific configurations of subjectivity through the “internalisation of the ‘idea of the state’” (8) in the yet-to-be elaborated form of the Oedipal complex (a reading influenced by the theories of Deleuze and Guatarri). Naomi Segal (1992) looks at the representation of the figures of mother, child and adulteress, in instances where they act as a counter-discourse to this evolving and dominant Oedipal subject. Pamela Gilbert (1997) examines the way metaphors of disease, the body, and reading were conflated, particularly in the figures of the diseased body and the prostitute’s body. She sees these metaphors, drawn from other Victorian discourses of desire such as medical science, imperialism, class, race etc., as going directly to Victorian fears and anxieties about transgression. Amanda Anderson (1993) discusses the Victorian construct of the fallen woman and the questions of identity and agency that it foregrounds.<sup>16</sup>

Although some of these studies include reference to Victorian poetry (for instance, see Davis, Anderson, and Sussman), the study of desire in Victorian poetry has, in general, been of a different order of criticism. As I have noted above, love, rather than desire, has been the preferred focus of analysis, and, while exceptions might be suggested, the focus has usually been on love in marriage. The underlying assumption of most studies (following Ball) is that the Victorian poets had a preference for a serious, sacramental conception of love, best achieved and expressed in marriage, and viewed desire as problematic.<sup>17</sup> Naturally, within this framework, it has been noted that not all Victorian poets are satisfied with the institution of marriage, and that their poems sometimes take a sceptical position on the capacity of marriage to satisfy the romantic and sexual desires of their protagonists. For instance, in Marriage, Duty and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama (1980), Richard D. McGhee argues that Victorian writers used dramatisations of marriage as a context in which to discuss the competing claims of duty and desire on the individual. In From the Great

Deep (1967), Clyde de. L. Ryals prefers to use the terms *agape* and *eros* in his discussion of Tennyson's Idylls of the King, while W. David Shaw (1968) uses Kierkegaardian formulations of ethics and aesthetics to discuss Robert Browning's "dialectical temper" and the various types of characters he constructed (a study not specifically focused on love poetry). These readings share the assumption that Victorian poets produced a literature of domestic relationships *because* they took a problematic view of certain human impulses, variously conceived of in the above-named studies as desire, *eros* and aestheticism, which they saw as putting individuals in conflict with their societies. Despite the variations in terminology, the theme is constant: a subject and his voracious libidinal instincts set against (both transposed against and in conflict with) an anxious culture which sought means of restricting and containing him for the good of society. This position is recapitulated in Foucault's "repressive hypothesis", the view that (mistakenly) characterises Victorians as prudes. Thus Wendell Stacy Johnson speaks unproblematically of "*the* sexual urge" (1975 156, emphasis added) and "*the* feminine sexual nature" (159, emphasis also added) as preoccupying problems in the verse.<sup>18</sup>

This view of Victorian society generally and of Victorian poetry in particular still exerts influence. Kerry McSweeney, in his recent book on Victorian love poetry, Supreme Attachments (1998), identifies the distinctive features of Victorian love poetry as:

a concern with the relationship of love to mortality; a preoccupation not with the Romantic high — the 'all' feeling in the present — but with the possibility of future transcendence; a concern with the point of view of both parties in the love relationship, more particularly with the woman as (in George Eliot's phrase) an equivalent centre of self; a recognition of the importance of context — not absolute Romantic love but love as subdued to what works in the [particular social, ideological or institutional setting]; and finally, a self-consciousness about romantic love and its poetic expression in relation to earlier experience and expression. (19-20)

McSweeney's study, suggested by these comments and worked out in close readings of several important Victorian poems, is a direct descendant of the

domestic relationship orientation initiated by Ball insofar as it is fundamentally concerned with the poetic representation and exploration of companionate love, a phenomenon that is chiefly associated with domestic relationships such as marriage. Thus McSweeney interprets various poems as the exploration of the problem of romantic passion, the solution to which is always shown to be the development of a kind of democratic, companionate love between lover and beloved (albeit that this solution is not always achieved).

One recent text, Divining Desire: Tennyson and the Poetics of Transcendence (2000), by James W. Hood, views the poetry differently. Hood claims that Tennyson's poems dramatise both "attempts to perfect desire in divine fashion [and also] try to 'divine' the nature of desire itself" (8). Although Hood still sees the subject in terms of "loss and lack" (9), he predominantly examines the way Tennyson's characters put their desires to work in erotic devotion and creative endeavour, in order to transcend the context of their contingent, human conditions.<sup>19</sup> The primary trope for both activities is the pursuit of knowledge; the formulation of desire is conscious and productive. Hood argues that while Tennysonian characters never attain the transcendental knowledge they seek, the quest itself (be it erotic or creative) approximates a "divined desire", through and in the experience of intense and spiritual passion. (John Maynard's Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion [1996] proposes that "sexual energies . . . even serve as natural focal points for divine penetration into daily human life" [16].) Hood's analysis of the cultural co-ordinates of the Tennysonian desiring subject is excellent. He cites the Victorian cult of femininity, the attitude of "earnest perseverance" of both Protestantism and capitalism, as well as the changing nature of Christian belief, and the Victorian preoccupation with mind/body health (11-16).

If Hood is concerned with the "transcendental" orientation of Victorian desire, his use of the term transcend is not equivalent to McSweeney's (above). For Hood, the term refers to the improvement of the original condition, that is, desire intensified; for McSweeney, the term refers to a



change from the original condition, desire, to a better and different condition, love, or more specifically, companionate love. (To avoid confusion I prefer to use the term intensify rather than transcend.) The different conceptions of the ‘transcendence’ under consideration produce different readings of the poetry, as does the removal of the ‘problematic/conflict’ frame, in which protagonists are assumed to be participants in either an intra-subjective conflict or a self-society conflict. Hood claims that the Tennysonian desiring subjects use creative artistry and erotic devotion as the “propulsion . . . to take them farther, faster” (9). Where Hood analyses the creative quests of various Tennysonian artists, I have traced similar processes operative in the representations of writers in Victorian poetry. The destination these desiring subjects aim for is not necessarily the marriage altar, or even a more peaceful existence. For Hood, desire ‘works’, and the subject works his or her desire, not with the aim of extinguishing it, but with the aim of being true to it, and thus true to him or herself. Compromise, limit, and fear are outside the ethos of the desiring subjects Hood examines, and of many of those I examine in this study.

#### IV

While my thematic interest shadows Hood’s (for instance, his focus on the Tennysonian artist approximates my own interest in the writing subject more generally in Victorian poetry), I do not set out an oeuvre reading of a single poet as he does, because at the time I conceived this topic the perception of the desiring subject of Victorian poetry that he and I share had not been generally discussed; consequently, I wanted to introduce it as a broadly relevant theme in Victorian poetry by discussing it in detail (in individual poems) with reference to a range of Victorian poets. Some important poets of the period are omitted from this study, purely due to constraints of time: Matthew Arnold, Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

In selecting poems, one of my concerns was to include a range of poetic

genres, so I have chosen sonnet sequences (Sonnets from the Portuguese, Mother and Daughter, and a variant, Modern Love), pseudo-epic or narrative poems (The Angel in the House, Idylls of the King), a dramatic monologue (Fifine at the Fair) and an epistolary poem (Amours de Voyage). Although this selection is already slightly weighted in favour of the sonnet sequence, it does seem to me in retrospect that I could easily and profitably have focused only on sonnet sequences, as there is no extant stand-alone study of this (Victorian) genre. Of the poems included, Fifine at the Fair has not been discussed recently, the Geraint poems from Idylls of the King have received comparatively less attention than the other idylls (Hood discusses “Lancelot and Elaine”), while Webster’s Mother and Daughter has received mention rather than analysis. One poem whose exclusion might justifiably be questioned is Tennyson’s Maud. This decision was taken for personal reasons (I had studied it previously, and I preferred to add to my own knowledge of Victorian poetry by studying other poems I was not as familiar with); the discussion at the beginning of this chapter is intended to somewhat mitigate this elision.

The discussion that follows is arranged in four sections: the desiring subject, objects of desire, the pursuit of desire, and desire and satisfaction. Although the headings are quite self-explanatory, each section contains a short introduction discussing the terms and parameters of the focus. To a greater or lesser extent, all of these aspects of desire could have been discussed in relation to each poem in this study; I have preferred not to divide up the discussion of each poem across the study but rather to focus on one aspect in greater detail in each chapter. As I have noted above, aside from focusing on conscious desire, I do not adopt a unitary theory of desire; consequently, no ‘grand claim’ or overall movement corresponding to such a general theory of desire is postulated. Rather, the study looks at how the protagonists in the poems represent themselves as subjects of desire and the kinds of things they do as desiring subjects. I view the poetry as both mimetic and productive, that is, as reflecting the Victorian cultures of desire as well as affecting them, although there is no formula for determining which process is most at work in any particular poem or at

the particular historical moments of their production and reception, nor have I attempted to design one.

A general recapitulation of this study would stress two points. First, the conventional repressive hypothesis, which takes the position that Victorians tried to repress desire, does not entirely define the limits of desire in Victorian poetry. Rather, the protagonists of Victorian poetry seek means of intensifying and expanding the rapturous feelings obtained in the experiences associated with desiring. Their attempts to do so are not always benign (for instance, Don Juan's manipulations of Elvire in Fifine at the Fair, and Claude's evasion and shuffling with Mary in Amours de Voyage). Second, the traditional critical emphasis on marriage or the heterosexual erotic encounter leading to marriage does not disclose the full range of Victorian poets' interest in love and desire (for instance, Mother and Daughter clearly falls outside the heterosexual context). Despite the variety of experiences associated with desiring, there are nonetheless across the poetry a number of reiterated themes and images, such that it might be claimed that there is a discourse of desire in Victorian poetry; however, that poetic discourse is not static but is always taking shape, as its contours entwine with other Victorian discourses of desire and the poets engage with each other's work. As the readings that follow will illustrate, the discourse of desire in Victorian poetry coalesces around themes of self-creation, self-representation, and self-loss. As a result of these themes, freedom becomes a central pre-occupation (freedom to choose one's own course of desire, rather than freedom from the tyranny of desire's promptings as previously assumed).

The quote from Flaubert I have used as one of the epigraphs to this Introduction is, in its original context, a cynical narratorial reference to Madame Bovary's capacity to talk herself into intense states of romantic passion. For Flaubert, her behaviour calls into question the very idea of romantic love. However, literature, including poetry, has as a chief virtue the capacity to 'amplify' emotion, that is, both to render emotion perceptible and to produce intense emotion. Victorian poetry "amplifies"

desire in all these senses of the word. Flaubert's notion of language as a "machine", however, is hardly benign; it suggests a process of linguistic self-proliferation that exceeds subjective control, and rather possesses and drives subjects. The second epigraph, from George Eliot's Middlemarch, seems to reiterate Flaubert's scepticism about love and its representation, but Casaubon's dispassion reflects badly on him. His lack of passion indicates there is something wrong with him rather than with the poets, and Dorothea's contrasting ardour, however misdirected, is always valued more highly by Eliot. In Victorian poetry also, passion is admired and desired, and in many ways becomes the measure of the character and the life work of the subject. Finally, the quotation from Kierkegaard characterises desiring as egoistic fantasising that takes the beloved other as mere material. Desire thus characterised suggests the desiring subject is a kind of author, writing his own story and his own self into being; this process is disclosed in all the poems in this study.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Studies of the Victorian poetry of love, sex and marriage since 1968 include: Isobel Armstrong, "Browning and Victorian Poetry of Sexual Love" (1974); Patricia Ball, The Heart's Events (1976); Wendell Stacy Johnson, Sex and Marriage in Victorian Poetry (1975); Richard D. McGhee, Marriage, Duty and Desire (1980); Kathleen Blake, Love and the Woman Question in Victorian Literature (1983); Margaret Homans, Bearing the Word (1986); Bernard Richards, English Poetry of the Victorian Period 1830-1890 (1988); Rod Edmond, Affairs of the Hearth (1988); Marlon B. Ross, The Contours of Masculine Desire (1989); Regina Barecca (ed.), Sex and Death in Victorian Literature (1990); Angela Leighton, Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart (1992); Lloyd Davis (ed.), Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature (1993); John Maynard, Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion (1993); Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (eds.), Sexualities in Victorian Britain (1996); and Kerry McSweeney, Supreme Attachments (1998). Studies on individual poets include: Samuel B. Southwell, Quest for Eros: Browning and 'Fifine' (1980); and Glennis Stephenson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love (1989).

<sup>2</sup> The terms love and relationship are united in a phenomenon known as affectionate or companionate love, which is a category that excludes other types of love such as erotomania and infatuation. Moreover, a distinction is sometimes made between being 'in love' and loving, by which is intended a more exalted, if less exultant, reciprocal affection and benevolence enacted in a relationship with another like-minded person; this version of love has been traditionally associated with the Victorian conception of sincerity. William Jankowiak's comment encapsulates the commonly held distinctions between being in love and loving, while indicating that those distinctions are seldom value neutral:

Romantic passion stands in sharp contrast to the companionship phase of love . . . which is characterized by the gradual and oftentimes initially unperceived change into a more peaceful (or

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less urgent), more comfortable (or less intense), and more fulfilling (or less ecstatic) relationship . . . (1995 4)

One might alternatively propose that a distinction between being infatuated, being in love, and loving is a matter of temporal orientation. Infatuation and being in love look forward to a relationship (or some other perceived good state or object) that has not yet been attained. By contrast, love is oriented to maintaining an already attained good. The term desire directs our attention to phenomena in Victorian poetry that might be said to precede relationships and love; these include being in love, “limerance” (Tennov 1979 in Jankowiak 1995 25), attraction, romantic passion and infatuation. However, if these states are hardly synonymous with loving, neither are they exactly synonymous with desiring, which encompasses other extra-romantic states too. One might propose, though, that the chief activity of infatuation or being in love is desiring, insofar as the subject is hyperconscious of both the beloved object and of his or her own tendency to think about the beloved. In this state, desire for the beloved is contemporaneous with the desire to think about the beloved and the desire to dwell on the self’s experience of this desire for the beloved. These thoughts are the constituents of desire and the activity of thinking them is desiring. In arguing that desiring is a mode of thinking, I am not suggesting that desire/desiring is not embodied; what I am suggesting is that desire is not equivalent to sexual arousal. The relationship between desire and sexual desire is somewhat vexed, with some arguing that all desire is derived from libidinous instincts and can be traced back to or described in terms of sexual motives, while others (for instance Robert Brown 1987 47-50) propose that “unaccompanied . . . sexual desire may be relatively infrequent” (50) due to the influence of other conscious motives on behaviour. Sexual intercourse might be viewed as a desired material outcome or goal of erotic desire, though.

<sup>3</sup> Clark’s overall point is somewhat different from mine. He argues that these assumptions about what constitutes love poetry tend to disguise or neutralise the presence of the debased, the erotic and the misogynistic in

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that poetry (such as the fetishization of the female body for instance), and thereby disguise or neutralise issues of power and domination.

<sup>4</sup> This point has been made before. Marilyn Kurata says, “A close reading that distinguishes between actual events and their emotional reverberations in the mind of the speaker forces one to question the reality of the romance . . . [this] reevaluation of the central emotional relationship in the poem significantly affects a reading of the poem . . .” (1983 369-70). Kurata reads Maud as a dramatisation of pathological desire, erotomania; however, E. Warwick Slinn, who also notices that “reference to objects has been more a matter of internalised symbolic action than a gesture towards narrative realism” (1991 82), notes that the “epistemological groundlessness” (198) of the protagonist’s discourse is a ‘normal’ condition, apprehended or not, for the alienated subject of language.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Claridge among others has suggested the Romantic poets’ response to their perception of the nexus of language and desire was the fear of belatedness and anxiety about their own un-originality (1992 3). Victorian poets seem less typically to mourn language as a tragedy. Thus, we might see Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” as a parody of Romantic belatedness: a dislocated chivalric figure riding across a denuded landscape, mortgaging not only his imaginative future but his immediate imaginative experience to the attainment of a “round squat turret” and the status of his lost “peers”.

<sup>6</sup> An interesting article by Jay Clayton (1989) discusses the pitfalls (for literary analysis) of adopting any universalist conception of desire, including those which grant the hypothesis that desire manifests itself in variable socio-historical forms and practices.

<sup>7</sup> I am assuming the reader is somewhat familiar with these theorists and their work on desire. If not, Fuery’s book is a good introduction, while Judith Butler’s Subjects of Desire (1987) provides an excellent discussion of most of these writers.

<sup>8</sup> Although Grosz's gloss is, in my view, an acceptable, reading of Deleuze and Guatarri, it should be noted that they claim "[process] must not be viewed as a goal or an end in itself, nor must it be confused with an infinite perpetuation of itself" (1983 5).

<sup>9</sup> Ironically, while Deleuze and Guattari castigate psychoanalysis for Oedipal reductiveness, their first concrete example of a desiring machine is a mouth machine coupled to a breast machine. They go on, thankfully, to argue that a mouth-machine may fluctuate between several functions and to claim that "each organ-machine interprets the entire world from the perspective of its own flux" (6). Thus while a mouth machine may prefer to plug into a flow of breast milk rather than a flow of shit (to take up the scatological language of *Anti-Oedipus* [1983]), because its interpretive mode is taste, it need not be taken for granted that a hand machine prefers to stroke a penis rather than to plunge itself into a warm pile of shit. In other words, the desiring machine is not governed by yearning for a necessary or particular object but by its productive pulsion and interpretive mode: "Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object" (26).

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler describes Michel Foucault as offering "a thoroughly cultural [analysis] which disavows any appeal to a desire that has a natural or metaphysical structure said to exist either prior or posterior to linguistic and cultural laws" (1987 215). Lacanians are bound to insist, with a limited validity, that they do not have a natural conception of the subject; however, within the frame of cultural and linguistic construction, the Lacanian subject has not been historically or culturally differentiated, and is posited as a universal. Jacques Deleuze also denies that his project aims at a metaphysics of desire: "For me, desire implies no lack; neither is it a natural given. It is an *agencement* of heterogenous elements that function; it is process as opposed to structure . . ." (in Davidson 1997 189). Desire, if it is inherent to anything, is inherent to the social field, within whose organisation it is engendered in particular forms. Judith Butler (1987 214-



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217) offers a critique of Deleuze's position.

<sup>11</sup> If psychoanalytical and Foucauldian conceptions of desire differ, they are not necessarily incompatible in literary analysis. Leo Bersani, who prefers a psychoanalytical conception of desire and the subject, takes up a 'Foucauldian' project of analysing the literary representation of desire in nineteenth and twentieth-century fiction. He says that institutional forms of social organisation, including Oedipal structures and conflicts, are not the full story of individual desire: "The mere fact that every living organism has to accommodate itself to a field of reality in which its needs can never be entirely fulfilled suggests that the self . . . would always have to go through a difficult negotiating process between its own appetitive energies and both a world *and* an internal economy which limit the possibilities of performing our energies and satisfying our appetites" (8). For this reason, he says, desire is also shaped by its cultural and historical context. For instance, he proposes that "the nineteenth century novel has trained us to be compulsive pursuers of significant design in fiction . . . Behaviour in realistic fiction is continuously expressive of character . . . [and] because the realistic novel generally remains faithful to chronological time, the very sequence of events becomes an organising principle" (1976 53). In addition he observes the influence of the "prior imagination of beginnings and ends" (54) in the "whole pattern-making process" (61) of the realist novel, and argues that realist fiction attempts to homogenise, thus disguise, disconnected and fragmented social conditions. The *telos* of realist fiction, he says, is to expel disruptive and threatening desires and passions. Bersani perceives desire as both a subjective mode and a cultural process.

<sup>12</sup> As Deleuze and Guatarri say more provocatively, "Judge Schreber has sunbeams in his ass . . . Judge Schreber feels something, produces something, and is capable of explaining the process theoretically" (1983 2).

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<sup>13</sup> The distinction between love and desire has been conceptualised in various ways, one of which is in fact suggested by Ball's aphorism, "the poetry of relationships". Following this formulation, the meaning of love is restricted to the aspects of affectionate (or romantic) experience shared with another, and the term desire is reserved for those aspects of experience not shared with another, and which might include falling in 'love', unrequited 'love', abandoned 'love', and fantasising. In practice, the readings which follow suggest this formulation of desire, but it is not a particularly helpful methodological unit for detecting desire in a poem, as the status of a relationship or non-relationship is neither always clear in Victorian poetry nor always static, and certainly one might both love and desire another person. An alternative distinction might be made on the basis of the subject's disposition towards the object, with love always being characterised by the presence of benevolent goodwill towards the object, while desire need not be thus disposed. For instance, in his discussion of *Maud*, McSweeney (1998) distinguishes between love as a "sympathetic desire seeking to amalgamate and blend" (58) and the protagonist's "desire to possess (to appropriate the other to his own self) and the desire for self-abasement" (58). My thinking on this topic has also been influenced by various older philosophical positions on desire, set out by Baier, which are based on the future orientation of desire. In these views love consists of the positive feelings for an already present good, while desire consists of positive feelings for a future good (and in which cases the good is subjectively conceived). Again, in practice, this formulation has been helpful, but I feel it is not always appropriate to designate the scene of a fantasy (distinct from the scene of fantasising, which occurs in the present) as being future-oriented. For instance, take the following fantasy:

And, then, I dream'd that I, her knight,  
 A clarion's haughty pathos heard,  
 And rode securely to the fight,  
 Cased in the scarf she had conferr'd;  
 And there, the bristling lists behind,  
 Saw many, and vanquish'd all I saw

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Of her unnumber'd cousin-kind,  
 In Navy, Army, Church, and Law;  
 Smitten, the warriors somehow tum'd,  
 To Sarum choristers, whose song,  
 Mix'd with celestial sorrow, yearn'd  
 With joy no memory can prolong;  
 And phantasms as absurd and sweet  
 Merged each in endless chace,  
 And everywhere I seem'd to meet  
 The haunting fairness of her face.  
 (Coventry Patmore, The Angel in the House I.iii.5)

This scene occurs in indeterminate time, neither in the actual past nor in any *likely* future. Both the notion of desire as operating outside a relationship and the notion of desire as a future-oriented wish implicate the notions of lack and absence that are fundamental to those postulations of desire I have collected under the rubric of French philosophy. Lack and absence might, however, be rephrased as more and other (one desires something more or other than what one has) in order to focus on desire's effects, its productive and elaborative work, rather than on desire's cause, the contours and characteristics of the lack that precedes it and produces it.

<sup>14</sup> See also Anatomy of Love (1992 40-58) in which Helen Fisher discusses the influence of odours, love maps, mystery, brain chemistry, addiction and culture on falling in love.

<sup>15</sup> Quite aside from the analyses of literary desire undertaken by the philosophers discussed above as illustrative of their claims, there are several extant models of the study of desire in a literary context. Perhaps the seminal study is René Girard's Deceit, Desire, and the Novel (1965), in which he sets out his formulation of "triangular" or mediated desire in the novel. Influenced by both psychoanalysis and structuralism (for instance, "the triangle . . . is a systematic metaphor" [2]), Girard discusses the literary representation of a "fundamental and primitive" (4) movement, imitation, which embraces both intertextuality (influence) and individual work's plots and structures. (Girard's thesis will be referred to in Chapter Six on Tennyson's Idylls of the King). Of equal importance is Leo

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Bersani's A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature (1969/1976). Bersani himself suggests that his use of the term desire "has affinities" (ix) with various notions of enthusiasm, vision, and freedom; later he adds, "[desire] is an appetite of the imagination" (10). Bersani proposes that desire is an "intrinsically violent"(13) response to the perception of "the world's capacity to resist and survive our desires" (13). In Desire and its Discontents (1991), Eugene Goodheart discusses and applies various conceptualisations of desire (in addition to those I have discussed above, he discusses Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, and Lionel Trilling) to a range of literary texts. Goodheart says that the term desire is most useful in literary analysis when it is defined loosely so that it retains both its "tragic implications as well as its imaginative power" (22).

<sup>16</sup> Even within this analytic economy (of discursive analysis of desire in the Victorian novel) the term desire maintains its polyvalency. For Armstrong desire is a historical and ideological phenomenon that discloses and shapes subjects' choices about spouses and domestic arrangements; for Gilbert desire is simply movement: movement towards, which she calls attraction, and movement away from, which she calls repulsion. Judith Mitchell (1994), whose approach is closest to my own, analyses the representation of three aspects of desire: the look of desire, the language of desire, and the enactment of desire, and how they are represented within the heterosexual erotic encounter in the Victorian novel (10). These particular definitions or uses of the term desire obviously do not preclude other definition or uses, yet each is precise enough within its own context to elaborate some aspect of the representation of desire in the Victorian novel.

<sup>17</sup> This assumption has shaped interpretations in identifiable and specific ways. For instance, for years, certain that we were reading the "poetry of relationships", we viewed Claude, the protagonist of Amours de Voyage, as a failure, because he couldn't or wouldn't marry Mary. It was felt that Claude should set aside his lofty idealism, his desire for the "Absolute",

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and, as McGhee puts it, “embrac[e] the flesh as a confirmation of identity” (1980 132). Idealism’s local form, then, was to be pragmatic realism with the goal of marriage. However, I would suggest that Amours de Voyage, as its title suggests, allows us to read Claude’s adventures in different terms, to determine the value and meaning of his experiences in the context of journeys in love, and the pleasures of this particular journey, rather than in his reaching the ‘right’ destination, the marriage altar. In short, perhaps it is time to see Claude as a successful letter writer and self-mythologiser, or even as a travel writer, rather than as merely a failure in the marriage market.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to argue that the inculcation of a subjectivity characterised as problematically desiring was not a strategy by which power gained access to individual and social bodies. Rather, I am challenging the extent to which we must read Victorian poetry as a branch of this and only this process.

<sup>19</sup> In God Between Their Lips (1994) Kathryn Bond Stockton discusses both the ‘traditional’ conception of the alienated subject of desire and her own conception of desire as labour in Brontë and Eliot.

## SECTION ONE

## DESIRING SUBJECTS

In this section I analyse the representation of desiring subjects in two poems, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) and Coventry Patmore's The Angel in the House (1854-1862). As Sonnets from the Portuguese has a female protagonist, and, moreover, has been celebrated as a seminal poem of 'female desire', and as The Angel in the House has a male protagonist, and has been viewed as an iconic instance of the ideology of the separate spheres and the Victorian paternalistic view of women, that is to say, as a poem of 'masculine desire', the relationship between gender and desire would seem to be foregrounded as a substantive issue for analysing these poems. Accordingly, in this brief introduction to the topic of the desiring subject, I discuss some of the ways the relationship between desire and gender has been conceptualised.

As Peter Cominos has shown (in Vicinus 1972 155-172) the relationship between sexual desire and gender was extensively debated during the Victorian period, particularly in the context of concerns about prostitution. One widely held mid-century view was that men had stronger sexual desires than women. In an 1850 essay on prostitution in the Westminster Review, representative of this stance, W.R. Greg wrote:

“women's *desires* scarcely ever lead to their fall [because] desire scarcely exists in a definite and conscious form [in women] until they *have* fallen. In this point there is a radical and essential difference between the sexes . . . In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous, and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited. [Women who 'fall'] yield to desires in which they do not share, from a weak generosity which cannot refuse anything to the passionate entreaties of the man they love.”<sup>1</sup>

(in Poovey 1990 32-3)

Women have sexual intercourse, compassionately and altruistically it

seems, because men have sexual desires. At least two objections might be made to Greg's argument. First, we might object to his claim that variation in males' and females' sexual desire is an "essential" sexual difference. Rather, in a culture that regulates sexual practices according to gender, whether that be Victorian culture or our own, variations in the experience of sexual desire cannot be said to prove anything about people's natural desires. In fact, gender, sexual practices and sexual desires are the objects of such considerable cultural intervention that the concept of a natural desire is little more than a chimera. Greg's essay itself is one such cultural intervention, an attempt to 'deploy sexuality' for certain ideological ends: as Mary Poovey observes, "the concept of 'sublime unselfishness' . . . fits women simultaneously for moral superintendence and sexual availability" (35). Second, we might object to Greg's implicit presumption that once females' "dormant" sexual desires have been "excited" they are of the same nature as males' sexual desires, as suggested by his reference throughout to "the sexual desire". Some (predominantly feminists) have argued for desire's "sexual specificity" (Grosz 1989 101). In its more sophisticated form this argument goes beyond essentialism (different anatomy equals different erotics) to examine the cultural determinants of sexual identity and to assert the need for a form of social organisation and language which is able to figure woman's sexual specificity and desires in autonomous terms rather than as a variant of normative male sexuality and desires. From this position, just as the schizo is the valorised figure for Deleuze and Guatarri, the hysteric and the frigid woman are viewed as heroic resisters of phallogentric sexual determinism, that is, as women who refuse the sexual identities and desires expected of them within phallogentric structures (language, society). However, such an autonomous female sexuality/language/desire cannot be simply grafted on to the extant phallogentric model. Were such a cultural revolution to occur, there would be consequences for males' sexual identity as well as women's, although the final shape of the utopia varies among theorists: for some it means more difference, for others it obliterates difference.<sup>2</sup>

In the Introduction to Sexualities in Victorian Britain (1996) Andrew H.

Miller and James Eli Adams observe that “there is [a] powerful and complex political investment informing virtually all invocations of the essentialist/constructivist dichotomy” (6); rather than entering into this debate on the origins of sexual identity, Miller and Adams prefer to “emphasize the remarkable variousness of Victorian sexuality, and the complex specificity of those many particular identities — or sexualities — whose interrelations shape Victorian conceptions of themselves and others” (7).<sup>3</sup> To approach literary representations of gender and desire in this way is not to deny a relationship between gender and desire, but to complicate the relationship between them, and, consequently, to view it in a richer way. As I argued in Chapter One, literature at different times reflects, resists and produces cultural values. The analysis of these processes is not a precise science and a literary text might disclose several of these processes. For instance, Mary Poovey’s analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* illustrates the ways Victorian women writers both resisted and were limited by the notions of their muted sexuality and their natural morality. Brontë’s resistance to these assumptions consists of her depiction of continuities between Jane and the more explicitly sexualised figures of Céline Varens and Bertha, which makes a claim for the general existence of sexual desire in women, and in Jane’s refusal of St. John River’s proposal, which suggests she has motives other than love of self-sacrifice; the limitation of Brontë’s disclosure of females’ sexual desire consists of the representation of Jane’s desire for Rochester as an unconscious and even spiritual inspiration, her psychically hearing his call, which disembodies and sanctions her desire, which, it is disclosed, she feels but does not understand to be sexual desire. Brontë’s text thus engages in complex and various ways with both essentialist and constructivist conceptions of female sexual desire, as does Poovey’s reading of it.

In the readings which follow I have tried to respect the “complex specificity” of the protagonists and their desires. In so doing, I have not found it desirable or necessary to postulate a determinate formulation of



female desire or male desire, nor to characterise modes of desiring as feminine or masculine. Nevertheless, consciousness of desire involves consciousness of gender, and the protagonists in these poems desire as men and women; accordingly, their representations of desire engage in various ways with discourses of masculinity and femininity, including conceptions of female desire and male desire, but they are not, in my view, reducible to those formulations. For instance, the protagonists in each poem apprehend their desire in quite different ways. Felix Vaughan, the protagonist of Patmore's poem, announces quite early in the poem:

I never went to Ball, or Fete,  
Or Show, but in pursuit express  
Of my predestined mate;  
And thus to me, who had in sight  
The happy chance upon the cards,  
Each beauty blossom'd in the light  
Of tender personal regards;  
And, in the records of my breast,  
Red-letter'd, eminently fair,  
Stood sixteen, who, beyond the rest,  
By turns till then had been my care:  
At Berlin three, one at St. Cloud,  
At Chatteris, near Cambridge, one,  
At Ely four, in London two,  
Two at Bowness, in Paris none,  
And, last and best, in Sarum three;  
But dearest of the whole troop,  
In judgement of the moment, she  
Whose daisy eyes had learn'd to droop.  
Her very faults my fancy fired;  
My loving will, so thwarted, grew;  
And, bent on worship, I admired  
Whate'er she was, with partial view. (I.ii.4)

Vaughan, in this impressive catalogue, does depict himself as an inherently and spontaneously desiring subject (to take up Greg's terms). As such, he is conscious of being subject to a continuous desiring propulsion which sees him regularly falling in love, anywhere he goes, with whomever the moment provides. By contrast, the protagonist of Barrett Browning's poem describes her experience of falling in love quite differently:

This love even, all my worth, to the uttermost,  
 I should not love withal, unless that thou  
 Hadst set me an example, shown me how,  
 When first thine earnest eyes with mine were crossed,  
 And love called love. (xii 5-9)

Her experience of desire is throughout the poem consistently figured in terms of a sudden, specific intervention and awakening. The correspondence of these patterns to Greg's description of males' and females' sexual desire (down to the indeterminacy of the non-existence or dormancy of female desire displayed in the phrase "love called love") cannot, however, be said to prove either Greg's Victorian model or an essential sexual specificity in desire more generally because, from the start, cultural factors implicating gender are also involved in these experiences of falling in love: balls, fetes and shows and who gets to go to them while others remain in their "close room" (Sonnets xlv), the idea of a "predestinated mate" and who should have one ("I seemed not one / For such man's love" [Sonnets xxxii]), and who has "personal regards" and who must "sit beneath . . . looks, as children do" (Sonnets xxxi). The experience of desire for these protagonists involves an already gendered identity, manhood or womanhood.

For Felix Vaughan, the problem would seem to be how to particularise his desire, how to pick the best of the sixteen names written on his heart, and how to constrain himself to that single relationship, while retaining his identity as spontaneously desiring subject, while for the protagonist of Sonnets the problem involves assimilating a man's "example" of desire ("how to love") to a self-perceived non-desiring, female identity. Thus the poems, which seem individually to inhabit separate spheres of sexual desire, the masculine and the feminine as conceived by Greg, both examine experiences of self-loss or self-fragmentation that seem to accompany the experience of desire throughout Victorian poetry more generally.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Greg slides in this passage from desire to sexual desire, but the latter is his main focus.

<sup>2</sup> We can also take exception to Greg's claim that male sexual desire "belongs to the condition of puberty". If this were to be the case, clearly the adoption of a gender identity (which appears to occur between the ages of two and three years) would precede the awakening of sexual desire, thus the 'nature' of sexual desire would be already affected by culture; contrariwise, sexual drive has been postulated to be organic and present from the earliest stages of infantile life, although undergoing a period of latency prior to puberty. (Again, though, the origin and nature of the latency is arguable.)

<sup>3</sup> There are a number of difficulties associated with the purely constructivist position in addition to its weakness in accounting for deviations from the norm. Not only is there a range of acceptance and resistance to hegemonic discourses of desire, but those discourses are often internally contradictory, and send mixed messages to those they intend to influence. For instance, Cominos refers to the hypocritical training in innocence designed to repress the unconscious sexual desires which women were said both not to have and to require protection from.

## CHAPTER TWO

SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE: "I DO NOT KNOW MYSELF  
WITHOUT THEE MORE"

Introduction

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) a nameless female protagonist records, in forty-four Petrarchan sonnets, the course of her romantic passion for her (also nameless) beloved.<sup>1</sup> While the poem, the sonnets taken collectively, looks forward to a relationship between the woman and the man in which they treat each other as intellectual and artistic equals and offer each other comfort, encouragement and respect, in this reading I focus on the intra-subjective negotiation and elaboration of the woman's experience of falling and being in love, rather than on the interpersonal actualisation of this relationship between the pair. The action of the poem occurs in the speaker's "close room" (xliv), and involves her imaginative exploration of the effects of falling in love and her attempts to reconcile this unexpected experience with her sense of who she is, a plain, aging woman of fragile health and solitary habits. In Sonnets from the Portuguese to desire is both to be changed and to change oneself. Both love, which disrupts the speaker's conception of her orderly life, and the speaker's growing commitment to embracing this love and forging a relationship with her beloved continually compel her to adjust her understanding of her own identity and her future possibilities. Single sonnets and sometimes pairs of sonnets, many instances of which reprise or echo in some form the eruption of "Love" (i) into the speaker's life, reiterate themes of change as the conception of self as lover is developed.

The significant, interwoven antecedents, frequently remarked upon, of this poem are the love of Elizabeth Barrett Browning for Robert Browning and the sonnet sequence tradition. The poem is frequently discussed with reference to supplementary biographical information on its author,

including her correspondence with Robert Browning, in which many of the phrases later to appear in Sonnets from the Portuguese are first used. Not only is there thematic symmetry between the love affair of Elizabeth and Robert, and the love affair described in the poem, with its vision of a utopian romance between poet-lovers, there is also a degree of pleasing symmetry between the structure of their subsequently published correspondence and the sonnet sequence format, insofar as the individual sonnets mimic the individual letters of the correspondence (a parallel actually dramatised in sonnet xxviii, “My letters!”). The breaks between the individual lyrics suggest the passing of time between letters and also stand in for the missing half of the correspondence, Robert Browning’s letters to Elizabeth. However, as that comment suggests, the symmetry between a correspondence and a sonnet sequence is not a seamless match. Not only is a correspondence by nature a collaborative effort that depends on the involvement of both parties to enact its outcome, but that outcome need not involve closure of the correspondence if the purpose of the letter-writing is phatic rather than instrumental. By contrast, sonnets and sonnet sequences are texts characterised by rules of closure: a sequence has a finite number of ordered sonnets, which are fourteen-line lyrics with regular rhyme and metrical schemes. In diverging from the open-endedness of a correspondence, Barrett Browning adheres rather to the sonnet sequence pattern and one is in no danger of mistaking the poem for a correspondence even though it mimics one, and one particular correspondence, in some respects.

Because Sonnets from the Portuguese conforms to many sonnet sequence conventions, Dorothy Mermin’s observation that “we do not hear the voice of tradition speaking through [Elizabeth Barrett Browning]” (1989 6) is only partially correct. Barrett Browning certainly alludes to and reprises many of the themes and images of Shakespeare’s sonnets.<sup>2</sup> In addition, her minor variations from formal convention (such as the periodic absence of division between octet and sestet, for instance in xvii, and her use of half rhyme, for example in xii) are not such that they render the lyrics unrecognisable as sonnets or the poem unrecognisable as a sonnet

sequence. Sonnets from the Portuguese might in this respect be contrasted with both Augusta Webster's Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet Sequence, which is incomplete in order and perhaps number due to the author's death before publication, thereby calling into question its attribution as a sequence, and George Meredith's Modern Love, which introduces a sixteen-line variation to the individual lyrics, thus calling into question their attribution as sonnets. In Sonnets from the Portuguese the traditional formal elements are preserved; moreover, it is the structure of the sonnet and sonnet sequence, and the readerly expectations they arouse, that shapes many readings of the poem. The two parts of a Petrarchan sonnet are conventionally used to elaborate first a problem, in the octet, then its resolution or closure in the subsequent sestet. A sonnet sequence can imitate this structure (problem, resolution) on a different scale, as the progression of lyrics towards a conclusion constructs a poem. In this trajectory a sonnet sequence resembles or constructs a narrative. The idea that something problematic is resolved in Sonnets from the Portuguese is a feature of most interpretations of the poem. For instance, Mermin reads the poem as addressing "the problematic relation of a woman's life to a poet's work" (1989 4), a problem which is resolved through a multi-level strategy of "doubling" (1989 130), which allowed Barrett Browning to present her female protagonist both as the object of desire and as a (female) desiring subject, and as both muse and poet. Glennis Stephenson (1989) proposes that the privileged trope of masculine desire in amatory poetry, the gaze, does not represent or accommodate female desire, which she says privileges the "tactual" over the visual. She argues Barrett Browning resolved this problem with a pattern of imagery of distances being overcome, thereby replacing frustrated desire with gratified desire. Pauline Simonsen (1993) offers a three step reading describing the protagonist's initial ambivalence towards romantic love and its cultural determinants and constituents, followed by her rejection of the prescribed female role of sinner/penitent, and, finally, the development of belief in her own capacity, through representation/writing, to transform the co-ordinates of power and passion in a love relationship. Finally, Margaret Reynolds (1997) reads the poem as a resolution of the problem of proportionality in love (who loves

whom the most), achieved in imagery of trade, exchange and commerce, which describes an economy of equals.

In those readings the focus is frequently upon the gender politics of poetry: how a woman poet managed to participate in, and to some extent revise, a male tradition of amatory poetry, and, just as significantly, how she dramatised a female desiring subject in a genre which is based on woman's presence (or rather absence) as a silent object of desire rather than as a desiring subject. All the above readers have affirmed the literary significance of both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Sonnets from the Portuguese in this respect (Mermin going so far as to call Barrett Browning the "great mythic mother" [1989 2] of both the male and the female poets who followed her) and their readings have countered many of the earlier criticisms made of the poem. For instance, Mermin excuses certain "embarrassing" (Robert Heilman's 1945 characterisation of the poem's incoherencies) or incongruous elements in the poem (such as the speaker's self-denigration and the representation of the exchange of locks of hair), which suggest that the portrait of female desire rendered is "merely personal [and] mawkishly 'sincere'" (1989 141), by proposing they are rather consequences of Barrett Browning's pioneering efforts to develop a "new poetry" that can accommodate the female voice. Stephenson's appreciation takes a different, and in my view less persuasive, line, discerning in Sonnets from the Portuguese the representation of a uniquely female mode of desire, "woman's desire" (73), which prefers touching to looking, and consummation to frustration, and which therefore cannot be expressed with the scopic imagery developed to express male desire in amatory poetry.<sup>3</sup> Jerome Mazzaro (1991), by contrast, declines to read incoherencies in the poem (he instances the sometimes inapt religious allegorising) as solely effects of gender displacement (female poet, female voice or female desire). He proposes they are rather deliberate strategies used by Barrett Browning in an attempt to represent an encounter with the sublime, the apotheosis of nobility, valour, passion and exaltation. He argues that "much as imprecision and formal violations function in the sublime poems to suggest a release from religious preconceptions,

imprecision and formal violations function in [the] sonnets of daily life to convey release from social expectations” (177). From Mazarro’s perspective, to attempt to rationalise these violations or to read them as a progressively developed and coherent figurative scheme defeats the author’s attempt to convey the “frightening and unbounded” (170) experience, characteristic of the sublime, that the protagonist undergoes.

Mazarro’s description of the sublime evokes Leo Bersani’s description of *desire* as “an area of human projection going beyond the limits of a centred, socially defined, time-bound self, and also beyond the recognized resources of language and confines of literary form” (1976 ix). Literary form, in this case the sonnet and sonnet sequence, becomes a boundary against which the representation of desire/desiring struggles and transgresses, and, moreover, it is a boundary that must be recognised in order to produce this effect of desire’s excess and violence (in the same way that the preservation of the traditional formal elements highlights that which *is* anomalous in the poem, its female speaking subject and its Victorian setting).<sup>4</sup> Bersani’s description of (literary) desire includes an element of violence, which can be seen not only in relation to the transgression of formal convention, but also in the fragmentation of character that accompanies desire. He says (of Racine’s *Andromaque*), “the hero’s life is fragmented; its continuity is broken, something abruptly ends and something else abruptly begins . . . [there is] a violent passage from one psychological and social order to another” (4). *Sonnets from the Portuguese* also opens with an image of violent disruption, the protagonist’s ambush and seizure by “Love”, against whose “mastery” she struggles; the poem goes on to elaborate the “passage” from one psychological state (self as “not one / For . . . love” [xxxii]) to another (self as lover). Bersani’s characterisation of desire as violence, together with Mazarro’s identification of terror in the experience of the sublime (166), can, accordingly, be used to infer a process of self-destruction (the self’s destruction) or fragmentation in addition to the identified strands of self-creation identified by Mermin, Stephenson and Simonsen. To have one’s desire switched on late in life, after having developed or internalised a



passionless identity, and subsequently to identify in oneself the transgressive and excessive movement of desire — to go from being an ostensible Angel to being an ostensible Eve through no direct volitional act of one's own — must bring with it a sense of both power and terror; the former has been thoroughly discussed, the latter less frequently.

In sonnet xxxiv the protagonist asks, “is the same the same, / Perplexed and ruffled by life's strategy?” The answer the poem offers to this question has been suggested some sonnets earlier, in xxvi: “better, yet the same, / As river-water hallowed into fonts”. For the protagonist of Sonnets from the Portuguese, the effects of falling in love are so profound that she feels irrevocably altered:

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand  
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore  
Alone upon the threshold of my door  
Of individual life, I shall command  
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand  
Serenely in the sunshine as before, (vi)

In the reading that follows I examine the dramatisation of change as it relates to the protagonist's identity in Sonnets from the Portuguese. While I do not disagree with those readers who have traced a progression from rejection to acceptance of love, the thematics of my study suggest a less linear approach to the poem. In this poem fragmentation, disjunction and change are reiterated motifs reprised sonnet by sonnet and negotiated on a case by case basis throughout the poem. The protagonist's acknowledgement of herself as a desiring subject is a process conducted in multiple stages rather than being a resolution managed in a single moment or along a single trajectory (such as that provided by the sequence of sonnets i through xlv). Moreover, the poem claims that if the protagonist is to recognise and accept herself as a desiring subject, she must also recognise and accept the ongoing mutability of her identity. The topics of this reading are the relations of time and place to desire and identity, and finally a discussion of the Electra motif as trope for power and terror. One

final introductory comment is required, however. Sonnets from the Portuguese is a poem about love: the word desire is never mentioned in it. It is my contention that falling in love initiates a period of focused thinking, speculation (including fantasising) and self-interrogation, which are themselves the constituents of conscious desire; thus the poem, while about love, dramatises a desiring subject.

### Desire, Identity and Time

One of the constituents of identity is the sensibility of one's historical continuity, of being the self-same, same self over time. In Sonnets from the Portuguese the first assault on the protagonist's identity involves her being abruptly ("straightway") catapulted out of her own unfolding history:

I thought once how Theocritus had sung  
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,  
Who each one in a gracious hand appears  
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:  
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,  
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,  
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung  
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,  
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move  
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair, (i)

The break in the protagonist's subjective continuity is dramatised as a break in temporal continuity: in sonnet i as a rupture in continuous time (the years "by turns") and elsewhere as a new appraisal of the passage of time and the means by which it is measured. As the trope in sonnet i indicates, the passage of time does not change, but the protagonist's perception of herself as constituted within and subject to this order of time (the years are "flung" over her) changes. The march of time goes on, but the protagonist no longer marches with it; she has stopped marching and perhaps found a "place to stand and love in for a day" (xxii).

In sonnet xvii the protagonist characterises her beloved as a "poet [who] canst touch on all the notes / God set between his After and Before". The

time “Before” is the period of “darkness” before love, the time “After” is the “death-hour” (xxii), but the time “between” is love’s time (see also “a love set pendulous between / Sorrow and sorrow” [xxxvi]). The time “Before” (love) consists of an accretion of undifferentiated years. Although this mode of time is dramatised in layers of diverse images atop one another, all the images are reducible to the same repetitive, cheerless meaning. Besides sonnet i’s “melancholy years . . . by turns” there are “sighing years / Re-sighing” (ix); “link by link . . . all my chains” (xx); and “year to year . . . sorrow after sorrow [like] stringed pearls . . . each lifted in its turn” (xxv). By contrast the time after love enters the protagonist’s life is a period characterised by upheaval and change. Love throws the speaker out of synchronicity with the repetitive procession of years and teaches her “the whole / Of life in a new rhythm” (vii). Her body feels different: her “pulses . . . beat double” (vi) and her blood runs faster (xxxiv). She feels unbalanced: she “thrill[s]” (xx) and is “perplexed and ruffled” (xxxiv). This time “between” sorrows is measured on love’s timepiece, which is set to “love’s eternity” (xiv) — yet at the same time given sensuous immediacy in the beloved’s capacity to “touch on all [its] notes” (xvii) — and its days are marked on love’s calendar with love-letters (xxviii), kisses (xxxviii), and tolling “silver iterance[s]” (xxi). (There is, as Margaret Reynolds notes, also something business-like about the recording of these transactions, producing the sense that love’s measurement is being made.)

If the past was characterised by dullness and repetition, the present is characterised by excitement and variety. The bundle of letters the speaker re-reads in sonnet xxviii symbolises the difference between the two periods. As she “loose[s] the string” the letters separate to symbolise discrete moments in the romance (“this . . . this . . . this . . . And this”). The letters, thus loosened, contrast with the previously undifferentiated years and repetitious days because each letter is different, each has its own specific content and each letter engendered a different response: one caused her to weep, another to quail, yet another made her heart beat faster, and now, re-reading them, her hands tremble. Clearly, these images also

denote a self in flux. Undifferentiated time is reconstituted as special occasions, such as a day in “his sight / Once”, and another “day in Spring” on which he visited, rendering each individual day significant. The same pattern is associated with the beloved’s kisses in sonnet xxxviii and his “many flowers” of the final sonnet.<sup>5</sup> The compounded effect of these multifarious special instances is the dramatisation of an attitude of haecceity, a special attentiveness to the feeling of being alive in each moment. Love has caused the speaker to stop thinking about death (“Then my soul, instead / Of dreams of death, resumes life’s lower range” [xxiii]) and to focus more intently on the immediate, which she now perceives in terms of colour, variety and vitality.

The beloved introduces the protagonist to a new, or at least revised, order of time: he “think[s] it soon when others cry ‘Too late’” (xl). The suggestion that time has leapt backwards implies a symbolic (re-)birth, and the speaker’s simile of sonnet vi, “What I do / And what I dream include thee as the wine / Must taste of its own grapes”, certainly suggests a primal reconstitution of her identity.<sup>6</sup> There are, in addition to the personified intervention of “Love” in sonnet i drawing the protagonist “backward”, a number of other pertinent images: in sonnet v “wild red sparkles” are fanned into fires; in sonnet vi, the protagonist stands “upon the threshold” of a new life; and in sonnet xxvii the speaker is re-vivified by the beloved’s “life breath”. References to spring (xxi, xxviii) suggest a the beginning of a season of fecundity and new life, as do the images of the pilgrim’s staff giving out new “green leaves with morning dew impearled” (xlii) and the speaker’s thoughts, which “twine and bud” (xxix). In sonnet xxvi the association of the beloved with “fonts” suggests a baptism. These images indicate that the speaker is confronting a fundamentally changed conception of herself; moreover, if the analogy of self and wine holds true, and the imagery of re-birth supports that being the case as does the theme of separate houses in sonnet xxxv, there can be no blending or middle ground of old and new identities. (Certainly, in the context of the author’s life, self-as-daughter and self-as-wife were discontinuous identities: Barrett Browning’s relationship with her father was incontrovertibly severed by

her elopement with Robert Browning, and father and daughter did not speak again in Barrett Browning's lifetime.)

If one may be jolted out of one's historical mode of identity and be reborn in such a fashion, what then might be the basis of future subjective continuity over time? Sonnet xiv suggests an answer:

If thou must love me, let it be for nought  
 Except for love's sake only. Do not say  
 'I love her for her smile . . . her look . . . her way  
 Of speaking gently, . . . For a trick of thought  
 That falls in well with mine, and certes brought  
 A sense of pleasant ease on such a day' —  
 For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may  
 Be changed, or change for thee, — and love, so wrought,  
 May be unwrought so. Neither love me for  
 Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry, —  
 A creature might forget to weep, who bore  
 Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!  
 But love me for love's sake, that evermore  
 Thou mayst love on, through love's eternity. (xiv)

Some symbols of love that has endured over time are the “kiss [her] mother left” on the speaker's hair (xviii) and the “pet-name” (xxxiii) others called her by as a child. These inalienable emblems of “early love” (xxxiii), however, come from “dead eyes too tender to know change” (xxxv), and as such they guarantee her former identity (as an object of others' love) rather than her future subjective continuity (after all “things in themselves [that] may / Be changed, or change” include herself). Sonnet xiv proclaims that future subjective continuity is obtained not through the residue of having been the object of love, but rather through “lov[ing] on”, that is through becoming a loving subject. However, the insight obtained in sonnet xiv applies only to the beloved, as indicated in sonnet xvii, where she asks, “How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?” Her demand that he “[c]hoose” a role for her is a move back into the role of self-as-object for another, as is her self-characterisation, “I sit beneath thy looks, as children do” in xxxi. In sonnet xix, where the speaker “barter[s] curl for curl”, however, she takes an active role in nourishing her beloved's hair on her

heart, symbolising herself as lover. Her commitment to providing “natural heat” in xix begins the process of “shoot[ing] / [Her] soul’s full meaning into future years” (xli), that is, embracing a new, ongoing identity of self as lover (thus, “I seek no copy now of life’s first half” [xliv]).

### Desire, Identity and Place

In Sonnets from the Portuguese internal change is also expressed through metaphors and imagery of external disruption and dislocation. Again, as with the temporal motif, this motif is supported by the structure of the sonnet sequence, which permits the poem to jump from one to another space or place without reference to a predetermined, exterior geography such as one might find in a more obviously narrative poem. Sonnets from the Portuguese might in this respect be contrasted with The Angel in the House, which moves between the locations of Vaughan’s and Honor’s homes and church, and Amours de Voyage, which traverses the length and breadth of Italy. Reference to place in these poems does not generally have a particular symbolic significance (with the exceptions of the marital bedroom in The Angel in the House and Claude’s travels in Canto IV of Amours de Voyage, as Chapter Five argues); however, in Sonnets from the Portuguese reference to place is a technique for rendering a metaphorical map of the protagonist’s changing identity.<sup>7</sup>

Sonnets iii and iv instantiate the metaphor of place for self. The sonnets establish a qualitative contrast between the protagonist and her beloved; thus, she is associated with both wandering through the dark (iii) and a poor and desolate house (iv), while he is associated with “social pageantries” (iii) and palace floors (iv). (This point is also made in sonnet xi through the association of “worth” with “place”: “it is plain / I am not of thy worth nor for thy place!”) While the associations of the images are consistent throughout both sonnets (that is, he is always associated with high position and she with poverty), the sonnets invert each other’s perspectives: in iii he is inside looking out at her, while in iv, she is now inside and he must “bear” to leave the palace floors to “lift this house’s

latch too poor". The speaker's self-characterisation of homelessness in iii ("me, / A poor, tired, wandering singer") can be read as a figure for her self-estrangement, or her sense of being 'outside' herself. Her subsequent repositioning in sonnet iv then suggests that despite her sense of inner change, there will be no accompanying change in her real world circumstances, and that she will remain a woman "alone, aloof". These paired sonnets suggest a change in self-perception, but also that the identity of self as lover has not yet been developed.

Another pair of sonnets, vi and xxxv, represent internal change as external change through the strategy of conflating heart and home. In sonnet vi the word "threshold" seems to indicate that the protagonist is on the verge of entering a new phase in her "individual life"; however, the image is not taken up, and she remains standing there. There is an internal change (in "sense" and serenity), but it is not to be accompanied by a relationship with the beloved ("I forbore, . . . / Thy touch upon the palm"). This sonnet also returns to the images of vastness and illimitability used in sonnet ii. In sonnet ii the speaker says, "Our hands would touch for all the mountain-bars", and in sonnet vi she says, "The widest land / Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine".<sup>8</sup> There is to be a union between the pair only in the metaphorical sense, "thy heart in mine". The image of the threshold in vi is taken up and developed, however, in sonnet xxxv, in which the speaker imagines actually entering a new home, but this time the metaphor is reversed, and the new "home" is the beloved's "heart".<sup>9</sup> (The implication of re-birth discussed above is also suggested by the speaker's reference to her "wet wings" in this sonnet.) Both sonnet vi and xxxv thus suggest that home (i.e. self) is where the heart (love or desire) is. (The figurative pattern is continued in sonnet xxxvi, with its references to "build[ing] in marble" and becoming "serene".)

In addition to describing a change in relationship between the speaker and her beloved, tropes of place are used to dramatise a more general subjective instability associated with falling in love. For instance, the poem jumps from place to place in a pattern of spatial reversals and

inversions. I have noted above the inversion of positions in sonnets iii and iv. There are several such others: in sonnet ii death signifies “absolute exclusion”, but in iii death is “a level” on which the couple may “agree”; in ii the speaker avers “men could not part us”, but in iii it is precisely the social world that intervenes between the pair; and in sonnet xi the speaker claims to be “not . . . for thy place”, but in sonnet xii says her soul has been “placed . . . by thee on a golden throne”. These images of reversal (negation then affirmation) disclose the protagonist’s conflicting desires to renounce love and to embrace love, and her wish for “ [a] place to stand and love in for a day” (xxii) is also a metaphor for her desire to *be* a lover. This pattern of conflict undergoes a change in the concluding sonnets of the poem, which employ expansive metaphors rather than simple reversed locations. In sonnet xliii the speaker’s offer of “the depth and breadth and height” of “Being” matches the beloved’s whole world of sonnet vii, while in sonnet xlv the speaker’s “close room” is itself the site of the expansive “unfold[ing]” of her ongoing (“their roots are left in mine”) desire (“thoughts”). The “close room” is, thus, also another metaphor for the self, in which the beloved’s love (his flowers that seemed to grow) has taken root, and, moreover, it is a metaphor that suggests the protagonist has access to an inner “place” where she is a lover.

Sonnet vii, which opens with the averment “[t]he face of all the world is changed”, also describes a world in flux: “The names of country, heaven, are changed away / For where thou art or shalt be, there or here”. While this line speaks to the cliché that there are only two places in love, with one’s beloved and apart from one’s beloved, this theme is reworked more specifically in terms of identity in sonnets xxix-xxxi. In sonnet xxix the speaker distinguishes between her imaginative construction of her beloved and the beloved himself, using the simile of a vine, whose “broad leaves” and “straggling green” eventually “insphere” the tree it grows on, hiding it from view. The supplanting of the actual by the imagined produces uncertainty, as the mixed metaphor indicates: “O my palm-tree . . . Rustle thy boughs”, and the speaker demands the beloved “[r]enew [his] presence” (a phrase which Simonsen cleverly reads as a demand for the



referent rather than the signifier). The motif continues in the next sonnet, in which the speaker is again “[p]erplexed, uncertain” since the beloved is “out of sight”. This time she uses a simile of an “acolyte . . . swooning” under the influence of an imagined “ideal”. In xxix the beloved’s presence puts an end to the speaker’s self-replicating fantasies, “Because, in this deep joy to see and hear [him] / And breathe within [his] shadow a new air, / {She does} not think of [him]”. This pattern is repeated in sonnet xxxi, where the beloved is adjured to “[b]rood down . . . [t]hese thoughts which tremble”. The speaker’s demands in these sonnets are linked by the phrase “as children do” in sonnet xxxi to her memory of herself “when [as] a child . . . [I used] To glance up in some face that proved me dear / With the look of its eyes”. Thus in sonnets xxix-xxxi she identifies with her childhood self as the object of others’ love, but she also behaves as a desiring subject by constituting, through the linked images and language, a demand for her beloved’s love as a living replacement for the now departed “eyes” of xxxiii.<sup>10</sup>

### The Electra Motif

In Greek mythology, Electra is the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and sister to Orestes. Upon his return from the siege of Troy, Agamemnon is murdered by Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthos; in turn Clytemnestra is murdered by Orestes in retribution. This basic plot was treated in different ways by the three Greek dramatists who wrote plays about it, so it is important to know which Electra is being referred to. In sonnet v the lines “I lift my heavy heart up solemnly, / As once Electra her sepulchral urn” tell us that the allusion is to Sophocles’ version of the myth, because his is the only version of the myth that uses a funerary urn.<sup>11</sup> In Sophocles’ Electra, Electra has determined that her duty to her father requires her to oppose her mother. She characterises herself as having taken the moral high ground and this has naturally made her unpopular with the new regime. She resists and undermines her mother in such ways as she is able to, but above all she waits and hopes for her brother to return to avenge their father’s murder. Orestes does return, but in order to

achieve his planned revenge he devises a ruse to enable him to get close to his mother: he pretends to be a messenger carrying the ashes of the dead Orestes. Electra's despair in receiving the urn containing her brother's ashes is quickly replaced with joy when Orestes reveals himself to her, and together they plan and carry out the murders.

If it is an interpretive convention that Sonnets from the Portuguese is a poem based on the actual romance of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, it has also become an interpretive convention that the allusion to Electra, because of the funerary urn and the Electra-Orestes relationship, is a reference to Barrett Browning's grief for her beloved brother who had drowned some years earlier.<sup>12</sup> In purely biographical terms the allusion does not strictly fit, though, as Barrett Browning's brother, unlike Electra's, really was dead. If Barrett Browning was taking liberties with her allusion, however, we might take another liberty with biographical interpretation and read in the allusion a reference to Barrett Browning's dominating father. Where Electra had to choose between being loyal to her father or to her mother, Barrett Browning's desire to marry Robert Browning was in total conflict with her capacity to be an obedient daughter, as her father measured such things. This being the case, the allusion can be read biographically as representing Barrett Browning's conflict over the terms of filial duty and personal desire.<sup>13</sup>

We might, however, also interpret the allusion as a marker of literary innovation. Sophocles himself was a literary groundbreaker, who is generally held to be the originator of the third actor on stage in Greek tragedy. Barrett Browning's reference to him establishes her own credentials as a groundbreaking poet, a status she merits twofold. First, she dramatises a female heroine/lover within a literary tradition — the sonnet sequence — comprised predominantly of male poets and male lovers. Secondly, she dramatises a consummated love affair in a tradition — the courtly tradition — associated with frustrated love. Barrett Browning's insistence on a happy ending for her protagonist reminds us that Sophocles' play also ends on the optimistic assertion that "freedom is won".

We know that in narratives of desire, woman's place is in the margins. She is the silent other, Sleeping Beauty, the booty won or lost by the hero. However, in Sophocles' *Electra* we find a woman centre stage, and this centrality is all the more significant that the myth requires that Orestes return and murder his mother.<sup>14</sup> This is an essential structural problem for the play: how can Electra be not only the titular protagonist but also its hero, when Orestes is the one who must bring the plot to its conclusion? We see the same problem in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: how can the protagonist rescue herself and become a desiring subject when, as she herself says, she is "saved" and "overcome" by her beloved? The answer, in both play and poem, is that the drama and meaning inheres not in the trajectory of event and action but in the exposition of heroic character, and in particular in the exploration of the strength and weakness of the great 'man' who falls, which as Watling reminds us, was the central concern of Greek tragedy.

Electra is a woman of her time and place, who finds herself out of that time and place. First, events (beyond her control) have dislocated her from the cultural order that defines the co-ordinates of timeliness and place in a woman's life, co-ordinates such as marriage, motherhood, family name and rank. She becomes subject to a different, and self-chosen, order of time and place: she postpones her life and waits outside the house she has renounced. In the play, Electra's weakness and also her strength, her tragedy and her heroism, are constituents of her sorrow. "I have no strength. I cannot stand alone under this load of my affliction" (72), she cries. Her self-imposed sorrow alienates her from her surviving family, to whom it appears an accusation. It incurs poverty and the threat of exile. Sorrow condemns her to a joyless and barren existence: "I have no child, no man to love . . . And now this passion can have no end till my life ends" (74-75). However, sorrow becomes strength in Electra's self-determined embracing of it, which in turn results in a kind of heroic endurance. In the play she is described as grieving "beyond all reason" (73) and as a self-torturing "hoarder of grief" (75), and in this quality she contrasts with her

more pragmatic sister Chrysothemis. Electra asks, “How would it help me to renounce this sorrow?” (79); her answer to her own question is that her sorrow enables her “to live on” (79). Identity, sorrow and life are co-referents. Electra’s heroic endurance leads to her being conceived by others as masculine. This masculine characterisation is, moreover, deliberately highlighted in the play: her sister asks her, “Do you forget you are a woman [?]” (98). Of course, to be strong, passionate and to have endurance are not inherently masculine characteristics, they are characteristics predominantly associated with male character. To be a heroic woman is not to become masculinized, it is rather to be characterised by others as masculine.

Although sonnet v is the only sonnet to allude directly to Electra, there is, throughout the sequence, a sustained evocation of Electra in terms of both plot and character. Electra’s tragedy is echoed in Sonnets from the Portuguese, when, in sonnet xi the protagonist declares she will “live on” by renouncing her beloved and committing herself to her grief. Electra’s “heavy load of enduring sorrow” (83) in the play is closely replicated by the speaker’s “great heap of grief” in sonnet v, and the reiterated use of the word “sorrow” in Sophocles’ play is reprised in Sonnets from the Portuguese, in which thirty-five of the forty-four sonnets contain references to death, sorrow, grief, or tears. Electra’s self-characterisation that she has “waited and waited till all the hope I ever had is worn away” (77) is echoed by the protagonist’s “hopes apace / were changed to long despairs” in xxv; Clytemnestra’s plan to banish Electra “to end [her] life singing sad dirges in a vaulted dungeon” is modelled in sonnet iv:

Look up and see the casement broken in,  
The bats and owlets builders in the roof!  
My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.  
Hush, call no echo up in further proof  
Of desolation! There’s a voice within  
That weeps . . . as thou must sing . . . alone, aloof.

Additionally, sonnet xxi, from “I think of thee” to the demand “[r]enew thy presence”, mimics Electra’s longing for Orestes’ return, and sonnet xxxi’s

“prodigal inward joy” echoes her response to his reappearance (although in Sonnets these sentiments are directed at the beloved). The reference to masks in sonnet xxxix evokes the staging of Greek tragedy, while the exchange of locks in xviii-xix recalls when Electra notes that her own hair, being “not glossy” (82), is an unfit tribute to place upon the grave of her dead father, although it is a fitting symbol for her grief.

In Sonnets from the Portuguese the protagonist’s grief is the impediment to love conventionally required by the sonneteer; it also (as Mermin has noted) ascribes to the protagonist other signs of weakness associated with traditional male poet-wooers, such as isolation, paleness, and weariness. Her commitment to grief is, like Electra’s, a kind of death-in-life: “I myself grew faint and blind”. At the same time, Barrett Browning’s excessive reference to her protagonist’s excessive grief serves to emphasise her protagonist’s capacity for endurance, rendered in sonnet xiii as her “dauntless, voiceless fortitude”. Grief has also given the protagonist strength, which she is later able to use in romantic love, as she indicates in the famous sonnet xliii “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways”, where she says “I love thee with the passion put to use / In my old griefs”.

If Electra is a possible model of strength in terms of female character, her mode of heroism, unbending resistance to the social and political order founded by her mother, and the form of her heroic action, matricide, violated both the precepts of law and the prescriptions of filial obligation.<sup>15</sup> Electra’s excessive, and ultimately violent, passion had the capacity to render her an extremely dangerous threat, both to idea of the family and to the idea of the state: “Now may the house and kingdom cry” (113), the chorus declaims after the murders. Moreover, in vowing vengeance on the murderers of her father, Electra also appropriates the rightful power of the gods (the Furies) to avenge kin murders. Electra represents the threat of the self-determining woman, a woman who defines her own (intemperate) identity, defines her own interests and is not afraid to act. The intemperate woman, it has been repeatedly observed, resonates throughout Victorian

literature as an emblem of fear and scandal (and who is cast in Victorian literature as a sexualised and/or mad woman). Barrett Browning's recognition and appropriation of these aspects of the Electra myth, the potential threat represented by the self-determining and passionate woman, is indicated in several places: in the Electra sonnet itself, as "when the winds blow up . . . all the fires shall scorch and shred", but also (in a very trenchant reversal of image from whore to angel, which reprises Electra's usurpation of the gods' powers) in her self-characterisation as a "patient angel waiting for a place / In the *new heavens*" (xxxix; my emphasis).

Electra is a figure who can symbolise specifically female resistance to cultural stereotypes of feminine behaviour, emotion and desire. In his discussion of desire in literature, Leo Bersani suggests that literary heroes of desire are often glamorous, and seem to embody both an enterprise of subversion (68) and a secret excess or violence (70). Certainly, Sophocles' Electra embodies these qualities in abundance: with pride, she calls herself "[v]ile, brutal, shameless" (86). She represents a literary configuration of female duty and desire governed by self-determination and personal choice, under the most difficult vicissitudes of fortune and against the claims of others, at a tremendous personal cost. The pattern for character in the poem, provided by Sophocles' Electra, is a person who can transform external circumstances (symbolised by tropes of time and place in the poem) into opportunities to transform and re-define herself. As I have argued, these transformations and re-definitions can also be conceived of as struggles involving the self's destruction and self-creation. Electra is also, in these respects, doubtlessly an ambiguous model, whose gains ("freedom") are always to be measured against her losses (her father, her mother, the blood on her hands). It is in this conjunction of heroism and tragedy, gain and loss, that Electra is a most fitting model for Barrett Browning's protagonist. However, the poet's and the protagonist's resistance to certain modes of cultural hegemony is also limited. The poet signs up to traditional hence masculine literary modes — classical tragedy and Petrarchan sonnet — that of themselves prescribe and proscribe the

contours of the story she may tell. The protagonist similarly subjects herself to a cultural order defined by her beloved — his order of time and place — thereby reconstituting her self-conception on terms external to herself: gain and loss. The ambivalence engendered by this loss is frequently dramatised in violent and destructive images, such as, for instance, the fires of sonnet x; the images of being “snatched up” in xii, being “vanquished” in xvi, and being “conquer[ed]” in xxxv; and the linking of love and hate in sonnet xl. However, at the same time, both Electra and Sonnets from the Portuguese end without closure, on notes of freedom, suggesting enigmatically and subversively that the measure of the protagonists’ lives must extend beyond the limits of the story that has been told.

### Conclusion

In “Two in the Compagna” Robert Browning asks, “How is it under our control / To love or not to love?”. Sonnets from the Portuguese might be said to address this very question, with its frank appraisal of the self-loss experienced in falling in love. Many of the sonnets explore the question of whether the protagonist will take up a relationship with her beloved; however, even the renunciative sonnets indicate that the protagonist has already been changed by love regardless of whether she forms an on-going relationship or not. We do the poem a disservice if we reduce the protagonist’s fears about love to the single issue of socially prescribed gender relations, that is, her fear of being subject to a disempowering cultural myth of romantic love: the protagonist is already subject to cultural myths as an ‘old maid’ at the start of the poem when she is deemed too old and too plain for love. The central theme of Sonnets from the Portuguese is the reconstruction of self, dramatised through the tropes of time and place, through desire. To desire comes to mean a cautious placing of the self in the world, or an interrogation of one’s place in the world.

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 NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Reference throughout is to sonnet number.

<sup>2</sup> It is not the purpose of this study to compare sonnet sequences, so I will mention here only a few instances to support this claim. These include Shakespeare's XLIX, which concludes "Since why to love I can allege no cause", which is echoed by Barrett Browning's "If thou must love me, let it be for nought / Except for love's sake only" (xiv); Shakespeare's LVII, "being your slave, what should I do but tend / Upon the hours and times of your desires?" is echoed in "God's will devotes / Thine to such ends, and mine to wait on thine" (xvii); Shakespeare's LXXI, "No longer mourn for me when I am dead . . . If thinking on me then should make you woe" is echoed in "If I lay here dead, / Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine" (xxiii). In addition, Mermin finds in sonnet ii an allusion to Shakespeare's CXVI, which, along with the Greek allusions in the early sonnets, she interprets as Barrett Browning establishing her "cultural credentials" (1989 138).

<sup>3</sup> Stephenson's argument in her chapter on Sonnets from the Portuguese begins with a quotation from Luce Irigaray, that female desire "would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks" (cited in Stephenson 73). Stephenson goes on to claim that Barrett Browning's "use of the trope of distance . . . certainly supports the general view of woman's preference for the tactual rather than the visual". An argument for gender-specific desire that proceeds from Irigaray's 'two lips' theory is suspect: can it not be argued that through the ongoing contact between the foreskin and the penis, man also 'touches himself' all the time? Not only is Stephenson's reification of woman, and consequently "woman's desire", disturbing, but her claims that such phenomena are representable merely through a shift in figuration or



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imagery within the form or “logic” of courtly love poetry are, in my view, arguable.

<sup>4</sup> Bersani argues that the literary representation of this “going beyond” results in an “elusive density” (5), which can confound interpretation and categorising, as Sonnets from the Portuguese has been said to in its overwrought syntax and imagery and its mingling of the personal and literary.

<sup>5</sup> In sonnet xxi the speaker asks her beloved to “Say over again, and yet once over again, / That thou dost love me . . . Say thou dost love me, love me, love me”. This repetitious refrain is distinguished from the previous repetitive cycles in the speaker’s life by associating each call with the coming of spring, suggesting that each iteration has a re-vivifying effect.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it can also be said that the use of the analogy of grapes and wine suggests an element of violence in this transformation. Mermin notes of this sonnet that the “tone is tender, but the images of incorporation carry menace, and grapes must be crushed to make wine” (1989 134).

<sup>7</sup> As his title suggests, Jerome Mazzaro argues that Sonnets from the Portuguese renders a “map of sublimity”. Thus, in sonnet i, he reads a movement from the “bounded imaginative realm of literary reminiscence into the frightening and unbounded realm of mystical appearance” (170). This movement is re-figured as the “limitlessness of God” (171) in sonnet ii. For Mazzaro, Barrett Browning’s “calculated incoherence” (171) — language that dramatises confusion and inexpressibility — is an approach to describing an encounter with the sublime as deity, although he notes that Renaissance poets used similar techniques to dramatise lovers’ passion. There is clearly some confluence between these categories of desire, although my own interest in this chapter is predominantly on the latter.

<sup>8</sup> Glennis Stephenson argues that these images impose distance between

the lovers in order that it may be subsequently overcome. Where the imposition of distance in courtly love poetry engenders a scopical economy (lovers who look but do not touch), in Sonnets from the Portuguese the imposition of distance is a strategy for intensifying desire (80) and also for rendering the consummation that follows “more perfect and moving” (89).

<sup>9</sup> That these images of disrupted homeliness are figures for disrupted identity can also be inferred with reference to a psychoanalytical paradigm, Freud’s “uncanny”. Freud says that the uncanny (“that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us” [123-24]) derives from both the exposure of a secret and the de-familiarisation of the familiar (for instance, the concealment of the known). The uncanny is suggested in Sonnets from the Portuguese in sonnet xxxv, in which the “new range / Of walls and floors” can be read as a façade or double that both replicates and obscures the notion of “home”, thereby rendering the idea of home “strange” or uncanny. Freud argues that the feeling of uncanniness associated with particular objects and events can be accounted for by the evocation and return of repressed infantile anxieties and wishes projected unconsciously onto those objects and events. Although we can’t infer an infantile complex from the poem, we can infer an intra-subjective conflict from it, such that it might be suggested that the strangeness of a new home represents both the protagonist’s fear of losing her identity (her estrangement from “[h]ome-talk and blessing and the common kiss”) and also her fear that this former identity may not be set aside, and might continue to impede her capacity to negotiate a relationship with her beloved (“I have grieved so I am hard to love”).

<sup>10</sup> As I indicated in the Introduction, the demand for love from the other is not the equivalent of desire as the desire of the Other in the Lacanian formulation. Rather, in such terms, the speaker’s demand for love (from her beloved) takes her towards a substitution for the original object of desire, the imaginary original bond with the mother (that is, desire to be the

phallus), via the mode of the Symbolic (language). The same distinction applies to the demand in sonnet xxiii, “Then, love me, Love, look on me” and to the attachment described in sonnet xxxiv, “my heart goes to thee . . . / Not as to a single good, but all my good!”. As a substitution, the beloved may offer a type of satisfaction but not the satisfaction of desire per se, which seeks a completion beyond anything the other can give. (I am indebted to Doreen D’Cruz, whose comments on an early draft of this chapter clarified these distinctions.)

<sup>11</sup> All references are to E. F. Watling’s translation in Electra and Other Plays, 1953. Reference is to page number.

<sup>12</sup> The allusion to Electra has been interpreted in several ways. Kathleen Blake (1983) interprets the allusion biographically, saying that “marriage and happiness would break the constancy of [Elizabeth’s] grief for her brother Edward” (179). Angela Leighton (1986 105-107) notes that the “imagery of ashes, sparks and wind is interesting because it gives the poem an undercurrent of meaning which denies [the poem’s] surface modesty”; she goes on to interpret that undercurrent as representing Barrett Browning’s creative passion, which may be whipped up by the “wind of poetry”, and which thus represents a threat to the other poet’s “laurels”. Glennis Stephenson reads the “wild red sparkles” as “the embers of passion” (77), suggesting that Electra is one of a number of roles the speaker adopts to keep the beloved at bay. These strategies are engendered by her fear of love, which, in the form of the beloved “threatens to come between her and the peaceful death which for all these years has been the only focus of her desire” (76). Mermin (1989), for one, argues that the allusion also has a more precisely thematic function:

[The simile] suggests that the lover is like a brother returned from the dead, and also that if he were to cure the speaker’s grief he would be taking the brother’s place — which may be why the speaker warns him that the ashes will flare up and burn him (as if in the recognition of rivalry: later she will ask him to “Be heir to” the

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dead [33]). While we cannot help reading in this the poet's sorrow for Bro, it functions without biographical reference as another allusion to the return of the dead: not the mythic return in Theocritus, but the complex relations of new love and old grief.  
(139)

The reference to Theocritus (in sonnet i), Mermin says, alludes to Adonis' return from death to Aphrodite; its parallel is Orestes' return from 'death' in Electra. Both symbols point to the coming of a lover. However, an alternate interpretation, suggested by Electra's averment that "[h]alf my life is wasted away" (74), is that the symbol foreshadows the protagonist's return from a kind of living death.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted, in this final respect, that Electra is nowadays also a symbol for the female version of the male Oedipal complex, which describes the girl's turning away from her mother towards her father in the process of developing a heterosexual identity (enacted by transference from the father to another man). In the play Electra tells her sister, "You ought to be ashamed, if you are our father's daughter . . . You cannot have it both ways; / Either defy her, or . . . Be an obedient daughter" (78). These implications of the myth will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, in relation to Augusta Webster's Mother and Daughter.

<sup>14</sup> By contrast, in Aeschylus' version of the myth, Electra is a peripheral figure, as suggested by the title of his play, The Oresteia, while in Euripides' 'realistic' version Electra feels largely resentment, at being married off to a lowly husband and being deprived of nice clothes and opportunities to go to balls.

<sup>15</sup> The other Greek tragic heroine whose story entails making a hard choice between duty to the familial dead and duty to the state is Antigone. Her story, however, does not end so happily: in Sophocles' play she hangs herself, and in Euripides' play she goes into exile with her father.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE: "NEW WORK AND CHANGED WAY"Introduction and Background

"The angel in the house" is, nowadays, a catchphrase used to dismissively characterise things Victorian, ranging from the period's organization of gender relations to its manners, sentiment, style and even poetry. "Angel" is a synonym for a sequestered, submissive woman, who is defined by her body, her domestic duties, and her moral mission. She is the counterpart to the other Victorian archetype, the sexualised and/or public woman of loose morals and dubious hygiene, and whom Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984), playfully subverting the angel phrase, have called the "madwoman in the attic". Angelic femininity is also the ideal complement to Victorian masculinity, as it was defined by its economic function and aggressive nature. He earned and she spent his earnings cautiously; he passed his days competing in the world of work and she provided a spiritual haven from it. Coventry Patmore's poem, The Angel in the House, is understood both to document and to participate in the construction of these Victorian scenes, the division of women into two opposing types, both designed to service male desire, and the ideology of distinct characteristics of and separate spheres for men and women.

First, the poem. The Angel in the House (1862) is a poem about a poet, Felix Vaughan, who composes a poem about his own courtship and marriage as an anniversary gift to his wife, Honor (Churchill).<sup>1</sup> It is made up of three discrete, but interwoven, strands. The first strand, the Prologue to each Book and the Epilogue, provides a contextual frame for the rest of the poem. The first Prologue introduces Felix Vaughan and his wife of eight years, and describes Vaughan's desire to write a great poem. Book I, which consists of the first part of that poem, follows. The second Prologue is set a year from the first and introduces Book II, which follows

immediately after and consists of the continuation of Vaughan's poem. The Epilogue closes the poem with a final conversation between the couple. Book I, the first part of Vaughan's poem to his wife, is comprised of twelve Cantos, each divided into two distinctive parts: Preludes (the second discursive strand) and narrative lyrics (the third strand). The Cantos are narrated by Vaughan in the first person. The Preludes contain his pronouncements on manhood, womanhood, love, sex, courtship and marriage; the narrative lyrics describe episodes in Vaughan and Honor's courtship and engagement. Book I covers the courtship up to Honor's acceptance of Vaughan's proposal; Book II, which has the same split structure as Book I, continues the narrative to just past their wedding. Although, as these remarks have indicated, The Angel in the House is structured like an epic poem, it departs from that tradition in its Victorian England setting and non-heroic plot and characters:

'Your arm's on mine! These are the meads  
 'In which we pass our living days;  
 'There Avon runs, now hid with reeds,  
 'Now brightly brimming pebbly bays;  
 'Those are our children's songs that come  
 'With bells and bleatings of the sheep;  
 'And there, in yonder English home  
 'We thrive on mortal food and sleep!' (I. Prologue. 4)

The relation of poem and catchphrase is itself a concern of many readings that analyse the poem's representation of gender relations. Joseph Bristow (1996) argues that a number of social forces converging during and after the mid-1800s threatened to limit masculine autonomy. For instance, he says, men were being legislated toward marriage as the sole context for satisfying their sexual desires; at the same time, women were gaining domestic authority through the efforts of conduct book writers and social activists, and even as a default consequence of the ideology of separate spheres. Bristow reads Patmore's poem as an attempt to assert males' domestic authority, in addition to their worldly authority, by locating *all* virtue and authority first in men, who, being possessed of an exemplary femininity in addition to their innate masculinity, have both the

capacity and the duty to activate and elevate women's innate but weak virtues. Bristow criticises the poem's "unbending inequality" (122) and its "agonized, violent hierarchy of men over women" (125). Elaine Hartnell (1996) also reads the poem in the context of select examples of the "discourses of the dominant" (474), as she calls masculinist conceptualisations of the feminine. She analyses the ways that The Angel in the House affirms various other gender theories, including those stipulated in Petrarchan love poetry, in Emanuel Swedenborg's philosophy (of married chastity and immutable femininity), and in Patmore's own essay on womanliness, "The Weaker Vessel" (1887). She concludes that "Patmore articulates a view of womanhood that is riddled with contradictions. Woman is morally superior to man and yet lacks morality; woman is 'heaven and the way' but man must get to heaven by his own efforts; woman is innately feminine but must be taught femininity by man, who is immutably male" (472).

Carol Christ (in Vicinus 1977) and John Maynard (1993) focus more directly upon the representation of sexual relations in the poem, and both take particular issue with Patmore's device of the "chace". Christ argues that the idealization of women as angels in the house (both as a broad cultural phenomenon and in the poem) derived from and reflected men's fears about their own sexual aggression. Ironically, she says, the idealisation of female passivity required of men precisely the sexual aggression (the chase) they had hoped to ameliorate in themselves. Maynard finds the poem dishonest. In his view the poem stultifies sex: everything is too orderly and bland, and the poem seems too easily to subdue the problem of sex by "filtering out the realities of marriage and idealizing what is left" (181). He says the poem constructs a "reduced and binary world" (184) that depends on an opposition between the ideal of "ultra-civility" and the "sadism and brutality [that characterises the] sexual state of nature" (184). He argues that Patmore fails to occupy the "still centre of sexual discussion" (182), that is the actual sex act, by refusing to explore "the tensions and anxieties produced by sexual excitement" (182); nevertheless, he says, those disturbing energies "find their subversive,

textually deconstructing outlets” (183) through which to erupt, such as “the chace” (I.xii). Actually, it is hard to know what bothers Maynard most about the poem: its claims that sex can be civilised (i.e. its ‘dishonesty’), or that its version of civilised sex and sexuality is actually rather sadistic (i.e. its ‘honesty’).<sup>2</sup>

The readings above have all contributed to showing how the poem fits within the complex of fantasies and fears that engendered and reproduced the Victorian construction of gender and gender relations that we now call ‘the angel in the house’, just as the expanding body of knowledge about those constructions has enriched these readings of the poem, and in particular of the assertions contained within the Preludes to each Canto. Patmore, through his spokesman Felix Vaughan, is argued to speak for the culture and his articulations are taken as cultural reflections. By focusing not on the trope of the angel, however, but on two other metaphors for desire used in the poem, movement and writing, I hope to show more clearly the ways in which this poem fits within the literary field I have called the Victorian poetry of desire, within which these metaphors for desire recur with noticeable frequency. (For instance, as I have already shown in my discussion of Sonnets from the Portuguese, desire takes place in space, where it is figured as movement between places, and time, where it is symbolised as a new “epigraph” [xlili] to the protagonist’s future.)

My purpose in exploring Patmore/Vaughan’s use of these tropes is not to redeem the poem, but rather to explore the ground that lies between, say, Patricia Ball’s obvious admiration of the poem’s sentiments and the condemnation of it evinced in the readings discussed above. For instance, where Christ speaks of male sexual aggression, the trope of movement Vaughan uses discloses a principle of active sexual desire that need not be conflated with aggression. (Moreover, the same trope of movement is applied to Honor to characterise her gradually becoming an active sexual subject as the “chaste and prudent counsels” [II.ii.i] that deny her sexual self-knowledge are slowly dismantled.) Vaughan himself wants neither to club Honor over the head and drag her back to the cave (or its modern



incarnation, “The Hurst”) for sex as a “savage” (II.ix.i) would, nor to preserve an unconsummated relationship with her.<sup>3</sup> The mode of courting and sexual intimacy that the poem valorises is not just a reluctant submission to good form on Vaughan’s part, nor is it strictly a reversion to courtly mores. Vaughan is, I believe, trying to take a longer view of sexual relations than just the moment of defloration (which Maynard wittily terms the pursuit of dishonour), although no doubt this issue does preoccupy him at times. Vaughan’s exploration of sexual desire and sexual intimacy occurs in the context of what Jean Baudrillard calls a “painful moment of seemingly endless frustration . . . [which is] haunted by the fear of sexual or matrimonial disenchantment” (1979/1990), that is, the Victorian engagement. During this fraught period of enforced chastity, Vaughan attempts to work out the terms of a mutually satisfactory sexual relationship over time.

As I noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Leo Bersani says that the “mere fact that every living organism has to accommodate itself to a field of reality in which its needs can never be entirely fulfilled suggests that the self . . . would always have to go through a difficult negotiating process between its own appetitive energies and both a world *and* an internal economy which limit the possibilities of performing our energies and satisfying our appetites” (1969/1976 8). A closer attention to the ironic reversals and swerves between the Preludes and narrative sections of each Canto discloses some of the negotiation Bersani speaks of, as Vaughan negotiates his desires with himself *and* with Honor; so too do the metaphors Vaughan (retrospectively) deploys.

The very first lyric of the poem contains the first use of the tropes of movement and writing:

‘Mine is no horse with wings, to gain  
 ‘The region of the spheral chime;  
 ‘He does but drag a rumbling wain,  
 ‘Cheer’d by the coupled bells of rhyme;  
 ‘And if at Fame’s bewitching note

‘My homely Pegasus pricks an ear,  
 ‘The world’s cart-collar hugs his throat,  
 ‘And he’s too sage to kick or rear.’ (I.Prologue.I)

The tone is at once deflationary — the word “homely” plays on the “house” of the title, suggesting the domestic theme, and Vaughan also specifically locates his story in the “world” rather than in the esoteric “region of the spheral chime” — and self-explanatory, enacting the “coupled bells of rhyme” to which it refers and characterising Vaughan as “sage”. Movement in this trope is to be restrained, sedate, deliberate; so too, is the poetry. Yet these assertions are undermined in the subsequent lyric, where Vaughan’s “thoughts [are] rife” and his phrase is “loftier”. Here, a sense of livelier energies beneath a placid exterior is suggested. Together, the first two lyrics begin to produce the first example of a pattern that will dominate The Angel in the House: an ongoing disjunction between an averment and the ironic subtext that follows such averments. (My favourite occurs when, in the first Prelude to I.ix, Vaughan declares, “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure”. Immediately after, Honor departs for a month in London, leaving him distinctly less than pleased.) In the Cantos of the two Books of the poem such swerves and reversals occur between the Preludes and the narrative lyrics, although they also occur within each strand. For instance, in II.iv.1 Vaughan declares, “The Maiden will fulfil your hope / ‘Only as you fulfil your vow’; in II.iv.2 he speaks of there being “no praise / [For] vows which are not more than kept”; in II.iv.6, of breaking his own rule to visit only twice a week he says, “I did but break a foolish vow”. As the poem is a retrospective account of the courtship, these swerves show Vaughan in the process of adjusting his inner reality to the external reality he encounters (often embodied by Honor). Although a retrospective account, the poem dramatises the negotiation of desire in a present characterised by changing emotions and desires, revealing not the imposition of a predetermined plan of domination but an on-going adjustment to the contingencies of desiring in real time, in the real world.

Going Forth: The Heart's Progress

The symbolic framework suggested in the lines quoted from the Prologue above is taken up again in the Preludes to Canto i:

The richest realm of all the earth  
 Is counted still a heathen land:  
 Lo, I, like Joshua, now go forth  
 To give it into Israel's hand.  
 . . . . .  
 From love's abysmal ether rare  
 If I to men have here made known  
 New truths, they, like new stars, were there  
 Before, though not yet written down. (I.i.iii)

The first image, which uses the language of Empire and its handmaiden, religion, characterises love as a territory, presently beyond the reaches of knowledge, to be explored, colonised and converted (“give[n] . . . into Israel's hand”). The second image describes the means by which love may be made “known”, that is, by its inscription into discourse. Thus loving constitutes an engagement (no pun intended) with the unknown, enacted through “go[ing] forth” and “writ[ing] down”, and these are the symbolic characterisations of the actual procedures of Vaughan's journeys in love as subsequently told to Mary in I.ii.

When we meet Patmore's protagonist, Felix Vaughan, on his first call to Sarum Close, he is already in “go forth” mode, and in a state of excited anticipation (“with heart and brain / That trembled” [I.i.1]). Thus Vaughan enters his poem at a point where he is already conscious of himself as a desiring subject: he has a history of desiring that is represented by the geographical co-ordinates he discloses to Mary in I.ii.4 (Berlin, St. Cloud, Chatteris etc.), and, as noted above, has sixteen “red-letter'd” names “in the records of [his] breast” (I.ii.4).<sup>4</sup> He describes himself as being in a joyful state comprised of “half memory, half desire” (I.i.1) — the journeys completed, and the journey he looks forward to. Like a “heathen land” or a “new star”, Vaughan's “predestinated mate” (I.ii.4) awaits somewhere to

be claimed by him, and is the object of his “pursuit express”. Against the locations he specifies to Mary, and the names collected therein, the virgin land upon which *he* will write *his* name (i.e. “know”) remains as yet to him unknown.

In the Preludes to Canto i, Vaughan uses an organic image that links feeling and movement: “Moving but as the feelings move, / I run or loiter with delight” (I.i.iii). Throughout the first six Cantos Vaughan is continually on the move, both outwardly and inwardly, reinforcing the suggestion that the work of male desire is to move bodies. In Canto i he visits Sarum Close, and there also refers to his travels in Europe; in Canto ii he walks with Mary in the garden, giving her his account of “Ball [and] Fête” he has attended. In Canto iii, having “grown weary with a week’s exile”, he returns to the Deanery on another visit. (The phrasing is interesting: it is not pursuit of a mate that wearies him, but abstinence from that pursuit.) Vaughan is re-orienting his general forward momentum to progress in a particular direction. In Canto iv he “pace[s] the lawn” (2) with Honor in the garden; and in Canto v he spends a restless “long, long week” (1) apart from her, finally visiting again in Canto vi, whereupon he commits himself upon his “chosen pathway” (3), by asking the Dean’s permission to propose. When Vaughan is not with Honor he pines, his “breast / A load of joy and tender care” (iv.3), and sleeps badly: in Canto iii he goes home to a “restless bed” (3) and dreams of himself as a “knight . . . in endless chace” (5). The cumulative effect of these images of Vaughan is to convey a sense of his consciousness of being impelled by the kind of “forward-reaching restless life-force” that Annette Baier describes desire as being (in Marks 1986 58). Vaughan is, thus, both a desiring subject, who moves in “pursuit express”, and subject to desire, which moves him, often in spite of his declared desire to stay away.

As a consequence of the images of motility, a conception of active (or “inherent and spontaneous” to use Greg’s terms) male sexual desire is established; however, this conception is, almost from the outset of the courtship, subject to a continual sense of circumscription or blockage,

which increases as Vaughan's pursuit proceeds toward its conclusion. In the dream of Canto iii, Vaughan finds himself in "endless chace", but at the same time "everywhere [he] seem'd to meet / The haunting fairness of [Honor's] face" (5). In Canto iv.1 Vaughan discloses:

'Full many a lady has ere now,  
 'My apprehensive fancy fired,  
 'And woven many a transient chain;  
 'But never lady like to this,  
 'Who holds me as the weather-vane  
 'Is held by yonder clematis.'

The word "apprehensive" suggests first Vaughan's own desire to apprehend or catch a lady, but in view of the subsequent simile it is later suggestive of his being apprehended or caught himself, and indeed it also suggests his fear (apprehension) that that might be the case. The inference is reinforced in the next lyric with the words, "She led me" (2). Canto v suggests the humour in the situation of the hunter becoming the hunted, with the image first of Vaughan's kissing Honor's stolen glove in lyric 1, followed by the words of her letter in 2: "So they [Honor and her sisters] had won the gloves".<sup>5</sup>

Vaughan's "spirit sick and faint" in v.1, which he attributes to being apart from Honor, might just as well be a psychological adjustment to his perception that he has been caught, for if his masculine self-image is defined by his active pursuit of a mate any delimitation of that activity must threaten his sense of self. In other words, if movement characterises being, then non-movement characterises not only death, but also an unnatural mode of being alive, as the double similes of "a ship frost-bound" and "that ship if the ice-field splits" in I.ii.ii illustrate. The "frost-bound ship" is both a metaphor for indifference ("too dull to be dismay'd") and an image of constraint and immobility. Although Vaughan refers to a "sudden polar Spring" freeing the ship, the antecedent to this scene is not natural seasonal order: the ship Vaughan describes has been "[t]hird winter'd in that dreadful dock". To be "[t]hird winter'd" is "dreadful" because it describes an unnatural stasis or coldness ("life did freeze"). The

unnatural image thus naturalises heterosexual relations, and the phrase “sudden polar Spring” is a naturalistic vehicle for the ‘natural’ order of heterosexual erotics, given, in the lyric, as “[w]hene’r I come where ladies are”. Vaughan also insistently uses the symbol of ice to describe religious asceticism and ascetics. In I.ii.1 he describes Mary as being “ice / To all but heaven”, and, in I.x.i, he speaks of “new-made saints, their feelings iced, / Their joy in man and nature gone”. The metaphor that characterises the marriage day as an “iceberg in an Indian sea” (II.xi.2) thus speaks to the melting of the final impediment to sexual expression.<sup>6</sup> (Vaughan will use a similar image when he speaks of Honor’s “life-in-life” being not yet begun [I.xii.i], suggesting that pursuit of sexual satisfaction is the telos of existence.)

The trope of movement for male sexual desire lends itself especially well to Patmore/Vaughan’s grand philosophy of self-regulation or manly continence. As Vaughan says, concisely summing up his position, “I (am) my own steward” (I.iv.3). This line actually occurs in a non-sexual context, as Vaughan collects the rent from the farmer who works his land; however, the allusion to the “soiled banknotes” suggests a common enough Freudian interpretation of sexual undercurrent.<sup>7</sup> Vaughan, “whip-in-hand”, presents himself as a model of manly (note the talk of “beef, and frothing beer” that again implies a sexual subtext) self-regulation, at least in this context; that image is replicated in the scene that follows:

. . . then to my room  
 I went, and closed and lock’d the door,  
 And cast myself down on my bed,  
 And there, with many a blissful tear,  
 I vow’d to love and pray’d to wed  
 The maiden who had grown so dear; (I.iv.3)

The image is at once both faintly ludicrous and suggestive of the virility of masculine desire — why else lock the door? Yet, by locking the door, Vaughan illustrates his own stewardship of his sexual desire for Honor in a way that ties the lyric’s two settings together. As both Herbert Sussman

(1995) and Adams and Miller have proposed, the Victorian conception of manliness required both a display of virility or potency and a display of self-discipline; the images of Vaughan “whip-in-hand” and in his locked room satisfy both these requirements. At the same time, the image is suggestive of loss and its emotional consequences, as Vaughan rehearses locking himself into domesticity with Honor.

The predominant contrast between the negative and positive conceptions of sexual desire represented by the trope of movement is one of instinctive, un-moderated reaction versus deliberate or considered action. Thus, the savage’s leap (“[f]orth leapt the savage from his lair, / And fell’d her, and to nuptials rude / He dragg’d her, bleeding, by the hair” [II.ix.i]), and Ixion’s “selfish” rape contrast with Jacob’s “patien(ce)” and Jason’s “service”, and more generally in the poem, with Vaughan’s measured pacing. Vaughan’s comparison of Ulysses and Orpheus illustrates the contrast within a single lyric:

The music of the sirens found  
 Ulysses weak, though cords were strong;  
 But happier Orpheus stood unbound,  
 And shamed it with a sweeter song. (II.i.iii)

Ulysses’ weakness is not physical weakness, but psychic: his inability or even lack of desire to resist the call of the sirens and their promise of instant sexual gratification. Ulysses’ weakness here looks back to I.iii.ii, in which Vaughan says, “Strong passions mean weak will”. Those subject to their passions are, psychically speaking, “wingless worm[s]” (I.iii.ii) or unevolved people. By contrast to Ulysses, Orpheus exhibits a superior (“happier”) type of sexual desire, one that apprehends the gratification of instinctual sexual impulse (represented by Ulysses’ response to the sirens) as shameful. (To again look back to I.iii.ii, in Orpheus sexual desire is a “virtue [that] soars above / The subtlest senses of the swarm”, that is above the immediate appeal to sensual gratification. Note that both these images again use movement.) Orpheus, however, is also contrasted with Ulysses by being “unbound”, a term which suggests not repression of instinctual

desire but freedom from it. The point is not that Orpheus cannot move, but that he chooses not to move precipitously. The image of Ulysses tied to the mast also looks back to Vaughan self-locked in his room, while the image of Orpheus suggests a psychic shift in Vaughan's perception of matrimony: where matrimony was envisaged as restriction and curtailment of his male energies in Book I, in Book II it is more frequently represented as (an admittedly idealised) freedom from indiscriminate sexual desire and the relentless pursuit of gratification.<sup>8</sup>

Two tropes of sexual desire, movement and the rose, are united in the image of the three kites in Book II.i.ii. In this lyric Vaughan describes a dream in which he saw three kites inscribed individually with the names Plato, Anacreon and Vaughan. The kites represent three different models of desire or love. The Plato kite soars "heav'nward" but pitches and drops irregularly because it has no tail. The Plato kite symbolises Platonic love, or love with no sexual dimension. The Anacreon kite cannot fly at all, as it is linked to a "lump of earth" — a reference to the ancient Greek philosopher's dedication to love, wine and sexual pleasure, in short an overemphasis on the worldly. The Vaughan kite, however, is "freighted [with] a long streamer of flowers" and "[r]ose in the sun, and flew for hours". That is to say, the Vaughan kite displays a balanced model of cultivated qualities (the flowers have been made into a streamer), resulting in the optimum capacity for flight (movement). This lyric thus looks back to the "discipline / Half delight" discussed above, and also to the description of Fanny Fry's overt and excessive sexuality in II.ii.1, "Three roses on a single stalk". We can also link the use of "soar" back to I.iii.ii.

Greg's statement discussed in the Introduction to this Section, claims that in women, sexual desire "is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited". Vaughan takes the position that it is dormant, or more accurately repressed, rather than non-existent. Thus in I.i.i Vaughan says that "Love's obey'd by *all*" (my emphasis). However, he says, women's love is a "substance" without "form" (I.v.i) and a "truth not shaped by thought" (I.v.i) prior to



marriage. (Against this use of form we might transpose the Platonic reference discussed above [from II.i.ii], and interpret the reference to “form” here in this earlier lyric as implying a transcendent ideal without material or sensual existence, as the Platonic kite in II.i.ii is indicated to represent.) Women’s desires thus exist (they have substance and truth), even while they have no definite or conscious “form”. If men are conscious of their sexual desires, women are conscious of desires, but not of their desire’s sexual nature:

The maiden so, from love’s free sky  
 In chaste and prudent counsels caged,  
 But longing to be loosen’d by  
 Her suitor’s faith declared and gaged,  
 When blest with that release desired, (II.ii.i)

Clearly, in these lines the poem depicts women (like men) as experiencing hydraulically-conceptualised erotic desires (“release [is] desired”), even though they don’t apprehend the sexual basis of those desires as a result of the “chaste and prudent counsels” that deny them that knowledge. This conception of female desire must be read in terms of the deliberately imposed innocence and ignorance that surrounded the Victorian middle-class maiden, and which rendered her sexuality “caged” (but see also “she from herself conceal’d / Love’s felt delight” [I.xi.4], and “[s]he sees, and yet she scarcely sees” and “veil’d joys arrest / The foolish terrors of her blood” [I.xii.i]). The imaged of “caged” female sexual desire being released is an exact counterpart to the image of Vaughan’s being locked in his room.

According to Vaughan, who uses the same trope of movement for female desire as male desire, female desire needs an external stimulus to be activated: “And then in her may *move* the more / The woman’s wish to be desired” (I.ii.i; my emphasis). Throughout Book II, as Honor increasingly becomes the conscious subject of her own desires, she becomes increasingly mobile. Vaughan characterises his proposal as the “avowal . . . [w]hich open’d to her own [desire] the door” (II.i.i), thus setting her on a

“novel path” (II.ii.i), presumably one identical to his own “chosen pathway”.

The first description of Honor disavows her motility by referring to her refusal to “let [Vaughan] pull the swing” (I.i.4). This refusal is given a specifically sexual inference with the characterisation of her as a “prude”. In the first six Cantos of Book I all of Vaughan and Honor’s meetings take place at the Deanery; it is not until after Vaughan has obtained the Dean’s permission to propose that he and Honor move beyond the confines of the Deanery (although she takes an increasingly active role in that context, as I noted above). The description of their first outing is full of imagery of movement: gusts of wind toss Honor’s curls, ribbons and dress. (The “stolid” Druid rocks are a touch too phallic for Vaughan on this outing, who prefers to focus on the “lightness of immortal love” [I.viii.5].) Later in Book I Vaughan uneasily conflates his travels in love (the balls and fêtes etc.) with Honor’s departure for London in I.ix and the inevitability of her “mixing with the people there” (I.ix.iv). His fears are, amusingly, projected onto the sexualised train pulling out of the station with “ponderous pulse and fiery breath” (I.ix.3), while he is left to impotently “[pace] the Close” (I.ix.6).

In Canto v of Book II there is an account of a visit by several young ladies, including Honor, to Vaughan’s home, reported by Vaughan’s housekeeper. The ladies had been upstairs to see “The Queen’s Room”, Vaughan’s (deceased) mother’s room, and:

‘Miss Smythe, when she went up, made bold  
 ‘To peep into the Rose Boudoir  
 .....  
 ‘All but Miss Honor look’d in too.  
 ‘But she’s too proud to peep and pry. (II.v.2)

The Queen’s Room has paintings on the wall featuring scenes of sexual desire. One features Jason, whose service gains him a goddess; in another, Ixion, bent on rape, “grasp’d a cloud”; in yet another, Psyche has been

“translated” into a space where she is free to “gaze on love, not disallow’d”. The paintings, in fact, actualise the abstract meanings the images suggest, a sanctified space for sex, the nuptial bedroom: “The pictured walls the place *became*” (II.v.3; my emphasis). Honor’s refusal to “peep” inside the Rose Boudoir suggests a parallel to the portrait of Psyche: Honor, as an unmarried lady, is still “disallow’d” to “gaze on love” prior to her ‘translation’ from the Deanery to The Hurst. The contrast between her modesty and the other ladies’ immodesty is strengthened by the Housekeeper’s observation that the other ladies “talked the rest in French”.

As Vaughan and Honor interact, their mutual sexual desires, as predicted in Book I (“[w]ith blissful emulations fired” [I.ii.I]; “And ever, like a torch, my love, / Thus agitated, flames the higher” [I.vii.2] and “her heart, / . . . takes warmth from his desire” [I.xii.i]), beget a “sweet rivalry” (II.viii.3). Vaughan and Honor “draw up” (II.viii.4) each other’s desire:

The more I praised the more she shone,  
Her eyes incredulously bright,  
And all her happy beauty blown  
Beneath the beams of my delight. (II.viii.3)

The problem that might result for a man from actually obtaining one’s desired ends, the “happy goal” (I.ii.i) and “fix’d aims” (I.iv.3) of matrimony so desired in the early Cantos, has its clearest rehearsal at the end of Book I, after Honor has accepted his proposal:

Honor was to be my bride!  
The hopeless heights of hope were scaled;  
The summit won, I paused and sigh’d,  
As if success itself had fail’d. (I.xii.5)<sup>9</sup>

Ball glosses this section as Vaughan’s having to “adjust himself to the Victorian rather than the Renaissance situation . . . The chase is over and each, in short is the prize of the other, each is undergoing a surrender and a change of attitude” (1976 209); however, where Ball reads a “new note of

tenderness in the imagery of the chase's end" (209), Maynard characterises the conclusion as having a gloating tone (183). Christ and Maynard have both focused on the figure of the chase as the logical outcome of Patmore/Vaughan's conception of male sexual energies. This trope occurs three times in the poem. In I.xii.1, "The Chace", it is used to characterise a woman's response to the determined seduction of a suitor; in I.xii.iii it is used to describe a "churl", who prefers the "chace" to the woman he pursues; and finally, in II.xii.i it is used to describe a husband's on-going wooing of his wife (which, Vaughan says, "Provokes [him] always to pursue"). Maynard attributes Vaughan's problem to his idealization of virginity. Honor's capitulation devalues her in Vaughan's eyes, thus the "failure" of his success. (In II.i, the poem records that Honor tries to reclaim the "honour of her vanquished heart", as if in mute recognition of the problem, by withholding not her hand, which he is now legitimately in possession of, but her gaze. The pun on Honor/honour here also suggests she is reclaiming herself.) Maynard's reading is supported by other sections of the poem, such as "My deepest rapture does her wrong" (I.ii.i; see also "with remorse and ire / [That] such a sanctity as this / Subdued by love to my desire" [II.i.3]).<sup>10</sup> However, Vaughan's use of the "chace" as metaphor in Book I differs from his use of it in Book II. In Book I it is used to describe the social conventions that require that "[i]t must not be believed or thought / She yields" (I.xii.i). In Book II, though, Vaughan's continuation of the chase is a consequence of his realisation that it would be a "false conceit" to assume that their "differences [have been] bridged" (II.xii.i), and that "in short, / She's not and never can be [his]". By now, for Vaughan, their "differences" are to be valued, rather than overcome, and he seems to understand that his earlier suggestion that a man "gains a right to call her his" (I.xii.i) is only a partial construction of the relationship between married lovers. The "violent" overcoming and undoing of the pursuit in the earlier Canto is thoroughly reversed in this later Canto.

Nevertheless, a problem remains to be worked out. If pursuing one's sexual desires actively is conceived of not just as a "love of the chase" (Maynard 184), but as a fundamental constituent of one's identity —

sexual desire moves men in “pursuit express” of a mate, after all — the attainment of those desires must also institute an identity crisis (as Vaughan puts it in I.vii.i, “*For ever is the gain or loss / Which maddens him with hope or fear*”; see also his “strange alarm” in I.xii.1). In short, Vaughan seems not to fear his desire and its propulsive urgings so much as he fears the curtailment of his travels in love: what does one do when one has reached the summit or brought down the deer? In part this problem is resolved over the course of Book II, with the transformation of Honor into an active desiring subject, and with Vaughan’s realisation of the possibilities of mutual desire. However, another image Vaughan takes up is the dance (I.xi), an image of two people moving in deliberate unison while yet preserving a “space which makes attraction felt” (I.xi.1). (To the objection that this trope also instantiates male domination in the form of leading a dance I would note that Vaughan is watching Honor dance as he comes to his realisation.) The imagery of “coupled suns, that, from afar, / ‘Mingle their mutual spheres, while each / ‘Circles the twin obsequious star” (I.xi.1), first used in context of the dance in Book I, is developed in “The County Ball” (II.iii). Vaughan instructs:

And learn to bow and stand at gaze;  
 And let the sweet respective sphere  
 Of personal worship there obtain  
 Circumference for moving clear,  
 None treading on the other’s train. (II.iii.i)

These images, which use dance as a metaphor for sexual desire, are not equivalent to unconsummated courtly love; in fact, they are even suggestive of post-modern feminist conceptions of desire, particularly as it has been theorised by Luce Irigaray, who valorises the preservation of an “inter-subjective interval” that preserves individual identity and difference within a context of mutual love and affection.<sup>11</sup> While Patmore/Vaughan is *not* a post-modern feminist, it is interesting that his solution for the problematic of male sexual desire — what to do after having ‘hit the mark’ and ‘come to the whole depth of his tale’, so to speak — should reach this ‘destination’ while yet retaining both the symbolic figure of movement and

the conception of desire sustained rather than desire extinguished.

The trope of movement for desire has a final outing in the concluding Canto of Book II. In II.xii.1 Vaughan looks on while Honor is “fitted . . . [with] sand-shoes”, as they prepare to walk the beach as a newly married couple. The incident of the sand-shoes, usually read as a minor domestic anecdote, takes on a fuller significance in the light of this discussion, as it comes to signify Honor’s assumption of a new sexual identity (Vaughan calls her “this / Sweet Stranger”), who leaves her own “shapely prints” (2) in the territory she traverses. This image links plainly back to the image of Vaughan’s going forth in the opening Canto of the poem. In the concluding lyric of the poem proper, Vaughan and Honor, now “[f]amiliar, unaffected, free” are both conscious, active desiring subjects, who “[run] into each other’s arms”.

#### Writing Down: The Heart as Palimpsest

Movement is a trope used in the poem to explore and characterise aspects of sexual desire including illicit sexual expression, self-regulated sexual expression, male and female sexual desire, and virility. The second trope Vaughan uses to represent desire is writing. This trope is emphasised by the poem-within-a-poem structure of The Angel in the House. Vaughan first offers an seemingly apocalyptic vision of ‘his’ poem to come: “In these last days, the dregs of time . . . [t]he first of themes, sung last of all” (Prologue.3).<sup>12</sup> These lines seem to promise a final text of desire, most likely to be the bucolic idyll of companionate love referenced above, which is to overwrite conclusively all prior texts of love (“And into silence only cease / ‘When those are still, who shared their bays / ‘With Laura and with Beatrice” [Prologue.3]). Yet, once again, Vaughan immediately muddles his metaphors and his claims:

‘Imagine, Love, how learned men  
 ‘Will deep-conceiv’d devices find,  
 ‘Beyond my purpose and my ken,  
 ‘An ancient bard of simple mind.

.....  
 ‘And, severing thus the truth from trope,  
 ‘In you the Commentators see  
 ‘Outlines occult of abstract scope,  
 ‘A future for philosophy! (Prologue.4)

The “simple” text with “deep-conceiv’d devices” is forgivable; the “last of days” that have a “future” is less so unless it is predictive of the general incompleteness that becomes associated with writing and text over the course of the poem. That is to say, the poem promises a final text, but then demonstrates the impossibility of there being any final text; this impossibility is the truth the poem discloses.

Again, as with the trope of movement, a parallel disruption is repeated in the first Canto of Vaughan’s poem, where he claims that he will “[make] known / New truths, [that] like new stars, were there / Before, though not yet written down” (I.i.iii). (The very claim at the literal level of stars is paradoxical.) From a claim to “sever” truth and trope (above), Vaughan proceeds to a claim about truth that is affirmed through a trope (i.e. that truth is like a star). In fact, as the poem proceeds, trope supplants truth as the dependable term in the binarism; that is, the claim that a final truth may be written fades away, while at the same time the overlaying text upon text (that is, *writing*) becomes a stable metaphor for a desire that is itself mutable, elusive and on-going.

Against Vaughan’s claim in the Prologue to make known the truth by writing it down, the specific textual instances dramatised in the poem clearly display impermanence, contingency and instability. Beginning with the reference in I.i.3 to “the fiction of the Christian law / that all men honourable are”, where an immutable “law” is redefined as a “fiction”, writing becomes a trope not for the fixed or the resolved, but for the mutable and reversible. In I.ii.1-2, Honor’s sister Mary offers Vaughan a poem to read that she had written six years earlier. The poem is an account of Mary’s unhappy phase of religious asceticism; she has “[s]ince happier grown”. The poem describes a series of dull and wearisome days, which

had been suddenly supplanted by a mysterious joyous calm. It concludes:

‘O, happy time, too happy change,  
 ‘It will not live, though fondly nurst!  
 ‘Full soon the sun will seem as strange  
 ‘As now the cloud which seems dispersed.’ (II.ii.2)

Vaughan responds with a text of his own, his account of the sixteen “red-letter’d” names “in the records of [his] breast” (I.ii.4). However, just as the cause of Mary’s reversal in mood is not accounted for, these names are neither disclosed (they are simply annotated as three and one and four and two, from here and there), nor is the reason for the supplanting of one name by another given. They have simply been overwritten, or supplanted by the next text. These are not the only texts to be overwritten. “Frank’s long, dull letter, lying by / The gay sash from Honoria’s waist” (II.ix.1) offers a contrast between the pull of friendship past and the allure of current love, and between the claims of the past and the promises of the future. Frank’s writing recalls for Vaughan affinities they once shared, but stands as an emblem for the differences between them in the present: it is another unwanted reminder of a past self and supplanted passions. Yet, when “Frank follow’d in his letter’s track” (3), it turns out he is, now, singing the same different tune as Vaughan: “what I sought excuse to tell / He of himself did first confess” (3). One script of friendship (now become “foolish memories” [4]) is thus overwritten by another: “Each, rapturous, praised his lady’s worth” (4).<sup>13</sup> The provisionality of text illustrated in the poem thus discloses a metaphor for desire that is also provisional, personal and mutable; thus, the most effective script Vaughan finds for desire is contained in the Prologue to Book II. Here he points out the bark of a beech tree on which he had carved Honor’s name ten years ago, saying “It grows there with the growing bark, / And in [my] heart it grows the same” (II.Prologue.i). This symbol marries a conception of desire with a history, to a conception of desire that is ever taking its form and maintaining its status in real time, a constantly disappearing present in which each moment supplants the one before.



Writing and text are thus also effective tropes for representing something coming into being that previously had no “form” (I.v.i). Vaughan uses a textual image to represent the development of Honor’s consciousness of desire. Canto II.vi describes an exchange of love-letters between Vaughan and Honor. Perhaps as a result of her visit to her forthcoming marital bedroom, in the next Canto Honor, now becoming the author of her own desire, writes to Vaughan:

‘Adieu! I am not well. Last night  
 ‘My dreams were wild: I often woke,  
 ‘The summer-lightning was so bright;  
 ‘And when it flash’d I thought you spoke.’ (II.vi.3)

The eruption of Honor’s unconscious desire into her dreams and the mimicking symbolic flashes of lightning shadow the development of the emergent psychological conception of emotional discharge in dreams and hysterical symptoms, itself based on the convention of nervous discharge in anatomical science. This image is used here to represent the ongoing arousal of Honor’s sexual desire, arguably the central theme of Book II, which as yet has no release except in “dreams” and elliptical postscripts. (The image of lightning here is part of a broader network of images of fire, light and heat, discussed above.) Honor’s use of “[a]dieu” reinforces this sexual interpretation, coming as it does on the heels of the Housekeeper’s comment on the young ladies’ speaking French, which also had a sexual inference.

Vaughan’s references to textual, and particularly literary, representations of love and desire are also illustrative of mutability. He includes Adam and Eve (II.i.iv); Rachel and Jacob and Leah (II.v.ii); a range of classical heroes of desire, both gods and mortals, including, besides Ulysses and Orpheus, Juno, Jason, Ixion and Psyche (II.v.3), Plato and Anacreon (II.i.ii); instances of courtly love, including Petrarch (Prologues and Epilogues), and Kriemhild and Siegfried (II.ix.i). Elaine Hartnell has traced the repetition of Petrarchan conceits in Vaughan’s poem (especially as they are used to characterise women). She makes the

important point that Vaughan's imitation of Petrarch has the effect of creating the impression that "the married woman is as worthy of romantic love interest as her unmarried counterpart" (464), a not insignificant modification of courtly love poetry. However, other references to Petrarch are also important. For instance, as Honor departs for London, Vaughan lends her a book, "a Petrarch", to read on the journey. No doubt the sentiments of unrequited love therein are intended to remind Honor that her own unrequited lover awaits her return; however, Vaughan also notes that the Petrarch is "worth its weight in gold" (I.ix.2). Petrarchan sentiments are thus reduced to the status of a historical rarity, whose values lie predominantly in the material world rather than the world of love. Later, when Aunt Maude makes Honor return the "Petrarch . . . lent long ago" (II.ii.6), we adduce her disapproval of the sentiments of romantic love therein (although the incident is also a joke on Maude, who, despite her mercenary view of marriage, seems not to appreciate the value of the book.) Again, as the instance of the Petrarch shows, the capacity of writing to represent truth is disclosed as a function of its historical contexts, both of production and reception.

The textual images metaphorically illustrate a paradoxical relationship between desire and language that is suggested as early as I.ii.i, where Vaughan notes that, "No mystery of well-woven speech, / No simplest phrase of tenderest fall, / No liken'd excellence can reach / Her". The referent of Vaughan's object of desire, Honor herself, is something other than Vaughan's linguistic representation of her. However, while the object remains outside language, it can only be pursued through language; it is a doomed enterprise. Thus in I.vii Vaughan speaks of "feigning" his "unfeigned passion" by writing to Honor, and later he speaks of women being "not convinced by proof but signs" (II.iv.iii). There is, in the textual instances, a dual sense of something occurring and, at the same time, of something escaping or being missed; thus, Vaughan notes in II.viii.4:

'But, praising you, the fancy deft  
'Flies wide, and lets the quarry stray,

‘And, when all’s said, there’s something left,  
‘And that’s the thing I meant to say.’

The “something” that’s “left” is the process of desiring itself, or in the case of the poem, the representation of the process of desiring.

In II.iv.4 we see Vaughan exclaiming, “How dull the crude, plough’d fields of fact / To me who trod the Elysian grove!”; however, in the ultimate Canto he says, repudiating the constituents of his own poetic discourse, “Feasts satiate; stars distress with height . . . Vex’d with the vanities of speech; / Too long regarded, roses even / Afflict the mind” (II.xii.ii). It is as though, here, Vaughan acknowledges that there can be no final text of desire, and that he can continue with trope upon trope forever, never exhausting the possibilities of language to enact desire, never ‘concluding’ desire.

### Conclusion

Desire thus characterised as movement and as writing is a process of endless change and self-creation. It is true that The Angel in the House dramatises a natural desiring subject, that is, a subject whose relation to desire is organic and perpetual. However, the subject’s (both Vaughan and Honor) apprehension of his or her own desire changes over time, particularly as a commitment to a particular course of desire is decided upon and strengthened. Of particular interest in this poem is the way Vaughan attempts to understand his desire: to know himself as a desiring subject is one of his central preoccupations, both during his courtship and subsequent to his marriage, where it becomes his “leisure’s labour” (Prologue to Book I). As the studies that follow will show, to desire is the work of the desiring subject, and to desire is, in part, to engage in a conversation with oneself about the nature of one’s desire (as indeed the Kierkegaardian epigraph to this thesis was intended to illustrate). However, of equal interest is the picture of female sexual desire that is disclosed through my tracing of the imagery of movement and writing

applied to Honor (the figure of whom acquires commensurably more richness too). Clearly this picture is a limited picture of female desire as male desire is given temporal priority in the poem, with the consequence that female sexual desire becomes or is seen to be something of a derivative of male sexual desire. However, at the same time, the scope of female sexual desire, as it is seen and conceptualised over the course of the poem, is appreciably enlarged by the end of the poem.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The poem was significantly revised over the course of its several publications between 1854 and 1862. All references are to the final published version as it appears in The Poems of Coventry Patmore (ed. Frederick Page 1949). Citations are for Book (upper case Roman numerals), Canto (lower case Roman numerals) and lyric (using both lower case Roman numerals and Arabic numerals as they are used in the poem). The Angel in the House comprises two books; two further books that were subsequently published under the title The Victories of Love are not discussed here.

<sup>2</sup> In earlier readings, Isobel Armstrong discusses Patmore's 'unwitting' disclosure of "sexual rage" (276) in her essay on Victorian poetry of sexual love (1974), while Patricia Ball (1976) says the poem describes the path from an idealistic conception of unconsummated love to a less romantic yet ultimately broader conception of lovers' sensibility (205), which comprises religion and spirituality, the notion of use, sexual satisfaction, and the appreciation of the minutiae of daily life and custom as the means by which married love is to be understood and valued. Interestingly, Ball's perception of this poem appears to contradict her claims that Victorian poetry represented a narrower interest in love, restricted to the criterion of sincerity, than did Romantic love poetry. Also interesting in this respect is Ball's characterisation of the poem's "enlargement of . . . religious [and] lover's sensibility" (205) and Maynard's charge that the poem capitulates to the "narrower spirit" of the period (180).

<sup>3</sup> It does make sense to read the image of the leaping savage as part of a truth-making exercise, instantiating as fact the postulated threat of male sexual aggression in its 'natural' state, in order to produce or support alternate modes of acceptable, or 'civilised' male sexual expression. Nevertheless, the notions of both a 'natural' sexual state and sublimation

remain ambiguous; accordingly, it is vital that commentators locate themselves clearly in respect to the various positions available on such phenomena. I personally am quite prepared to believe that actual men might perceive there being a *qualitative* difference that matters to *their* pleasure or satisfaction between having sex with an unconscious woman and an enthusiastic partner, such that they prefer the latter to the former, and adopt an approach commensurate with obtaining their desired end (i.e. as a matter of personal preference rather than as an imposition of cultural mores). Clearly there will be some *natural* variation in such a preference, which, no doubt, goes for women too.

<sup>4</sup> This entire lyric suggests an unlikely affinity to Robert Browning's Don Juan (Fifine at the Fair), of whom Elvire says:

You talk of soul, — how soul, in search of soul to suit,  
Must needs review the sex, the army, rank and file  
Of womankind, report no face nor form so vile  
But that a certain worth, by certain signs, may thence  
Evolve itself and stand confessed — to soul — by sense.  
Sense? Oh, the loyal bee endeavours for the hive!  
Disinterested hunts the flower-field through . . . (lx)

Don Juan's solution for determining the "soul to suit" is quite straightforward: he tries them all. For Vaughan, the problem is presented in different terms. If "[e]ach beauty blossom[s] in the light / Of tender personal regards", on what basis can he choose his 'soul-mate' — especially when, also like Don Juan, he suggests there is something in desire that is inimical to duty and reason:

Anne lived so truly from above,  
And was so gentle and so good,  
That duty bade me fall in love,  
And 'but for that,' thought I, 'I should!' (I.ii.iii)

<sup>5</sup> The question is, of course, to what extent is Vaughan conscious of these reversals? In II.viii.i Vaughan speaks directly of women having the

“cunning of the snake” and “forging chain and trap” with which to snare unwitting men. Several commentators have interpreted these lyrics as instances of Patmore/Vaughan’s sexist attitudes. However, might not these be merely wry acknowledgements of Honor’s power over him that stand in ironic contrast to all his claims elsewhere of being the director of the romance?

<sup>6</sup> The contrast to the icy image is the rose, which is predominantly used to symbolise healthy sexual desire, for instance in I.vii.ii: “How long shall men deny the flower / Because its roots are in the earth”. Thus, in the lyric referred to above, Mary had been “ailing and pale”; now, “soft wild roses deck’d her face” (I.i.4). The weighty symbolism of the next lyric (“She from a rose-tree shook the blight” [I.ii.3]) links back to the roses in Mary’s cheeks, and indicates that she has found a happy “sense of present good” (I.ii.3). From their first meeting after his proposal he begins to associate Honor with the rose as she becomes increasingly conscious of sexual desire; that day he finds her like “a morning rose” (II.i.3).

<sup>7</sup> Vaughan’s preference for ownership without labour is disclosed elsewhere, when he refers to having “from this fair land [i.e. Honor], which called me lord, / A year of the sweet usufruct” (II.ii.7). We should certainly remember his formative metaphor of giving the “heathen land . . . into Israel’s hand” from the Prologue; however, this rather unpleasant phrasing of Vaughan’s occurs hot on the tails of the first Aunt Maude episode, which is also significant. When Honor tells her Aunt that she is to marry Vaughan, her Aunt says:

‘ “You, with your looks and catching air,  
 ‘ “To think of Vaughan! You fool! You know.  
 ‘ “You might, with ordinary care,  
 ‘ “Ev’n yet be Lady Clitheroe. (II.ii.3)

Later she advises Vaughan that ““A woman, like the Koh-i-noor, / ‘Mounts to the price that’s put on her”” (II.viii.4). The double entendres on the

words “catching” and “mounts” in these vignettes (which embarrass Honor) suggest Maude represents an older aristocratic tradition of marriage by name and class, and always with a view to the pecuniary advantage obtainable therein. Although Maude is subtly mocked in this account, Vaughan’s own reference to “usufruct” discloses his own tendency to view Honor as a possession.

<sup>8</sup> Ulysses resembles Matthew Arnold’s “Barbarian”, a figure of “staunch individualism” with a passion for “the assertion of personal liberty”, whose powers of thought and feeling are “unawakened” (“Culture and Anarchy” 1993 202-3). Orpheus represents the seed of human potential to develop its better nature, which finds its ascendance in the pursuit and production of music, poetry etc. The allusion to Orpheus also evokes Orphism, a mystical cult, and later a moral philosophy developed by Pythagoras, which advocated a regimen of mental discipline, simplicity and purity, and whose aim was the preservation of the divine in human nature. It is a philosophy that is commensurate with Vaughan’s ideal of “delight” being “[h]alf-discipline”, and also of Vaughan’s conception of heavenly-mandated sexual relations within marriage. Thus Orpheus as musician stands also in contrast to Arnold’s “philistine”, the middle-class generally, whom he says prefer, in a “stiff-necked and perverse” fashion, a “dismal” life opposed to “sweetness and light” (202) to a life of “delight”. Aunt Maude, in addition to representing the aristocracy, might also represent this philistine.

<sup>9</sup> Patmore’s lines shadow another Robert Browning poem, “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” (1855):

For, what with my whole world-wide wandering,  
 What with my search drawn out through years, my hope  
 Dwindled into a ghost not fit to cope  
 With that obstreperous joy success would bring, –  
 I hardly tried now to rebuke the spring  
 My heart made, finding failure in its scope. (iv)



The conflation of success with failure in both lyrics is a result of the success of the quest to obtain the desired object, the attainment of which is perceived by the questor to negate his identity as questor, there no longer being any difference between him and his object. Subsequently, in the Preludes to the final Canto, “Husband and Wife”, Vaughan will acknowledge that he has in fact not managed to incorporate the object of his desires: “spirit-like, [she] eludes embrace” and “[s]he’s not and never can be mine” [II.xii.i]. It is interesting to speculate on the possible reasons for the variant reception of Browning’s hero and Patmore’s.

<sup>10</sup> Hartnell also discusses the “vestal” (II.xii.i) vestiges that continue to shape Vaughan’s post-marital conception of his wife (463-64).

<sup>11</sup> See particularly Irigaray’s An Ethics of Sexual Difference (1984/1993), which will be discussed in Chapter Four. Another interesting counterpoint to Patmore/Vaughan’s image is to be found in Jane Gallop’s discussion of the work of Annie LeClerc in “Carnal Knowledge” in Thinking through the Body (1988).

<sup>12</sup> The poem’s idealistic and somewhat smug rendering of the Victorian age as the height of progress might be contrasted with Claude’s assertion in Clough’s Amours de Voyage: “Let us not talk of growth; we are still in our Aqueous Ages” (III.ii). Phelan’s notes to this line say that it is “an allusion to the proto-evolutionary theory outlined by Robert Chambers in 1844 Vestiges of Creation . . . Claude’s point is that our present compound nature is due to our comparatively low level of evolutionary development” (120). Certainly, Vaughan takes a rather optimistic view of temporal flux, employing images of organic growth (“looking backward through his tears, / With vision of *maturer* scope, / How often one dead joy appears / The platform of some better hope” [I.v.ii; my emphasis]); evolutionary improvement (his reference to “Pagan styles . . . far below Time’s fair intent!” [II.ix.i]); and a benevolent divine plan (“Well, *Heaven be thank’d*

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my first-love failed, / As, Heaven be thank'd, our first-loves do!" [II.iii.1; my emphasis]). Walter E. Houghton's The Victorian Frame of Mind (1957), and in particular Chapter Two, "Optimism", contains a general survey of Victorian views on and expressions of the evolutionary development of society and man.

<sup>13</sup> Against these conceptions of positive change over time, however, there is a more threatening instance of textual trope. The poem advocates a systematic education in sexual desire for women, predicated on the dictum that "[a] careless word unsanctions sense" (I.xi.ii). The phrase indicates that sexual knowledge frees a woman's sensuality, but also that inapt or "careless" talk results in illegitimate (unsanctioned) sensuality. In the infamous "Daughter of Eve" lyric (I.xi.i), the "worst" woman is characterised as a "blank ruin", who has no longer "a name / Or place". The textual image used here infers not the emendations or editing suggested above, but rather an irreversible erasure of subjectivity; it appears that writing on the body is qualitatively different from the heart's writing.

## SECTION TWO

## OBJECTS OF DESIRE

This section contains readings of Augusta Webster's Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence (1895), and Arthur Hugh Clough's Amours de Voyage (1858); the focus is on the representation of objects of desire.<sup>1</sup> The readings are based on a very simple question: what does the main protagonist desire? In both of these poems, the answer is to write a self. Each protagonist writes him or herself as a link between a precursor text and an extra-textual and silent other (Webster's protagonist's daughter and Claude's correspondent Eustace). The protagonists appropriate from their precursor texts a subject place in and for their own narratives, then, in their own writing, reconfigure that place. In Mother and Daughter the mother-speaker appropriates the subject place of the sonneteer; in Amours de Voyage, Claude appropriates the subject place of the Ulysean adventurer. "See me like this," they then demand of their readers, referring both to the roles and identities they have appropriated and also, through their texts, to themselves as writers and self-mythologisers.

Analysis of the literary representation of motherhood in the nineteenth century has been, in the twentieth century, an expanding field.<sup>2</sup> Beginning with Elaine Showalter's A Literature of their Own (1977) through to Margaret Homans' Bearing the Word (1984), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic (1984), Nancy Armstrong's Desire and Domestic Fiction (1987), Naomi Segal's The Adulteress's Child (1992), and Angela Leighton's Victorian Women Poets: Writing against the Heart (1992), twentieth-century readers have examined the nineteenth-century representation of mothers and mothering from a range of broadly feminist theoretical standpoints. However, within this critical body, the attention paid to Augusta Webster's Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence has been nominal.

Several explanations for this critical elision may be suggested. Firstly, the poem's status as "uncompleted" and the unquantifiable influence of its editor, William Rossetti, on its final form create critical grey areas. I discuss some of the problems associated with these aspects of the poem in the next chapter, but must concede that they are irresolvable. In the end these problems must simply be set aside in the interests of studying the poem we do have, just as we work from a particular published version of any poem that has also been published in multiple or revised forms.

Secondly, there has been a critical preference for Webster's dramatic monologues over this poem. This preference is perhaps a result of the felt need to 'rescue' Victorian poetesses from their late obscurity by focusing on their use of the significant formal development of the period (the dramatic monologue), which, moreover, tends to be a genre (for Victorian women poets at least) consisting of overt socio-cultural criticism, in contrast to the thematic connotations of romantic love associated with the sonnet tradition. While Webster's Mother and Daughter, as a sonnet sequence, is hardly a trivial format, both its theme of motherhood and its reception as autobiographical contribute to its marginalisation insofar as 'serious' literature excludes both these categories.

Thirdly, twentieth-century feminists, who have produced most of the work on mothers and motherhood in nineteenth-century literature, have had an ambivalent if not negative perception of the nineteenth-century institution of motherhood. The Victorian period saw the production of what is now viewed as a pernicious version of the institution of motherhood, shaped by the ideology of separate spheres and the mythology of the angel in the house. Since we like to view Victorian women writers as our feminist forebears, our critical tendency has been to look for and examine instances of splits or rifts between patriarchal constructions of femininity and women's writing, and, in particular, to valorise the so-called 'daughterly' plots dramatising women's escapes from and rejections of the prescribed, circumscribed feminine maternal role. However, in

dramatising a mother who writes, Webster also resists patriarchy by challenging the conception of motherhood as silent otherhood.

Finally, Webster's poem is a theoretical impossibility that is also difficult to discuss with reference to the dominant twentieth-century theories of subjectivity and desire, as most of them do not encompass a place for the maternal subject nor consequently for maternal desire. Without being a maternal subject, a mother cannot be said to speak or write *as a mother*. French theorists Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have, however, both pursued theories of maternal subjectivity, and these will be discussed in the chapter on Webster.

Formal problems aside, the difficulties we have with the Victorian construct of mother and mother as writer/desiring subject are also good reasons for studying Webster's poem. Her attempt to articulate maternal subjectivity and to construe it in terms of a female genealogy are, in my view, deserving of acknowledgement, and this poem should be recognised as one of her most important.

The willful villainy of Arthur Hugh Clough's protagonist Claude, in *Amours de Voyage*, has, I think, been under-appreciated — both under-reported and under-admired. If Electra provided Elizabeth Barrett Browning with a model for behaviour, as I argued in Chapter Two, Ulysses provides Clough with a model for misbehaviour. Critics have tended to conclude that Claude misses his chance for happiness with Mary Trevellyn (the young woman he spends most of the poem courting or at least writing letters to his friend Eustace about) because he is either too weak or too entranced by his own lofty idealism to commit to an earthly marriage. This interpretation may be a consequence of the duty-desire-marriage matrix in which Victorian poetry is often situated, and within which marriage is either the goal of or the context for a representation for a struggle between duty and desire.

Claude's commitment to an idealistic conception of his desire is not questioned in my reading, although the locus of that idealism is problematised. Claude's relationship with Mary (and to a lesser extent his behaviour in the political context) is characterised by his metaphors of Ulysses and Theseus in I.xii. The first allusion concerns Ulysses' adventure on Circe's island (Books X-XI of *The Odyssey*), while the reference to Theseus concerns his adventure in the labyrinth of the Minotaur. The Ulysses metaphor has, quite oddly I feel, been interpreted as describing Claude's entry into the enchanting world of human love; however, as I will argue, there is another link between the two mythic references that leads to an alternative interpretation of Claude's behaviour. The metaphors are allusions to seduction and abandonment. The women who offer these heroes aid and sexual gratification are later abandoned to the necessity or allure of the heroes' grand narratives' final destination (the ideal wife, Penelope, in the case of Ulysses, and the ideal state, represented by Athens, in the Theseus myth). When the allusion is unpacked it illustrates quite clearly that Claude's relationship with Mary is all along subordinate to both his grand adventure and the narrative of self he is producing for Eustace by way of his letters.

The metaphor has its problems for Claude. Victorian England is not Ancient Greece, and Mary is not Circe. Moreover, Claude's commitment to the metaphor ties his actions to a predetermined narrative, reducing Claude to an effect of someone else's meta-text. His identity as letter-writer, involving the continual re-enactment and re-invention of his affair with Mary, duplicates the reduction. The heroic metaphor that suggested a journey of sexual freedom is thus disclosed to be merely a narrative of deferred desires: the contingent experience of pleasure is overshadowed by a commitment to absolute satisfaction, which is only and always to be found on the island one has just left or on the next island ahead.

Claude's relationship with Mary occurs in the context of a metaphor of life as journey. It is a journey Claude says will end in the attainment of a "perfect and absolute something" (III.vi.144), but there is an indeterminate

relation between the legs or episodes that make up his journey and his final destination. In fact, the Ulyssean metaphor, through the nominal confusion associated with it, also clouds the meaning of that final destination. There are two versions of Ulysses: the Homeric Odysseus, who is an enterprising and useful fellow committed to his wife, and a later Ulysses, who is cunning and deceitful. The latter Ulysses is characterised in Tennyson's 1842 poem as a "name; / For always roaming with a hungry heart" and as "a gray spirit yearning in desire". The allusion's indeterminacy in this respect problematises Claude's idealism, and whether it is to be characterised in terms of "the terminus" (III.vi.iii) or the journey itself, in which "we have our being, and know it" (III.vi.128). If the latter, Claude has much in common with Robert Browning's Don Juan (of Fifine at the Fair), who also uses a metaphor of life as a series of journeys but without ever conceding any transcendent or teleological end.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have retained the punctuation used in the source for Webster's poem, which contains a lower-case letter after the colon.

<sup>2</sup> For a reading of earlier, archetypal plots of mother and daughter such as Jocasta and Antigone, Clytemnestra and Electra, and Demeter and Persephone, and their influence on English literature see Marianne Hirsch, The Mother Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (1989).



## CHAPTER FOUR

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER: “WITH JOY HALF MEMORY, HALF DESIRE”.Introduction and Background

Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence is a set of twenty-seven Petrarchan sonnets (published posthumously in 1895) by Augusta Webster.<sup>1</sup> As I noted in the Introduction to this Section, the poem has received little critical comment, and consequently I spend some time in this chapter constructing both a poetic and a theoretical context for the poem. This background is important, for the poem’s attempt to articulate a maternal subject, and hence maternal desire, involves negotiation with a symbolic order that according to conventional wisdom has no place from which such an articulation may be made, nor a speaking subject to make it. The poem’s most basic averment, that a mother writes, grounds the possibility of a mother who desires, so it is important to understand the poem’s cultural context and the significance of precursor texts to the poem’s eventual formulation of maternal subject and maternal desire. Then, later in the Chapter, I discuss some ways the mother-daughter relationship has been conceptualised. These discussions make this chapter more theory-laden than others in this thesis.

The mother of Mother and Daughter loves her daughter. She does not ‘desire’ her child sexually or possessively. Nevertheless, the mother desires and the child is indispensable to her desire. The concept of desire implies an absence or a loss, a yearning for something that is not or is not here now. The absence that conditions desire in this poem is the very absence of the maternal subject. Thus the mother’s desire is disclosed in her speech, insofar as language is a strategy for mediating the space between self and other, and between what is not and what might be. Language, and in this poem writing, makes the absent thing at the least

textually present.

The relationship of mother and child (“Being child and mother” [XXII]) involves two subjects (“Mother” and “Child”) and one unit (a “we” and a “pair”), whose positions in relation to each other, always reversible and reciprocal, are characterised by a “mingling” (XII) that is already operative in the mother, who is both mother and daughter. The maternal speech in this poem is not mournful or abject. Rather, mothering and being a mother in Webster’s poem is an experience characterised by “joy” (I) and “passion” (XXVI).<sup>2</sup> “Child and mother, darling! Mother and Child! / And who but we? We, darling, paired alone?” the mother exclaims rapturously (XXVI). The aim of the mother’s speech is not to eliminate the space between mother and child but to bridge it in such a way that intensifies and sustains passion (rather than extinguishes it). Luce Irigaray speaks of desire as “the first movement *toward* [that takes] as its momentum the subject’s passion or the object’s irresistible attraction” (184/1993 76). From passion and attraction comes writing: a mother writing (to) her child, writing (to) her own mother, and writing (to) herself.

### Mothers, Poetry

In its literary context we understand a mother to be a function of someone else’s subjectivity, either the author’s or the hero’s. In Bearing the Word (1986), her account of mothers in nineteenth-century literature, Margaret Homans argues that “virtually all of the founding texts of our culture” contain versions of the myth that “the death or absence of the mother sorrowfully but fortunately makes possible the construction of language and culture” (2). Literature in this view is the history of men’s attempts to represent and sublimate the loss of their pre-Oedipal mothers. Women, by contrast, the argument went, did not need to write (to represent this lost union), because they could reproduce it by having a baby of their own. Of course, it is now common knowledge that women do write, but the fact of their writing has been interpreted *within* the same mythic structure as men’s. That is, women write as daughters, attempting to

represent their pre-Oedipal attachments to the phallic mother (like men writers) or they write as pseudo-sons (using male pseudonyms or writing themselves male roles), attempting to differentiate themselves from their (castrated) mothers.

If literature is written by sons and daughters as a kind of “motivated phantasy” (Naomi Segal 1992 19), the mother written in literature, the mother-character, is of marginal note. She is there as an object in relation to the hero and his plot. In this relation, there are bad mothers and good mothers, who respectively correspond to the two archetypal woman figures of masculinist erotic fantasy, whore and angel.

A bad mother is a mother who attempts to act as an agent in pursuit of her own desire. She appears in a text in order to be punished and expunged — to be put back in her place. Bad mothers are controlling mothers, nags, professional women, and adulterers. An adulterous mother, a type of whore, is a “woman who [has placed] desire where maternity belongs, in her ‘inside body’, incarnat[ing] a scandal to both fathers and sons” (Segal 11). An adulteress has two narratives. Her son, whom she loves, falls ill and the mother renounces her adulterous desire and re-submits herself to her constitutive maternal-object function, or she bears a daughter, whom she loathes, and, excluded from her function in the patrilineal fantasy-narrative, the mother dies or disappears. (The narrative of the other fallen mother, a mother who bears a child out of wedlock as a result of rape, as Amanda Anderson [1993] argues, is characterised by her “attenuated autonomy” or lack of agency. This mother’s redemption is always possible because she has never been an agent of sexual desire, and the function of the narrative as cultural critique is frequently to point this fact out. This mother is an object co-opted to the service of the author.)

A good mother is a mother who desires nothing. Her Virgin archetype of course, is also never an agent, either sexual or material. Homans has argued that the myth of the Virgin articulates not only the denial of

women's materiality in the conception of a child but also hatred of women's bodies, and as such this myth is continuous with the other founding myth of creation — God makes Man — that also circumvents the maternal body and subsequently contaminates it through the Fall of Eve. The Virgin myth, Homans argues, specifically also characterises women's role in the transmission of language as passive, insofar as Mary is impregnated by the Word and gives birth to the Word, but is never an author herself.<sup>3</sup> Homans says the "ideology of the 'Angel in the House' . . . substitutes for the maternal body a spiritual presence that presides over but does not seem to touch its family" (157). An angelic mother subordinates her entire being to the interests of the child, through whom she lives vicariously. This mother speaks, but only to mouth masculinist ideology. (However, with cunning reversibility, it was also argued that although women were not part of the process of conception, but merely the vessel in which it occurred and matured, they could transmit their dis-ease and diseases through their blood to their foetuses, producing enfeebled children. Women, always already fallen and thus potentially a threat to their children, were thus enjoined to be even more passive in the interests of their sons and husbands.) The ostensibly polarised figures of whore and angel thus take the same position (object) in the same structure of the child's desire that is reproduced in all masculinist discourses.

In order to account for the sonnet sequence before him, and to place it within the permitted framework described above, William Rossetti's Introductory Note to Augusta Webster's Mother and Daughter begins with this little gem:

It is my privilege to have been invited to say a few words by way of introduction to this little book of sonnets. . . . Nothing certainly could be more genuine than these Sonnets. A Mother is expressing her love for a Daughter — her reminiscences, anxieties, and hopeful anticipations. The theme is as beautiful and natural a one as any poetess could select, uniting, in the warm clasp of the domestic affections, something of those olden favourites, The Pleasures of Memory and The Pleasures of Hope. It seems a little surprising that Mrs. Webster had not been forestalled — and to the

best of my knowledge she never was forestalled — in such a treatment. But some of the poetesses have not been Mothers.<sup>4</sup>

According to Isobel Armstrong, Victorian women's poetry has, in the twentieth century, been characterised as a genre of political protest, rather than as an expressive genre "constructed by reference to the Victorian notion of what was specifically feminine in poetry" (1993 323). Many Victorian writers, both male and female, viewed women's poetry in this way, Armstrong says. Rossetti's characterisation of Webster's poem, intended to be complimentary, locates it specifically within such an expressive poetics, as his words make clear: a mother is "expressing her love". For Rossetti, the poem is feminine or "genuine" to the extent that it is autobiographically concerned with the representation of woman's "natural" domain of the "domestic affections". Webster's identity as a poetess is engendered by and authorised by her prior identity as "Mother" and the scope of her material is limited to the special "little" area of her feminine expertise, the "domestic affections". Rossetti thus forces the poem into an angelic mould.

Even today, when we consciously seek out the political voice in Victorian women's poems, this poem of Webster's is excluded from that process. Angela Leighton (1996), discussing Webster's dramatic monologues, describes Webster as a poet who "rejects the idea of poetry as a transcription of life into art, of the suffering body into the spontaneous text. She proposes, instead, that art antedates life, the love poem invents a lover and the hero forms a poet" (182). Leighton, despite identifying sonnet XI as a cultural critique, however, does not make the leap to saying that the maternal poem invents a mother. Neither does Isobel Armstrong, who, in the chapter mentioned above, notes simply that "Augusta Webster . . . adopted the dramatic monologue as a way of making a 'masked critique', though [she] also wrote a series of sonnets to her daughter, Mother and Daughter, published posthumously (1895), which look back to Sonnets from the Portuguese" (372).

Armstrong's reference to Sonnets from the Portuguese does not express the extent of Webster's debt to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. If, for Webster, the paradigm for mother included a literary dimension in excess of the "natural" and the "domestic" scope Rossetti allowed both motherhood and female poetry, then Barrett Browning was in large part the source of that dimension. Again and again, Barrett Browning took up the project of writing a maternal subject in poetry.<sup>5</sup> Her continued efforts in this area demonstrate the very intractability of the structure she was trying to subvert as well as her process of thinking through women's alienation from their own maternity. In "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1844) Barrett Browning dramatises the story of a female slave who bears a child after she is raped by her owner:

My own, own child! I could not bear  
 To look in his face, it was so white;  
 I covered him up with a kerchief there;  
 I covered his face in close and tight:  
 And he moaned and struggled, as well might be,  
 For the white child wanted his liberty—  
 Ha, ha! He wanted the master-right. (xvii)

The reiterated "own, own" of the first line conveys the pathos of the situation. Throughout the poem the slave repeatedly says, "I am black, I am black". The living, white child is a sign of his father's mastery and his mother's subjection (or objectification), and there is no place, even in "the free America" (xxxii) where the mother and child "may kiss and agree" (xxxvi). (The "kiss" between the owner and slave is conspicuously without her 'agreement'.) Only her impending death permits her to imagine a reconciliation with the white baby, who is no longer white but "changed to black earth, . . . Nothing white, . . . / A dark child in the dark!" (xxvii; ellipsis in original). However, Barrett Browning's target in this poem is not the structure of motherhood that reduces all women to objects in the interest of a patrilineal order, but the black/white opposition that permits some men to own others. This structure that permits slavery also creates divisions between women based on the same opposition; thus, the baby is "[a]s white as the ladies who scorned to pray / Beside me".<sup>6</sup>

In the same volume, Barrett Browning published “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus”, with an epigraphic reference to Milton. The epigraph points to an attempt to represent the Virgin as any mother attempting to settle a small baby (“But see the Virgin blest / Hath laid her babe to rest”), but this demystifying project is not taken up in Barrett Browning’s poem. Rather, Barrett Browning does suggest the immense burden the Virgin is made “to bear” (xi) in more mythic terms: “Albeit in my flesh, God sent His Son, / Albeit over Him my head is bowed . . . Still my heart / Bows lower” (vi). This Virgin is a mother whose formative role in her baby’s conception must be “self-renounced” (vi) and whose role in relation to him must be as a servant to a king (vii). As in “The Runaway Slave” there is in this poem a breach between the mother’s body and the child born of it: “So, seeing my corruption, can I see / This incorruptible now born of me . . . Created from my nature all defiled” (vii).

In both of these poems Barrett Browning takes up the issue of the mother’s materiality in relation to her child: in both poems the child is alienated from the mother’s body and in both poems the cultural and mythic structure prevails, suggesting that there is no easy way these iconic maternal figures may be co-opted to speak women’s desires. In her masterpiece and female *künstlerroman*, Aurora Leigh (1856), Barrett Browning uses a different strategy to construct a maternal subject: she fills the paternal subject’s place with a woman who is a pseudo-man. Her protagonist Aurora is constructed as a fictive son. Her mother dies giving birth to her; thus, Aurora “felt a mother-want about the world, / And still went seeking, like a bleating lamb” (I.40-41). Aurora is thus patterned on Jesus Christ, the “lamb” of God, the archetypal “unmothered” (a word used several times to describe Aurora) son. Denied a maternal body, she is also denied a mother’s tongue:

. . . Women know  
The way to rear up children (to be just),  
They know a simple, merry, tender knack  
Of tying sashes, fitting baby shoes,

And stringing pretty words that make no sense,  
 And kissing full sense into empty words,  
 Which things are corals to cut life upon,  
 Although such trifles: children learn by such,  
 Love's holy earnest in a pretty play  
 And get not over-early solemnised, (I.47-56)

Instead, Aurora is inserted within the father's symbolic ("college-learning, law and parish talk" [I.67] and "books" [I.189]) as though she were a son rather than a daughter. That is to say, Aurora is aligned with the symbolic position of the father, rather than the castrated mother, and her subsequent career as a poet suggests the privileged masculine position she takes as her own. However, in Book II, when Aurora adorns herself with ivy, she becomes the target of Romney's rebuke: "Women as you are . . . We get no Christ from you — and verily / We shall not get a poet" (220-25).

Aurora's self-perception is distinctly at odds with a world that determines her gender by her anatomy. Aurora's story intersects with that of Marian Erle, a woman who gives birth to an illegitimate baby as a consequence of rape. Marian is Barrett Browning's device for rehabilitating the fallen woman (cast in the victim role and misjudged by society), but, as Anderson puts it, Marian also "[appropriates the] voice at precisely that juncture when a woman is "conventionally perceived to be 'lost'" (195). In telling her harrowing story to Aurora, she becomes herself an author, temporarily evading Aurora's authorship as well as society's. However, once Aurora has acknowledged Marian as mother-speaker, Aurora resumes narrative control by taking on the role of fictive (not biological) father to Marian's son. In a few extraordinary lines, she puts to Marian a proposition that suggests a new framework for motherhood:

Come, — and henceforth thou and I  
 Being still together will not miss a friend,  
 Nor he a father, since two mothers shall  
 Make that up to him. (VII.122-25)

Aurora's description of herself as a "mother" here is a function of her anatomical sex, but, as she has been gendered masculine in the poem, it is not certain that she views herself as a mother. In fact, her appropriation of



Marian and her child, through the incorporation of them into Aurora's 'order' or line, suggests she is behaving in a rather paternalistic way. The maternal subjects Barrett Browning produced in this poem remain limited: when Romney turns up near the end of the poem Aurora immediately steps aside to permit him to take on the fatherly role for Marian's baby, and Marian Erle finds personal desire (in the form of heterosexual love) incompatible with her motherhood (Book IX).

Barrett Browning takes one further step towards creating a maternal subject in verse. In the poem, "Mother and Poet" (1862), based on the life of the Italian poet Laura Savio, Barrett Browning recounts the story of a mother who, having written patriotic poems, blames herself when her sons are killed in war and renounces writing. The poem seems to suggest a retreat from the emancipation of the woman artist that Barrett Browning addressed so frequently throughout her life ("What art can a woman be good at?" she asks in this poem [iii]). However, Barrett Browning is also mourning the co-option of both motherhood and women's art to the interests of the patriarchal order that mothers and poetesses serve against their own interests, and quite likely their children's. Barrett Browning is also implicitly expressing a desire for a union of art and motherhood that can glorify other ends than dying for one's country (v), and she is thereby taking up the question of what and how a mother might speak to, and influence, her sons. (It might be proposed that Barrett Browning's most symbolic gesture in instantiating this influential maternal poet-subject was to name her own son 'Pen', after the very instrument through which she exercised her textual control.)

As this brief discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work has indicated, the prohibition on maternal agency/speech was not unchallenged in dramatic Victorian poetry although its history has hardly been recognised. (Barrett Browning is conceived of as both a love poet and a political poet, but her representations of mothers have not been widely reviewed in either conception.) Barrett Browning both used and was limited by the constituent maternal roles her culture made available to her.

In acknowledging the failure of each of these poems to realise a maternal subject (the mothers die; the sons also die), we should also notice that Barrett Browning was working from models never intended to speak as mothers, and demonstrating this fact was a success in itself.

Webster, who, like Barrett Browning, also wrote both dramatic monologues and plays, wrote her maternal poem in a different genre. There are two ways that decision might be interpreted. First, the culture responsible for the separate spheres ideology had developed a maternal identity, the domestic angel, that Webster *as a mother herself* was presumed to have expert personal knowledge of, and thus authority to write about; the sonnet sequence, typically conceived of as a lyric or expressive mode of poetry, provided her an authorised feminine mode of poetry as vehicle. Such is William Rossetti's interpretation. However, Joan Lidoff (1993) says that to see the mother-daughter story in literature requires "alterations [in] our traditional conceptual structures" (399) and "a different way of reading" (400). We might examine Rossetti's framing of Webster's poem in terms of "traditional conceptual structures". For instance, his admiration for Webster's not having been "forestalled" actually dislocates Webster's poem from any possible female literary genealogy or history, by denying the existence of such a thing because she was the first.<sup>7</sup> In this move, literary tradition simply imitates patrilineal tradition. To situate Webster in a daughterly relation to Barrett Browning, the second interpretative possibility, suggested by Webster's use of the sonnet sequence, is to begin to make apparent a female literary history that has been obscured from view within the "traditional conceptual structures" to which Lidoff refers. From this stance, it might be proposed that in her choice of genre Webster exploited a loophole in the ideological structure that prohibited maternal agency.

What grounds are there for postulating a daughterly textual relation between Webster and Barrett Browning? Webster cannot have been ignorant of Barrett Browning's work, and certainly not of her sonnet sequence, and it is implausible that she had not been influenced by it. It is

certainly possible to indicate apparent allusions to Sonnets from the Portuguese in Webster's poem, as I shall show later (although it is also possible to refer these allusions back to the broader sonnet tradition, as I showed in the case of Barrett Browning's poem). Finally, Webster's poem is neither dedicated to her daughter nor does it speak directly to her (the child is referred to throughout in the third person); in fact, the title is suggestively ambiguous and may be taken to refer to the mother/speaker herself being both mother and daughter. These conditions, when added to Barrett Browning's powerful articulation of a female desiring subject in *her* sonnet sequence, do problematise Rossetti's framing of the poem, making it conceivable that Webster takes up the challenge Barrett Browning voiced to her lover in Sonnets from the Portuguese, "Be heir to those who are now exanimate" (xxxiii). It is apposite here to recollect Dorothy Mermin's comment on Barrett Browning, whom she called the "great mythic mother" (1989 2) of both the male and the female poets who followed her. If such a mothering/daughtering in the case of Barrett Browning and Augusta Webster cannot be proved by reference to Webster's intentions — the old reversible strategy of requiring women to have precisely what they cannot theoretically be said to have — it is, nevertheless, available as a strategy of reading, providing a constructive frame for Webster's poem as a matrilineal genealogical project.<sup>8</sup>

### Mothers, Daughters

Luce Irigaray says, "According to our traditions, which for centuries have stayed faithful to a God-father who engenders a God-son by means of a virgin-mother, the maternal function serves to mediate the generation of sons. This function, which is certainly divine, sets up no genealogy of the divine among women, and in particular between mother and daughter" (1984/1993 68). Within the law of the father each daughter must "begin anew" (Doreen D'Cruz 2002 57) as she is seduced into a patrilineal line at the expense of her maternal origins. The archetypal myth that dramatises this process is that of Clytemnestra and Electra, who sacrifices her mother

in order to obtain a place in the patriarchal order. In Aeschylus' "The Eumenides" the ancient birthright of the Furies, who say "Honour your *parents*" (254; my emphasis), is abolished in favour of the paternal law in which the mother is "just nurse to a seed . . . She [is] like a stranger for a stranger" (264).<sup>9</sup> Under the law of the father, all women become 'strangers for strangers': they are estranged from their own mothers and children, co-opted to the service of men who are as strangers to them. However, if Aeschylus' mythic telling estranges the child from the materiality of the mother's body, Sophocles' version of the myth describes Electra's estrangement from her mother's language. His play (which is Barrett Browning's source) contains a lengthy debate between Clytemnestra and Electra that quite specifically devolves on there being two *explanations* for Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon. The debate between mother and daughter involves a struggle for control of language, whose version becomes the authorised version, and who gets to tell it. (In this respect it is significant that Clytemnestra's speech is written in prose form, rather than in the verse that is characteristic of Greek tragedy.) In Sophocles' play, Electra specifically rejects her mother's telling and insists on substituting her father's story: "I would like to say what I think may be justly said for my dead father", she says. The linguistic breach between mother and daughter is sealed when Clytemnestra caustically reframes the mother's betrayal as the daughter's betrayal: "There stands one near me, / Before whom I may not freely unveil my thoughts" (87).

In Sonnets from the Portuguese Barrett Browning's protagonist's self-characterisation of herself as Electra-like (discussed in Chapter Two) evokes both of these mythic breaches between mother and daughter. First, Barrett Browning dramatises estrangement from the maternal body, as the protagonist is translated from the uterine-like "close rooms" of her familial home into the sphere of heterosexual love, a process that involves her relocation within her husband's home (in sonnet xxxv). Second, she dramatises the protagonist's estrangement from her childhood language ("pet name[s]" [xxxiii] and "home-talk" [xxxv]), as she is rescripted within the domain of the masculine symbolic (she says, "I seek no copy of life's

first half: / Leave here the pages with long musing curled, / And write me new my future's epigraph" [xlii]). Barrett Browning's protagonist, in these lines, does not break with maternal silence but with maternal language. (It is also clear that Barrett Browning felt, in her professional life as a writer, an acute sense of dislocation from a female literary genealogy, as evidenced by her reference to her lack of "grandmothers".)

In the search for a non-sacrificial mythology of mother and daughter, the pre-Oedipal relation of mother and daughter (prior to the intervention of the paternal law) has been taken up as a privileged site. For instance, Nancy Chodorow has argued that although girls are eventually co-opted to the law of the father, they do not enter the symbolic as early as and as fully as boys do as a result of identification with their mothers based on anatomical similarity as well as a cultural dimension derived from the extended period of the mother's primary parenting role. As a result of their continued identification with their mothers, daughters do not entirely terminate their belief that communication does not require the absence of the mother nor do they terminate their affective bonds with their mothers. According to Chodorow, these factors, rather than hatred of their mothers for not having penises, motivate them to have a child. Desire for a child in Chodorow's formulation thus derives from the daughter's desire to please her mother and her desire to reproduce her own pre-Oedipal union with her mother.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, the value of the pre-Oedipal space as *the* domain for feminine desire, or what we might call the mythology of presence (the imaginary fantasy of union with the mother's body), is being reassessed. If, as daughters, women want to recuperate and revalue their early attachments to their mothers, there is a cost to the mother in restricting that experience to the pre-Oedipal domain.<sup>11</sup> First, the pre-Oedipal or phallic mother doesn't exist in time or place. D'Cruz says that "the confinement of the mother to the pre-Oedipal site is the corollary to a social order erected in the Name-of-the-Father" (5). The pre-Oedipal or phallic mother "is itself a construct of the masculine imaginary" (5), and is thus both a function and a fiction of

the child's desire. Second, the imagined "fused entity" of pre-Oedipal mother and child is without desire: it is this loss of plenitude that is subsequently mourned by the child. As D'Cruz says, "[t]he idea of desire presumes the existence of an intersubjective interval located in time, which the subjects of desire seek to bridge through language and through their bodies" (4). This last point also raises a question about the conflation of pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic, which can only characterise the child's misapprehension of the experience of his or her early relation with the mother. Although the child might not consciously remember it (is required to repress it), the mother certainly spoke to the child. In fact, in the pre-Oedipal mother-child dyad the mother more or less exclusively holds the speaking position: might it not be this position, speaking subject, that the daughter seeks to reproduce for herself by having a baby? (The silence of the mother is so reified in theory that this point seems not to have been discussed at all, although it is certainly allowable in terms of either unconscious wishes/return of the repressed, or the more commonsense circumstance of actual girls having seen actual mothers behaving as speaking subjects with other actual babies.) The mother's status as speaking subject in this context is not theoretically unambiguous. For instance, for Kristeva there is a maternal body, without subjectivity and speech, and a "woman-subject . . . under the sway of the paternal function (as symbolizing, speaking subject and like all others)" (238). The Kristevan mother-who-speaks is actually structurally only a daughter, "homologous to a male speaking body" (242), having been inscribed into "language-symbolism-paternal law" (242).<sup>12</sup> However, D'Cruz argues that "instinctual female desire does impose itself on the symbolic order and in turn upon narrative" (12), and in this Chapter I will argue that a like 'imposition' on the symbolic order occurs in the language encounters of mother and child dramatised in Webster's poem, and through Webster's evocation of her textual mother's voice.

In literary studies of the representation of motherhood the pre-Oedipal union of mother and daughter has also been taken up as a privileged site, and there has developed a tendency to look for literary instances that

represent mother-daughter affinities evocative of this union, such as the daughter being experienced by the mother as an “extension or double” of herself. For instance, Margaret Homans has adapted Chodorow’s argument to explain the “structures of literalization” (26) she detects in women’s writing as attempts to “re-presenc[e] the mother’s body” (15).<sup>13</sup> Lidoff also identifies features characteristic of the mother-daughter story in twentieth-century literature. For instance, she identifies “grammatical ambiguity”, “embedded” stories, “fluctuations at . . . boundaries”, “mutual empathy”, “visceral verb-nouns”, instability of inside and outside, and a “spiralling sense of time, a multiple sense of self and story”. If these features speak to a merging of mother and daughter’s bodies, they also speak to the disruptive connotations of the mother’s language. Indeed, both Barrett Browning and Webster articulate the notion that there is something distinctive about and potentially transgressive in mothers’ speech to their children. For Barrett Browning a mother’s words “make no sense”; for Webster they are “[p]rompt, idle, by-names with their sense to seek” (XXI). In Barrett Browning, mothers’ words prevent the “over-early solemn[ising]” of the child; in Webster’s sonnet, mothers’ words are playful “jester’s” words and “laughing ironies”. The playfulness of mother’s tongue mocks the father’s law (no means no!); the mother’s tongue (a maternal symbolic?) is not only non-rational, it is also anti-rational.<sup>14</sup>

Although we are developing a “way of reading” mother-daughter stories that discloses thematic and grammatical specificities that persist over time, such as those identified by Homans and Lidoff, we still do not know the meaning of these re-iterations — the extent to which they recur as a result of each daughter/writer beginning anew, as D’Cruz put it, and are thus a consequence of the structural position of women in culture and history, or the extent to which they can be said to disclose a dissenting tradition in some way excessive to or free of that culture/history/genealogy. Also problematic, for women at least, is the question of their role within these structures/history: for instance, the extent to which their own early

language encounters with their children prepare the grounds for the father's symbolic.

### Mother and Daughter: an Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence

Joan Lidoff has identified “fluid” or “interacting boundaries” (399) in the mother-daughter stories she analyses. She relates that fluidity to the developmental trajectory outlined by Chodorow, who theorises that girls' identities are defined by a “less absolute separation of self from other” (Lidoff 399). Lidoff modifies this theory somewhat, following Jane Flax, to allow also for a “core self” (402) that can encompass the need to differentiate from the mother while yet allowing “negotiations and fluctuations at its boundaries” (402). Doreen D’Cruz also speaks of “liquidity” and “the dynamics of fluidity” (71) in the mother-daughter stories she analyses; she reads these as strategies the authors use to “signify . . . a different mode of intersubjective congress” (71). As both writers suggest, the notion of a “fluid boundary” is useful only to the extent that an “intersubjective interval” (D’Cruz, cited above) between mother and daughter also remains, without which there is no need for language and there can be no desire.

Mother and Daughter creates two mother-daughter structures that are characterised by both “fluid boundaries” and “intersubjective interval[s]”. The first structure is the mother-daughter relationship between Barrett Browning as textual mother and Augusta Webster as textual daughter. The “fluid boundaries” of the relationship manifest in the embedded allusions, predominantly, but not exclusively, to Sonnets from the Portuguese. The importance of this relationship is that it occurs within and through language. Doubtlessly that language is the paternal symbolic (they *are* sonnet sequences); doubtlessly that fact also places the mother in literature and history, and thus there is an interval between mother and daughter (separate poems, separate temporal periods). If, in this mother-daughter relation, Webster speaks from the daughter's position she nevertheless speaks to a speaking mother. The second structure is the mother-daughter



relationship between the speaking mother of the poem and her child. Again, this relationship involves a negotiation with the paternal symbolic. In this instance, that relation is developed within the available identities of lover and beloved as they consist within the sonnet tradition, which is characterised by an “intersubjective interval” between lover and beloved (or, here, between child and mother) that the gaze and the sonnets attempt to bridge. In Webster’s poem, the mother-daughter pair are both “loverlike” (XVI) and “stranger-wise” (II) to each other; these terms characterise the mother-child relationship as one of desire. In being “loverlike” the daughter views the mother as someone other in relation to herself. The daughter’s “happy gaze finds all that’s best” in the mother, just as the courtly lover gazes with partiality (but from a distance) on his beloved. The daughter “will not have” the aging of the mother, and, through her will to love, “half keeps [her mother] as she’d have [her] be”. But where and what is the “half” that escapes the daughter’s constructive gaze, though? It is found where the mother herself is most loverlike, addressing sonnets to *her* beloved, “[a]s he that to his sole desire is sworn, / Indifferent what women more were born” (XXVI). Alternately, she is found where the mother uses her own voice to “[s]ing Time asleep” and to “[b]e twice the thing her [daughter’s] fancies are” (XIII). In these ways the mother is excessive to her child’s perception/construction of her. The reversibility of roles within the mother-daughter relation (they are both “loverlike”) in this poem constitutes “fluid boundaries” between them even while the lover-beloved relation characterises a space between the individual subjects. The slippage between these roles throughout the poem, mother and daughter each being lover and beloved, each speaking and then listening to the other, prevents the relation from lapsing into narcissism.

### *1. A Mother-Daughter Encounter in Language*

In Sonnets from the Portuguese Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses the image of Electra and her funerary urn to characterise her protagonist’s “heavy heart”: “see / What a great heap of grief lay hid in me” (v).

However, the self-death suggested by the ashes in the urn is belied by the “red wild sparkles”, which represent the protagonist’s nascent life. Barrett Browning’s Electra/protagonist is re-born outside her mother’s body, through a fortuitous conjunction of circumstance and heterosexual love; the “winds” of sonnet v are subsequently identified as the beloved’s “life-breath” of sonnet xxvii, and, still later, become the “breath” of the protagonist’s “whole life” in sonnet xliii. Barrett Browning’s protagonist is Electra-like in being a daughter who takes up the father’s tongue through the aegis of her beloved: she is reconstituted by him (and in relation to him) in his time, in his place, and he enables her to take up the position of a sonneteer. (What she makes of it after that is in the nature of the imposition suggested by D’Cruz.)

In its evocation of Sonnets to the Portuguese, Webster’s poem negotiates different grounds for a female subjectivity that do not depend on the murder of the mother. The same image of sparks and flames used by Barrett Browning, is, in Mother and Daughter (“Stirring the ashes . . . For yet some sparks to warm the livelong gloom”), used differently by Webster, although it also characterises “weary hearts” (IX). In Webster, the “weary hearts” belong to “poor mothers that look back”. Webster says these mothers feel a “joy forlorn”, suggesting Kristeva’s melancholic mother, whose “child has become an object, a gift to others, neither self nor part of the self, an object destined to be a subject, an other” (239). These mothers are “outcasts from the vale where they were born”. On the one hand, they are “outcasts” from their own maternity: their insistence on keeping their children in an infantile state, and hence never others or subjects, negates the possibility of their becoming (being “born” as) maternal subjects themselves. On the other hand, the birth of a child reproduces a “forlorn” state for all mothers, in relation to their own maternal heritages (from which they are “outcasts”) and their children’s futures (in which they will be “outcasts”). The way through this impasse, Webster suggests, is not to regress towards silence, to become “Love’s Counterfeit” (X) or “Love’s Mourner” (XI), but to “dare [to] tell” what “is” rather than “what’s o’er”: to allow the child to become a subject and to

negotiate a relationship with the child as a speaking mother-subject herself. Thus both Barrett Browning and Webster, with the same image in these two sonnets, describe two different paths to adult female subjectivity and speech. Both images, however, insist on the possibility of a future subjective ‘becoming’. Barrett Browning’s sonnet looks back to her sonnet i, in which the protagonist is drawn out of the procession of “sweet, sad years”, while Webster’s sonnet speaks of mothers who “[t]urn on their road”, thereby implying a road that continues forward. By including Barrett Browning’s image within her own poem, Webster differentiates from her textual mother without disconnecting from her: she places her speaking mother within her own daughterly speech, reminding the reader that Barrett Browning opened up such a place in the sonnet sequence ahead of her.

To combine the maternal body and the maternal speaking subject within the mother-daughter relation, Webster borrows another image from Barrett Browning. In sonnet xxi Barrett Browning’s protagonist invites her beloved to “[s]ay over again, and yet once over again, / That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated / Should seem a cuckoo-song”, but also to “love me also in silence, with thy soul”. She embraces her access to the Symbolic, but she also invites her beloved to share with her an extra-linguistic (but also disembodied) love, which she has the greater expertise in. By contrast, Webster’s protagonist, using the same image (“Birds sing ‘I love you, love’, the whole day through” [XXIII]), asks her daughter to cherish her bond with her mother’s body, “[l]est iterant wont should make caresses trite, / Love-names mere cuckoo ousters of the true.” The sestet continues:

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

Barrett Browning’s protagonist can doubt her beloved’s words, because

“distant years . . . did not take / [The beloved’s] sovranity” (xxxvii); his words are not her first language. By contrast there is continuity between the mother and daughter of Webster’s poem: “Being child and mother [they] learned not nor forget” (XXII). The problem for the mother-daughter relation involves retaining that trust beyond the early years; the solution is to continue caressing.

In sonnet XX Webster’s mother remembers the child “that held my finger . . . Wondering and wiser at each word I said”, providing a figure for the mother/daughter relation that can move beyond an imaginary relation with the phallic/silent mother. Webster’s image in sonnet XX unites the bond of bodies (“held my finger”) with the maternal transmission of language (“each word I said”) such that they exist contemporaneously. However, in describing the daughter as “dearer and more; / *Closer* to me, since sister womanhoods meet” (my emphasis), the mother claims that neither bond has been relinquished, suggesting that a mother-daughter relationship need not require the daughter to renounce her maternal origin: as adult women they *can* “meet” on different terms, as subjects in common. Such a meeting envisages a context for a relationship between mother and daughter (sister/woman), that moves beyond the roles fixed for them and dividing them within patrilineal genealogy. One can also put this context to use for reading women’s literary history: Webster as textual daughter, “wondering and [becoming] wiser” as she pored over Barrett Browning’s words, later becoming her sister-sonneteer. (And, after all, why should a female genealogy take the same linear temporal form that men’s genealogy takes?)

## 2. *Rewriting Cultural Myths*

The octet of “Love’s Counterfeit” (X) describes a mother ensnared by “Memory — / [Love’s] shadow that now stands for him in all”. This mother is a “thrall” in “chains” to the child who has since “passed by”; she is transfixed by the spectre of the baby who once needed her, but who is

now “past reach”. These phrases characterise the phallic mother/body, who is not only beyond the reach of the child, but is trapped outside language and time. Sonnet XI, “Love’s Mourner”, reframes this relation (mother as abandoned object of the child) as a cultural myth: “’Tis men who say”, “So in a thousand voices”, “that men call”, “naming for love”. The myth that says “[t]he woman’s love, wife’s, mother’s, still will hold” is the myth characterising the male imaginary, the myth of union with the phallic mother. (The line also captures nicely the interchangeability of woman/wife/mother as objects of males’ desire to be held.) This myth, which purports to elevate women as the embodiment of unfailing, self-renouncing love, and which is perceived from the outside as a cherished, enduring weakness, is perceived from the inside (by actual mothers) as an expensive, painful burden — thus the heart-wrenching ambiguity of “this dear patient madness”. Instead of there being a mother (or wife or woman) who is an actual woman-subject, there is only a “void place” filled with “[k]indness of household wont” and “faith”: an angel in the house. (Webster’s mother also disavows her own angelic perfection in other sonnets: she gets vexed [VI], she is “hard” and has a “narrow near regard” [VII], she doesn’t sing well [XIII], she is aging [XV-XIX] and she is proud of herself [XIV-XXVII].)

In sonnet II Webster takes on another cultural myth: “That she is beautiful is not delight, / As some think mothers joy”. In this sonnet, Webster challenges the idea that mothers gladly participate in the cultural positioning of their daughters as objects of exchange in a masculine economy. Her mother’s “joy” does not reside in her perception of her daughter’s ability to captivate men (“to witness questing eyes caught prisoner”), but in her own perception of her daughter’s “beauty”. The mother’s love and the daughter’s value are not routed through someone else’s eyes or voice or economy. This mother notes, grows happier, worships, such that she is herself a loving subject. In the exclamatory sestet the mother compiles a list of her daughter’s beautiful attributes; they are physical beauties that any “stranger” might admire. The beauty of the

beauty, however, is, for the mother, in the daughter's "being thou!"

Maternal passion has two forms in nineteenth-century literature: the disembodied passion of Mary (and the angel in the house) and the feared and despised passion of the sexual or mad mother. Webster (again following Barrett Browning's revisionary example) violates the conventional function of the sonnet sequence as a mode for the expression of male erotic love to appropriate a place for the voicing of maternal passion. Webster's mother analogises maternal passion with romantic passion in XXVI, taking on the position of lover. (At the same time, the traditional co-ordinates of power associated with the heterosexual relation, in particular the subordination of women, are challenged. For instance, sonnet XX says: "She did my bidding; but I more than obeyed".) The lover's attachment to his "sole desire" renders him "indifferent" to other women, and his beloved is the only object who can satisfy his desire ("And if she loved him not all love were vain"). Both the lover's passion and the beloved he desires are exalted by the singularity of his fixation: it is all or nothing for him, and because he risks everything, he potentially "gains more". In the economy of romantic love, the ideal unit is a pair, rather than a "wifely train". If a mother is everything to a child, Webster's revisionary move here is to make the child equally valuable to the mother, thereby introducing mutuality to the relation: "Thou hast all thy mother; thou art all my own". This mutuality is not restrictive, but expansive (the "heaven of" one encounters the "infinite deeps" of the other, again echoing Barrett Browning's heights and depths), allowing for a commensurate expansion and revaluation of the "passion of maternity".

### *3. Replacing the Mother-Daughter Relation in Language: A Maternal Symbolic?*

It has been suggested that mothers both mourn and experience feelings of guilt about the separation of their babies at birth and later in life (Lidoff 407). However, Sonnet XXVII frames the separation of mother and child at birth in a positive fashion:

Since first my little one lay on my breast  
 I never needed such a second good,  
 Nor felt a void left in my motherhood  
 She filled not always to the utterest.

The “void” in this sonnet contrasts with the “void” in sonnet XI, which is filled with a ghostly, silent mother. Here, the “void” constituted at the same time that a baby is born is her empty uterus, which is punned with the mother’s “utterest” here and “uttermost” in XXV, and is also suggestive of her utterance, her pleasure in speaking to and of her daughter. Separation here is not viewed as either the mother’s or the daughter’s tragedy, but rather as the beginning of a mutually nourishing encounter.

There are, in Mother and Daughter, a number of watery images that suggest a kind of fluid mingling of mother and daughter. For instance, the “full and crystal lake / [That] gives it skies their passage to its deeps” describes the child’s openness to her mother’s gaze in III, and in XXII the mother-child relation is characterised by complementary images of “brook” and “tarn”. In sonnet XVII Webster makes interesting use of the lover’s poetic conceit of twinned pulses when her mother says, “methinks her heart sets tune for mine to beat”. This image and the mother’s reference to “youthful blood instilled” in the sestet invert the notion of maternal blood nourishing the foetus. The mother’s claim that her “youth upflowers [and repeats] [o]ld joyaunces . . . nigh obsolete” certainly speaks to mothering as a reproduction or re-evocation of the mother’s daughtering.

For Webster, moreover, the reproduction of her literary daughtering and the separation of mother and daughter in her poem *is* mediated by language, and her sonnet sequence exposes the fiction of the mother’s silence. Even the images of “brook” and “tarn” in sonnet XXII also comprise a linguistic dimension: the brook is “riotous” and has a “triumphing sound”, while the tarn has “never a sigh wherewith its wealth is said” and a “strong hush”. (The phrase “strong hush” seems to violate linguistic convention in the ways Lidoff has suggested.) In sonnet XVII,

the mother says, “[w]e are so near; her new thoughts, incomplete, / Find their shaped wording happen on my tongue”. The mother’s tongue provides a completion for the child, but in such a way that agency is diffused: the process is found and it happens. The drifting prepositional phrase in the line “I watch the sweet grave face in timorous thought” (III) has the effect, through its grammatical ambiguity, of also confusing agency. In XIII there is a dimension of the mother’s voice, her “tones”, that is excessive to the “measure [of] note and line”, the symbolic constituents of the language of music. In this sonnet the mother’s voice has a particularity, a “secret thine”, perceived only by her child (in contrast to the mother’s “voice to stranger ear”). In the child’s phrasing, “something in thy tones brings music near; / As though thy song could search me and divine”. The mother’s tones here “give back” (XXI) the daughter’s “trill” and “music” from sonnet I. Thus these examples also suggest “fluid boundaries”, but within a specifically linguistic context.

One of the most complex and most beautiful sonnets of the sequence is XX, which is evocative of Barrett Browning’s lines from Aurora Leigh characterising mother’s speech: “And stringing pretty words that make no sense, / And kissing full sense into empty words” (cited above). Webster’s revision is subtle and playful: her strings of words have many senses and her words’ emptiness is a function of their surfeit of meaning. The sonnet begins, “Hardly in any common tender wise, / With petting talk, light lips on her dear cheek, / The love I mean my child will bear to speak”. The interpretive possibilities of these lines are manifold: mother’s love is not ordinarily considered to be wise (either sagacious or conscious); a mother’s love is not tender or wise in any common or ordinary sense; mothers’ love speaks without using the “common tender” or shared currency of affectionate words; a mother speaks of her love for her child in the “common tender” of erotic love, the sonnet; a mother ‘speaks’ her love in “petting” sensual touches rather than in common speech (that is, speech in common, in the physical encounter, dramatised in VI as “lip to ear”); mothers’ love uses the “common tender” of words but uses them “floutingly” (to break the rules or to provocatively display the speech act).



My list of interpretations reflects the grammatical ambiguity of the proposition by repeating its subjective indeterminacy: who or what speaks? The sonnet produces still other paradoxes: speech is a “foreign tongue” and yet is “[f]amiliar on our lips and closely known”; speech is “empty sound”, and yet “each word” has its “every purport”. Without using the word love (“Loth of its own less image for disguise”), the mother weaves “merry gird[s]” of words whose “core” referent is love. Thus “love” is not something exchanged in solemn avowals of love (the devalued currency of sonnets XI and XXIII), but exchanged in the intimate context of word-play that “gives back such a meaning”, as, indeed, Webster poem “gives back” language and meaning to the mother-daughter encounter.

### Concluding Remark

In this reading I have focused on the mother-daughter relation as it involves literature and language, as writing, language and desire are the main interests of my thesis. These interests do not define the limits of Webster’s representation of the mother-daughter relation, and my selected examples and analyses do not exhaust the poem’s representation of language and desire. Areas to be further explored can be suggested. Several sonnets introduce the figure of the husband/father to the relation, suggesting a re-characterisation of this mythical triangle by way of the gender of the child and the linguistic authority of the mother. The concluding group of sonnets on the topic of the single child, seem particularly personal or autobiographical; however, they can also be explored with reference to changing patterns of child-bearing during the period. Finally, there is a need to re-assess the placement of this poem within Webster’s oeuvre, from which it has typically been displaced, and, consequently, to re-examine the Victorian poetics of motherhood beyond the few works I have discussed here.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All references are to sonnet number.

<sup>2</sup> The word “passion” designates an intensity or excess of feeling that can even approach suffering, and as such it evokes the term *jouissance*, which Fuery defines as a “point of ecstasy in which the idea has orgasmic force” (1995 6). In this reading I do not suggest that Mother and Daughter is the expression of Webster’s own maternal *jouissance*, but rather that her poem represents an idea of what maternal *jouissance* might be like.

<sup>3</sup> The description of Christ as the “fruit” of Mary’s womb, does, however, connote some material relation between the body of Mary and her son. It has been suggested to me that the sanctity of Mary is possible because she is material without being sexual, as suggested by the epithet “Virgin” (D’Cruz, pers. communic.) Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature (Ed. Lloyd Davis) explores the use of virgin and virginity in a number of nineteenth-century literary texts.

<sup>4</sup> In her excellent chapter on Victorian women’s poetry, “‘A Music of Thine Own’: Women’s poetry — an expressive tradition” (1993 318-377), Isobel Armstrong draws the reader’s attention to another William Rossetti introduction (to Felicia Hemans’ poetry) that uses many of the same (patronising) terms he uses here.

<sup>5</sup> She was not the only poet to do so. Other poems in which a mother speaks include Joanna Baillie’s “A Mother to her Waking Infant” (1790); Dora Greenwell’s “Demeter and Cora” (1876); and Edith Nesbit’s “Song (Oh, baby, baby, baby dear)” (1886).

<sup>6</sup> In Aurora Leigh (1856), Barrett Browning, in a wry, self-parodying observation, has Romney say to Aurora: “[You] Will write of factories and

of slaves, as if / Your father were a Negro, and your son / A spinner in the mills" (II.104-96).

<sup>7</sup> Lidoff herself seems to date the inception of a female and feminist literature to Virginia Woolf, saying "women writers of this century have insisted on articulating . . . the mother-daughter story" (398); she subsequently footnotes that "this story is now being written", citing a number of texts of the 1970s and 80s (418).

<sup>8</sup> In "The Textual Mother as Unmothered Daughter" (1992) Elizabeth L. MacNabb adopts this strategy, postulating an intertextual relationship between Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, and Kate Millet's Sexual Politics and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic. MacNabb uses Chodorow to theorise a textual gendering that mirrors the gendering of boys and girls. MacNabb speculates that de Beauvoir's text was an "unmothered" or "masculine" text, its formative influences being male-authored texts by Hegel, Sartre, Levi-Strauss, Freud, and Engels. In Millet's book MacNabb observes "obvious similarities" to The Second Sex, but that that textual inheritance is not acknowledged. By contrast, The Madwoman in the Attic identifies with a feminist tradition whose inception its authors specifically refer back to de Beauvoir, although their work "subverts the mother's [text by] filling in the gaps" created by de Beauvoir's tendency to devalue the feminine sphere and literature. I am not sure that this process is best described in relation to the gendering of children in psychosexual processes, a theory which seems to deny mothers, daughters and writers much agency in their own identifications and influences.

<sup>9</sup> All references are to The Oresteia, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1977). References are to page number.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Kristeva makes an argument that seems at first to affirm Chodorow's reproductive theory: "By giving birth, the woman enters into

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contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself” (1987 239). However, Kristeva’s subsequent analysis undermines the grounds for a maternal subjectivity based on this continuity. She refers to a principle of “split symbolization” (1977/1987 240) underlying a daughter’s desire to become a mother. She says that desire for a child is “without fail a desire to bear a child of the father” (238), but alongside this desire “motherhood seems to be impelled *also* by a nonsymbolic, nonpaternal causality” (239), which she reads as a daughter’s fantasy of reunion with the body of her mother. This facet of a daughter’s desire, the “*homosexual-maternal facet*” (239) is “feeling, displacement, rhythm, sound, flashes, and fantasied clinging to the maternal body” (239-40). In the Lacanian formulation of subjectivity, these facets of desire (paternal, maternal) are inscribed by/in Oedipalisation, which produces simultaneously the phallic mother of the Imaginary and the castrated mother of the Symbolic. In the Kristevan reformulation of Lacan, the Symbolic and the Imaginary remain, but excessive to these is an actual biological maternal body, which inscribes its own programme on the child; she calls this body/programme/domain/inscription the Semiotic. The semiotic/maternal body is also called a “filter”, a “threshold” and a “limit” where nature meets culture, whose “nothingness” is filled with/by the fantasy phallic mother in the interest of obtaining/maintaining “symbolic coherence” (238). The Semiotic is excessive to the Symbolic, which confers subjectivity in language, thus maternal jouissance is “mute” (241) and a maternal subject is “a delusion” (242). However, the maternal body is encountered/disclosed, for daughters, in the act of giving birth, and traces of it are found in the aesthetic practices of sons (alongside the fetish object-body) as flashes of colour and light that reproduce/represent the ‘elsewhere-ness’ of the mother. Although Kristeva does not discuss woman-as-artist, one would assume that in this respect the woman is again homologous to a man; it is not clear how the fact of a woman having given birth is related to her practice as artist.

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<sup>11</sup> In her analysis of Sade and critique of Freud, Jane Gallop notes that the cost of preserving the phallic mother necessitates for the male subject “an eternal desire to castrate her” (1988 62).

<sup>12</sup> If, as Kristeva characterises women’s actual speech, the mother speaks as a male homologue, and is only a filter for paternal law, why does the child subsequently need to be Oedipalised?

<sup>13</sup> Homans uses this thesis to work out women’s problematic relationship to writing in her analysis of Elizabeth Gaskell’s diary. Homans theorises that Elizabeth Gaskell saw “language . . . as a disaster” (162) in terms of her relationship with her daughter. Reading, Homans says, is a form of isolation or absence of the other which had no value for Gaskell compared to the value of the literal identification with her daughter — being with her — aside from mediating between them in the case of one or other’s death. (The diary would only become a text for reading if either of the pair were dead.) Homans suggests that, in privileging the literal, Gaskell is subverting the privilege customarily granted to the figurative under the law of the father. Nevertheless, Gaskell did write, and not only a diary. What is the relationship between being a mother and writing in these circumstances?

<sup>14</sup> In developmental psychology the language relationship of mother and child is characterised by distaste, denial and negation. First, there is a postulated language called ‘motherese’ that mothers use when speaking to their children; however, we are told that “[y]ou do not have to be a mother to speak motherese”. The language is reduced to a series of vocal techniques available to all adults: “pitch your voice high, use short words, speak slowly” etc. The specificity of the mother-child relation in language is negated, then its importance is denied: it is “unclear . . . how important motherese is”. Second, an instance of spoken motherese is recorded, and receives the following comment: “this typical commentary from a mother may not sound as if it is on the highest intellectual plane”. The text goes

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on to say, “Although it is not necessary to *teach* a child to talk, it is important to speak naturally”. Speaking “naturally” involves “correct[ing] wrong answers” and faulty grammar. All these references are to Diane E. Papalia and Sally Wendkos Olds (1992, 135-36), but the trend is widespread. In three texts I referenced, none had an index reference for mother under language, and none had a reference for language under mother.

## CHAPTER FIVE

AMOURS DE VOYAGE: "THE FANCY'S FREE TO SPEND / ITS  
SPECIAL SELF ARIGHT IN MANNER, TIME AND PLACE"

Introduction and Background

This chapter considers Claude's desire in Arthur Hugh Clough's Amours de Voyage (1858).<sup>1</sup> Amours de Voyage is an epistolary poem comprised predominantly of letters from Claude to his friend Eustace, but it also includes letters from Georgina and Mary Trevellyn to their friend Louisa Roper. (There are no replies from either of the correspondents included in the poem.) The poem is divided into five Cantos, each containing up to thirteen letters written in the famous hexameters; in addition, ten italicised elegiac verses open and close each Canto. The main topics of Claude's letters are, initially, his impressions of Rome, which he is visiting during the period of the "Roman Republic" (1848-1849), and, later, his account of his putative courtship and pursuit of Mary Trevellyn. Claude's relationship with Mary is intertwined with his other experiences in Italy and also with the elegiac sections that open and close each canto. (In this structure, Amours de Voyage resembles The Angel in the House, which also has discrete lyrical passages that constitute an embedded model for the narrative of Vaughan's courtship.) In Amours de Voyage the elegiac sections are lyrical or poetic versions of the events described in the letters, and they represent not so much an idealised model for the narrative as an alternative way of viewing the events of Claude and Mary's relationship.

The recent critical history of Amours de Voyage began with the mid-twentieth century wave of the re-appraisal of Victorian poetry initiated by Walter Houghton's The Victorian Frame of Mind (1957). The focus of the early readings is Claude's (and, in the case of Katherine Chorley's 1962 study, also Clough's) frame of mind: his "intellectual posturings and

defensive detachment” (I. Armstrong 1962 25); his “conflict between engagement and disengagement” (Chorley 201); his “inability to work out a final answer” (Hardy 1969 255); and his “subjective disjunction” (Goode 1969 283). These readings all associate the poem within the context of the Victorian intellectuals’ ‘crisis of faith’, in which, it was said, the competing demands of the “critical mind” and the “will to believe” (Houghton 1957 106) initiated a morbid kind of self-analysis obviating any action in any direction at all. Three readings between 1970 and 1980 extend the discussion of Claude’s state of mind to include the love plot, although only briefly. James R. Locke (1975) calls the poem “a man-to-man discussion of a woman” (57), while Wendell Stacy Johnson proposes that Claude, at the end of the poem, rejects both sex and marriage as incompatible with the life of an intellectual (85). Richard D. McGhee (1980) interprets Claude’s problem as his failure to embrace his sexual identity (132).

Later readings are informed by post-structural understandings of subjectivity. Robert Micklus (1980) describes Claude’s “humorous escapade into the world of action” (413) and his subsequent withdrawal from it, concluding that Claude’s demand for a fixed perception of reality, juxtaposed against evidence of a world in flux, and indeed a self in flux, results in his retreat from the world of experience to the world of abstraction. Three more recent readings focus on textual processes as constituents of subjectivity and identity. W. David Shaw (1990) analyses Claude’s representation of himself as “a possible hero in a novel” (109), drawing together Claude’s musings on role-playing and his “resourceful hovering” (170) over the various roles available to him. Shaw concludes that Claude’s unwillingness to be constrained to a single role results in him “be[ing] nothing in practice” (167), or, more specifically, being nothing more than a self-referential utterance. E. Warwick Slinn (1991) explores Claude’s attempts to differentiate himself from the world of conceptual and textual production around him, a project that is both sustained and undermined by his own role as letter-writer. Finally, Suzanne Bailey (1993) argues that the fragmented form of the poem (the divisions between elegiac and letter verses, the one-sidedness of the correspondence between



Claude and Eustace, the countervailing letters of Georgina and Mary), and the attendant demands this structure places on the reader replicate Claude's developing awareness that reality is also provisional, a product of subjective and relative processes such as synthesis and interpretation.

Amours de Voyage is a complex poem which turns on the question of what Claude desires at any one time; yet the narrative of Claude's relationship with Mary has not been thoroughly explored in the critical literature, which has tended to focus rather on Claude's more general pronouncements on women, or his final failure to conclude satisfactorily his pursuit of her. Bailey notes in another context, however, that "Amours de Voyage provides its own interpretive agenda" (159). Micklus finds this agenda in Claude's term "juxtaposition", while Goode finds it in the "act of verbalisation" (292), and Bailey herself finds it in the structural fragmentation of the poem's form. In my reading, Claude himself provides an "interpretive agenda", the heroic and predictive metaphor of Canto I.xii, for reading his relationship with Mary. Generally Claude's relationship with Mary has been viewed as a failure resulting from his inability to act decisively. In contrast, I view his relationship with Mary as a deliberate 'failure', resulting from his decisive commitment to a particular mode of heroic action. Reading the relationship as the unfolding of the metaphor points to the influence of individuals' expectations and beliefs on desire, raises questions about the ways and degrees which one's desires can be manipulated, and illustrates the complexity of the connections between desires and their objects. Rather than answering questions about what one should desire, Amours de Voyage poses questions: "What I cannot feel now, am I to suppose that I shall feel?" (II.iv.83), and "Must we abandon the future for fear of omitting the present[?]" (II.iv.90), asks Claude, and, in the end, "After all do I know that I really cared so about her?" (V.viii.156).

### Canto I: Objects from the Past

Canto I defines Claude's personality. Claude is fleeing his personal past

by taking a tour of a more distant, classical past, which he hopes to find in Rome. Unfortunately, the Catholics got there before him and ruined it, or at least that's how he describes it to Eustace in his early letters, which even Claude admits are "spiteful" (I.i.16) in tone. These early letters establish Claude's view of himself as a superior and unusually discerning person, who is disappointed by all that he encounters in Rome. In Canto I alone he denigrates Bernini and the "old Romans" (ii), Luther, Aquinas, Ignatius (iii), and his 'friend' Vernon and Vernon's friends, the Trevellyn's (vi). His superior stance is noticed by Mary Trevellyn, who comments: "He is what people call, I suppose, a superior man, and / Certainly seems so to me; but I think he is frightfully selfish" (I.xiii.269-70).

Numerous commentators have pointed out Claude's commitment to what Slinn calls an "idealistic conceptualising of his desire" (1991 96), and this commitment is an important feature of this Canto. Turning away from one past (his history in England), he turns to another past in Rome, that of classical antiquity. Yet Rome in actuality fails to live up to the ideal Rome of Claude's imagination. As Claude puts it, "Marble I thought thee, and brickwork I find thee!" (I.ii.50). Several times in this Canto Claude invokes the notion of the Platonic idea to express his dissatisfaction with what he sees in Rome: in I.ii.47, as Phelan notes (80), but also in his use of the term "form", in relation to religion (in I.viii.159), and as exemplified by children (in I.ix.176).<sup>2</sup> An "idea" is a paradigmatic and unambiguous instance, not so much "expressed in contingent reality" as Phelan says, as imitated by it. The Platonic idea is an intellectual rather than sensual concept; it speaks to Claude's desire for "a perfect and absolute something" (III.vi.144). Claude's use of this term also establishes a distinction between classical Greece and Roman antiquity, which is in excess of his critique of the Roman residue overlaid by Catholic relics he finds in Italy (as his reference to the Coliseum indicates).

Instead of the idealised Rome of antiquity hoped for in the opening lyric, Claude finds something "*rubbishy*" (I.i.20; original italics), "foolish" (I.i.21) and "incongruous" (I.i.22); even the weather "which truly is horrid"

(I.i.15) disappoints him. Seeking ideas, Claude finds rather “notion[s]” (I.ii.46), which represent both the failure of the imagination and the failure of action (“this rubbish of ages departed / Things that Nature abhors, the experiments that she has failed in” [I.ii.41-2]). In place of commitment to an “idea”, he finds the ancient Romans to have conceded to mere “amusement”, and their modern descendents to “playful follies” (I.iv.80). In Rome, Claude resembles Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh, in his journey through the “Centre of Indifference”, who finds “there are, if for the longing heart little substance, yet for the seeing eye sights enough” (Sartor Resartus 246). Claude finds, “of solidity much, but of splendour little” (I.ii.48).<sup>3</sup>

If Claude’s experience in Rome represents the failure of the distant past, the Trevellyns are viewed through the filter of Claude’s disillusionment with the more recent and the more personal past. Claude’s representation of the Trevellyns is characterised by the same spitefulness with which he perceives and represents Rome. As Eustace apparently points out, Claude’s mockery of the Trevellyns is unnecessarily cruel (I.vii). He calls them “[m]iddle-class” (I.vi.125), “rustic” (I.vii.136), and, in short, “[n]either man’s aristocracy. . . nor God’s” (I.vi.128). He decries their respectful and generous treatment of him as merely the “reverent worship of station” (I.vii.137), and sneers at Mrs Trevellyn’s intellectual forays. In short, the Trevellyns are subject to a parallel critique to that of Rome. Their attempts to perform the “old ritual service of manners” (I.vii.140) associate them with an older aristocratic tradition, but, like Rome, this older tradition is overlaid by new “gewgaws” (I.iv.79), such as Mrs Trevellyn’s “affect[ing] the blue” (I.xi.208). Claude’s relationship with the Trevellyns is represented to Eustace in terms that emphasise his non-involvement. For instance, he describes his re-entry to society as a performance enacted by his shadow (I.iv.85), and later explains that he continues to see them, not because he likes them but because “I am asked, in short, and am not good at excuses” (I.vi.124). Claude’s rejection of the past in Canto I is, I suggest, reinforced by his use of two French terms to describe his relations with the English: “*en rapport*” (I.i.2) and “*assujettissement*” (I.i.30;

italicised in the text). These are Claude's signs of his distance from and rejection of Englishness, and are used to distinguish him from Vernon, "who is here the same that you knew him" (I.i.33).

Claude closes letter I.vii with a comparison of himself to Adam, saying "[f]or Adam there is not found an help-meet for him" (150). It is not unreasonable to suppose, given Claude's critical attitude towards the Trevellyns, that he intends, along with the Biblical allusion, a play on the term "meet", implying that none of the Trevellyn daughters is a suitable prospective partner. This throwaway comment, however, first raises the possibility that finding a "help-meet" had been on Claude's agenda all along. Casually, moreover, in Claude's penultimate letter of this Canto, he also observes, "I know there are thousands as pretty and hundreds as pleasant, . . . Higher and manners more perfect than Susan or Mary Trevellyn" (I.xi.222-24). By his omission of Georgina, who is already engaged to Vernon, Claude discloses that his interest in Susan and/or Mary is not strictly 'platonic' (both as the word has been used above and as it refers to non-sexual interest). Nevertheless, letters i-xi of this Canto do not suggest any likelihood of an intimate relationship developing between Claude and "middle-class" (I.vi.125), "inferior" (I.xi.214), somewhat "pleasant" (I.xi.22) Mary Trevellyn.

Claude's final letter in Canto I, xii, is a masterpiece of allusion that ties together the Roman and the love plots and exerts a controlling effect on the narrative that follows.<sup>4</sup> The letter opens with Claude's famous admission: "Yes, I am going . . . Fusing with this thing and that, entering into all sorts of relations, / Tying I know not what ties" (I.xii.228-230), words which suggest that he is becoming more committed to his relationship with the Trevellyns. However, he immediately asserts his provisional commitment to their relationship, stressing that these ties "[w]ill, and must, woe is me, be one day painfully broken" (231). He then introduces two important supporting metaphors. First, he compares himself to Odysseus landing on Circe's island, as his reference to "*moly*" (236; original italics) makes clear. Second, without directly indicating the change of subject, he compares

himself to Theseus, braving the labyrinth of the Minotaur (237-41). Generally, these metaphors have been viewed as signifying Claude's entry into an enchanted realm of desire; however, there is another link between the two mythic references which has not been as thoroughly explored: seduction ("Fusing" and "Tying . . . ties") is followed by abandonment ("ties, which . . . Will, and must . . . be . . . broken").<sup>5</sup> In Homer's account of Odysseus' journey, Hermes' protective medicine insulates Odysseus from Circe's magic, enabling him to engage in sexual relations with her and to obtain the means of journeying to Hades to obtain instructions for his safe return home (Books X-XI).<sup>6</sup> In Theseus' adventure, he is only able to master the labyrinth of the Minotaur with the aid of Ariadne, whom he agrees to wed but later abandons on his journey home to Athens. In each instance, the woman who offers the hero aid and sexual gratification is abandoned by the hero in favour of his commitment to the 'real' best thing, which, in the case of Odysseus is Penelope, the exemplary wife, and, in the case of Theseus, is Athens. With reference to the heroes' goals, the two distinct allusions can be further refined, as my reading of Canto II will illustrate. The reference to Odysseus' adventure presages Claude's romantic adventure with Mary, who is not his Penelope, and the reference to Theseus' journey looks forward to Claude's experience in a more political context, the defence of the Roman Republic, which is not his ideal, classical Greece.

By comparing himself to these heroes, Claude discloses that Mary, to him (and at this point in the poem it is still not clear that Claude is interested specifically in Mary rather than Susan), is no more than a way station on his own heroic adventure to some other shining goal. These mythical allusions, then, rather than signifying a sea change in Claude's interest in Mary, tend to reinforce his earlier claims of not being particularly interested. At the same time, Claude's allusion suggests that there is, after all, something to be gained from engagement with the Trevellyns, that a relationship with them might offer "an *ad-interim* solace and pleasure" (III.vi.143; original italics) which would complement but not compromise his "steady fore-sense of a freer and larger existence"

(III.vi.123). That is to say, Mary might help him on his way as long as he keeps his true goal in mind. And, in fact, Claude's letters prior to this point do disclose that alongside his "abuse" (I.vii.135) of the Trevellyns, there has been a steady development in his perception of what value the Trevellyns might hold for him as "solace and *pleasure*" (my emphasis). For instance, Claude's attitude towards them moves from not liking them much (vi.122) to finding it pleasant to be in their company (ix.1) to owning to liking them (xi.220), although this latter state he contends may simply be "the horrible pleasure of pleasing inferior people" (I.xi.214).

Claude in the end, with his mythical allusion, states his intention to enact a classical, heroic narrative, a project that is concomitant with his declaration "I shrink and adapt myself" (I.ii.35). On the one hand, this commitment negates his declared desire for "freedom" (I.xi.216) because it ties his actions and their consequences to a predetermined narrative of seduction and abandonment; accordingly, as Slinn notes, it reduces Claude to an effect of textual processes: "[Claude's metaphor raises him to] the level of mythical adventurer in the same narrative process which reduces him to the level of personal negation: 'I yield, I am lost and know nothing'" (1991 100). On the other hand, Claude's desire to enact a heroic narrative indicates the kind of freedom available to a person of his means and abilities. Claude demonstrates his freedom to play with desire itself, to stimulate and simulate passion through the manipulation of circumstances to produce a particular narrative, which then becomes the measure for evaluating the success or failure of his relationship with Mary. Thus the structure of the heroic narrative that Claude proposes in his metaphor will ground both his experience and his representation of his relationship with Mary.

### Canto II: The Immediate Object

Canto II reveals Claude attempting to enact his heroic narrative despite the inaptness of his current circumstances. Maynard says that the juxtaposition of Claude with the Italian hero Mazzini acts chiefly as a

contrast between the latter's "heroic action" (1993 61) and Claude's inaction. I, however, take the view that Claude does act 'heroically' in terms of the metaphor discussed above, by refusing to mistake an escapade for the quest. For instance, letter ii, which elaborates a distinction between patriotic self-sacrifice (the reference to Horace's "Dulce et decorum est" [30]) and dispassionate or natural (ii.35, 36, 39, 45) self-preservation ("individual culture" [32]), has Claude coming down on the side of self-preservation, which is a distinctly classical rather than Romantic view of heroism. In letter iv Claude contemplates the possibility of his engagement in the conflict, not in the role of defending the republic "on the barricades" (71), but in a lesser role of defending the "British female" (66) at the Maison Serny; the implicit question is whether he is prepared to lay down his life for Mary. His problem is, as he describes it to Eustace, that his relationship with Mary is merely one of "good manners" (69) and "graceful attention" (70), and neither seems quite worth the sacrifice of his own life. Against "common civility" (79) Claude places "vocation" (76), "calling" (86), "knowledge and insight" (86), an indubitable and passionate commitment to his true desire.<sup>7</sup>

Claude is not totally unmoved by the cause of the Roman Republic. In letter i he offers "[o]ne true tear for thee" (II.i.22) and in letter iii he confesses to dreaming of "a sword at [his] side and a battle-horse underneath [him]" (62). His actual experience of the battle is enough to cure him of his indulgent sentimentalism, though. Letters v, vi, and vii all discuss aspects of the battle as it appears to Claude. Letter v begins, "[y]es, *we* are fighting" (1; my emphasis). What follows, however, is Clough's "coldest irony" (Chorley 192), an account which reduces the battle to a series of personal inconveniences: there is no milk for the coffee (100), the waiter is preoccupied and provides poor service (102), the weather is unsettled (115), watching and speculating on the course of the battle becomes "tiresome" (127, 132), and finally Claude wearies of "gossiping idly" (133) and heads for home. Claude's comment that he has "*Murray* . . . in hand" (II.v.96) is in direct contrast to his earlier dream of "a sword at [his] side" (II.iii.62). (It can also be assumed that Clough

intends a play on “*Murray*” and “*moly*”). It is little wonder that, in letter vi, Claude finds the Italian victory anticlimactic: “when it is over, / Why, it is over” (152-3).

The remaining letters in Canto II (with the exception of ix) concern Claude’s involvement with Mary. A sense of continuity with the events in Rome is established by Claude’s use of “meantime” in II.x.250 and with the near repetition of the phrase “poise and retention” in vii.173 and xi.266 (“poises, retains, and fixes”). At the same time, there is also a sense of discontinuity introduced by Claude’s reference to “those letters” (x.251) that have led Eustace to infer that Claude is in love. We might well ask, “Which letters?”, as none of the material thus far has suggested any such conclusion. The question of the opening lyric, “*Is it illusion?*”, becomes more urgent simply because there seem to be no grounds for his reappraisal. (Claude’s consciousness of this problem is revealed in II.xiv when he asks Eustace to come and meet Mary [316]).

In this Canto, while Claude denies that he is in love, he describes Mary in very different terms from those he used in Canto I. For instance, he grants “[i]t is a *pleasure*, indeed, to converse with this girl” (II.x.253; my emphasis). While pleasant conversation falls some distance short of Odysseus’ magical and sexual encounter with Circe proposed as a model in the preceding canto, and short also of the usual meaning attached to the idea of being in love, Claude’s description of Mary here is very different from that in Canto I. Gone from Mary’s voice is the grating mercantile accent of I.xi.212, here replaced by “music” (II.x.260), “song” (261) and “articulate vocables sounded, / Syllabled singly and sweetly the words of melodious meaning” (261-62)! In contrast to his description of the Trevellyns as “not wholly / Pure of the taint of the shop; [who will] / Have their shilling’s worth” (I.vi.125-127), he begins to represent Mary as a prelapsarian Eve, who “retain[s] her simplicity” (II.x.256) and purity (for instance, perhaps ironically he says, “’tis her beautiful nature, not ever to know me” [II.xiii.287]). At the conclusion of Canto I, Claude insists he will presently break off his relations with the Trevellyns; in Canto II, he



pleads, “Drive me not out . . . from my Eden” (xii.277). Claude has, literally, re-written Mary and the wholly critical has become the wholly adulatory. Has Adam found his “help-meet”?

The letters about Mary utilise the same network of images and attitudes used and established in the preceding letters about the Roman republic, suggesting the episodes parallel each other. Claude’s reversal from fervour to restraint between letter x and xi inverts his reversal between enthusiasm and detachment in the first two letters of the canto. Claude’s “two different kinds . . . of human attraction” (xi.264), and his preference for the kind that “poises, retains and fixes, and holds you” (xi.266) recall his distinction between patriotic fervour and natural self-preservation in II.ii, and his “I do not wish to be moved, but growing, where I was growing” (xi.268) looks back to his clinging limpet image in that letter (42). Claude’s “[w]aiting, and watching and looking” in his relationship with Mary (xii, 278; see also 274) imitates his viewing of the battle in v, and his unmanly wooing in xiv corresponds to his lukewarm chivalry in iv. Finally, Claude’s uncertainty about what he has actually seen in vii is reprised in xiv, where he concludes, “I know but little about it” (313). The tragi-comic inflection of these repetitions is that while Claude experiences the defence of the Roman republic as a matter of ordinary, personal inconvenience, his attempt to take a romantic view of and stance in his relationship with Mary, to “[l]et love be its own inspiration” (xii.278, 281), is soon to be rephrased by him as merely a “boy’s own / Folly” from which he is pleased to escape (xiv.302-3).

Claude’s sentimental support for the Roman Republic is diverted by his actual experience of the conflict.<sup>8</sup> Firstly, he has no clear heroic role to play, but merely that of observer. Secondly, he is caught up in an episode of “anti-clerical violence” (Phelan, 105), a frenzied mob “smiting, / Hewing, chopping” (vii.183-84), which gives Claude a visceral and frightening experience of the consequences of actual engagement, leading him to conclude “action / Is a most dangerous thing” (xi.270-71). At this point, Claude backs off and passes away from the scene. Claude’s

involvement with Mary seems an altogether safer course. In fact, because he has reconceptualised Mary here in much more flattering terms, he is able to suggest a commitment in principle: “let me look, let me watch, let me wait, unhurried” (xii.274). Although he is not exactly in love (x.263), he experiences “bliss . . . in her exquisite presence” (xiv.300), and we see that looking at Mary is altogether more pleasurable than looking at the defence of the Republic.

However, Claude’s imaginative engagement with Mary is, in line with his experience of the Roman republic, swept up and transformed into an actual experience of, in this instance, “wooing” (xiv.290). He becomes swept into Mary’s orbit, just as he was caught up by the mob in vii: the “mob” is now represented by the other Trevellyns, particularly Georgina, Vernon and Mary herself. He now finds “[s]he goes, — therefore I go; she moves, — I move” (xiii.289). Claude finds that, despite his commitment to merely enjoying “what is present” (xii.275), his disinterested pose is assailed, apparently, from within and without. Letters xiii and xiv repeat the pattern of excited syntax first seen in Claude’s account of the priest’s murder. In describing Mary’s response to him he says he “estranges, hurts, and repels” (xiv.299) her and later his manner “withdraws her, removes her, and severs her from [him]” (xiv.301). It appears to him that Mary “cares not a tittle about [him]” (xiv.296), just as earlier the Italians “seem[ed] to think any one else more / Worthy than me of attention” (v.102-02). Letters vii and xiv are parallel letters, each representing the high point of engagement with the Republic and Mary respectively. They are exhilarating moments of suspense, in which Claude is caught up in events that seem threateningly outside his control.

However, Claude’s behaviour is read by others as signifying quite particular ‘intentions’, transforming his adventure in love, his “bliss”, into “a permitted flirtation / Under those vulgar eyes” (III.xiii.279), “permitted” because it is expected to lead to a formal and permanent relation stabilised in marriage. This interpretation also provides Claude with a reason to

escape the scene. The simple explanation is that classical heroes bed, but they do not wed, or rather they are already wedded to another cause. (We should remember too that Odysseus deferred his journey home long enough to conduct a sexual relationship with Circe.) The requirement of the narrative at this point is excitement followed by escape, and this is precisely the course Claude takes. In Canto I Mary, with her exemplary Englishness, represented only a tie to Claude's failed past (I.xi); in Canto II she stood for "ideas and fancies and loving sensations" (x.258), an attempt to gain some interim pleasure through a free-floating engagement with the present. However, enchanted sojourns on magical islands cannot last forever. At the end of Canto II this phase of the adventure ends when Claude discovers that Mary is acting as her own agent, and co-opting him to her narrative (although it will be later disclosed that she knew nothing of Vernon's intervention).<sup>9</sup>

### Canto III: Ideal Objects

Just as Canto I explored two dimensions of the past, Canto III explores two dimensions of the future: the distant future, represented as an end to desiring in death, and, at the very end of the Canto, a more immediate future, represented by Mary. The action (if it can be described as action) of Canto III occurs after Mary has left Rome for Florence, Claude having abandoned his plans to accompany the Trevellyns there after Georgina's and Vernon's infelicitous intervention. The letters of this Canto are written in the context of Claude's belief that Vernon's remarks concerning his "intentions" were sanctioned by Mary. Canto III looks forward to "that final discharge" (III.vi.119), death, which Claude represents as the end of desiring. Predominantly in Canto III Claude now represents the present as a treadmill. He is subjected to a "vile hungering impulse" (viii.180), from which knowledge provides no escape, and only death offers "a perfect divine satisfaction" (viii.181). The problem of Canto III is the structure of the narrative itself, as the following quotations indicate: "to escape from our strivings, mistakings, misgrowths, and perversions, / Fain could demand to return to that perfect and primitive *silence*" (vii.170-71; my

emphasis) and “from the *tumult* escaping” (ix.185; my emphasis).

Claude’s first letter in Canto III (letter ii) referring to a previous steamer trip between Marseilles and Civita Vecchia (II.ii.47) evokes the Ulyssean metaphor and his reference to “the hall of the famed Ariadne” (56) is an allusion to his Theseus metaphor in Canto I (I.xii.237-241). These casual references thus provide a link to his previously expressed provisional commitment to both Mary and the Italian republic and redefine his adventure with them as it was related in Canto II, undermining the integrity of his account there by reminding Eustace and the reader that Claude had predicted the eventual breaking of his ties with them (in which case the reference to Ariadne makes a double play). Clearly here, though, it is also useful to remember Claude’s full text, including “[b]roken with painful remorse, with shrinkings of soul, and relentings, / Foolish delays, more foolish evasions, most foolish renewals” (I.xii.232-33), a prediction which looks further forward to the vain pursuit of Mary in Canto IV. Letter iii repudiates Claude’s interest in the cause of the Italian Republic: “what’s the / Roman Republic to me, or I to the Roman Republic?” (iii.66-7). Letter vi, on juxtaposition and marriage, is a repudiation of his affair with Mary in Canto II. As in I.i Claude reverts to French to distance himself from his commitment to her with “*pour passer le temps*” (III.vi.109 and 111), and he goes one step further by referring to the affair obliquely, by way of a hypothetical simulation, a train or steamer trip. However, his instance of a “journey” (vi.109), and perhaps also his reference to travelling by “steamer” (vi.108), recalls the journey of Odysseus, clearly linking this letter back to Canto I, as does the “Actual Abstract” (III.vi.132) which looks back to the “great massy strengths of abstraction” (I.xii.251). Moreover, Claude’s questions, “Ah, did we really accept with a perfect heart the *illusion!* / Ah, did we really believe that the *Present* indeed is the Only” (113-14; my emphases), which have an air of distance (for instance, “did we” rather than ‘did I’), refer quite plainly to the use of “illusion” in the elegiacs of Canto II, and to his devotion to the “present” in II.xii. Claude also links the two events, the Italian cause and Mary, with his use of the word “list” in iii.74 and “enlist” in vi.119, declaring that he intends

not to enlist in the service of either.

Claude's revision of Canto II with allusions to these metaphors from Canto I has the effect of minimising the significance of his relationship with Mary in Canto II by suggesting she was just a "girl that [was] next one" (III.vi.110) for part of an otherwise "tedious journey" (VI.109). In Canto III Claude says he is fed up with the "journey" and wants to get to the "terminus" (III.vi.111). However, the very device which enables Claude to remain the central figure in his narrative and to dismiss Mary as a diverting episode, his analogy of himself with Odysseus, also foregrounds his problem, his subjection to the vicissitudes of a meta-narrative (the whole "tedious journey") characterised by phenomenal repetition with no causal relation to the final conclusion — just as a flirtation with a girl on a train has no causal relation to the attainment of "a perfect and absolute something" later (III.vi.144). The story of Odysseus is *not* a bildungsroman, after all.

Canto III is replete with images of repetitive events. For instance, letter iv offers the "decaying and flowering ever" (iv. 82, repeated with variation in 83 and 84) blossom of knowledge on the Tree of Life; cypress trees "[w]ithering still at the sight which still they upgrow to encounter" (iv.89); and the migratory patterns of various sea birds. The intent of these images is to foreground repetition rather than progression, as Claude's closing words, "[l]et us not talk of growth" (iv.97), indicate. By analogy Claude suggests that he too is trapped in a repetitive cycle, with the distinction that he, unlike the other creatures of the natural world (the grain in ii, comorants, ducks and gulls of iv, women in vi, dogs, kittens and lizards in vii, Mary in ix and beasts of the field in x) is conscious of a better future out of reach. Thus he exclaims, "Take from me this regal knowledge; / Let me, contented and *mute*, with the beasts of the field, my brothers, / Tranquilly, happily lie" (x.211-13; my emphasis).<sup>10</sup> Claude's letters to Eustace in this Canto are evasive concerning the topic of Mary. For instance, in iii his declared desire is to be "out far away from the pother"

(78) of the Italian defence; he says nothing specifically about Mary until letter ix when he refutes the idea of obligation with respect to his relationship with her (190-206). Claude's response to Eustace's apparent letter, which is that his involvement with Mary was "a semi-performance / At the first step breaking down in its pitiful role of evasion" (201-01), suggests that his avowed intent, "to shuffle . . . to compromise . . . engagements" (203), was in fact supplanted by something more sincere: his desire to "let love be its own inspiration" (II.281), although this is not quite the same thing as, say, signing up to the "perilous contract" (III.vi.120). However, Claude also describes his meetings with Mary as "games played for nothing" (ix.200), after which, "lo, on the following morning / It was all e'en as before" (ix.199-200; note the magical and enchanting connotations which serve to both exalt and minimise the encounters). This interpretation points to his lack of real engagement with her. Nevertheless, despite half admitting that he felt something for Mary, he also insists that he had incurred no obligation to her because "there she met me and knew nothing of it" (204). His claim that Mary "[k]new not of debt" (206) has a triple thrust. First, it looks back to Canto I's reference to shillings and pennies (if anyone was to know accurately about debt it would be these "bankers" [I.vi.125]); second, it suggests that Claude *had* incurred an obligation to Mary, but it was one which did not need to be met because she did not know of it; finally, it evokes the Odyssean adventure, in which it might be argued that Odysseus owed nothing to Circe, as she had intended to entrap him anyway (the analogy is that all women are trying to trap men).

Nevertheless, in letter xiii, Claude, upon learning that Mary had not known of Vernon's and Georgina's meddling, suddenly renounces renunciation, and determines to pursue Mary, with the comment, "Tibur I shall not see; — but something better I shall see" (290). Claude is still looking to the future, but it is a very different future from that which has been the focus of the Canto to this point. The refrain of letter xi, "[s]o not seeing I sung" (219, 229), and the distinction between the imaginary Tiburian vista and the actual vista from Montorio's hills (from where

Claude sees the preparations for battle) and contrasted with the words “illusions of vision and fancy” (237), point to the distinctions between the two conceptions of the future used in this Canto. From the position taken in letter xii, of a renewed commitment to Mary, the refrain acts as an embedded commentary on Claude’s assertions throughout the Canto: “not seeing” the absolutely perfect something, Claude nevertheless committed himself to it; now “not seeing” Mary he nevertheless determines to pursue her. Claude’s commitment to the “Absolute” is now aligned with “illusions of vision and fancy”, which were in effect, his own strategy for “[c]heating the prisoner Hope” (237), as his comment on his “fine diplomatic inquiries” (xiii.280) reveals.

Canto III, like Canto I, is characterised by Claude’s disaffection with life. He claims a sense of unity with the natural world around him; accordingly, his metaphors lead inexorably to death. The letters also contain an uneasy mix of bravado and sadness, as Claude milks his encounter with Mary for every drop of pity that he can obtain, while at the same time he denies and turns away from his attachment to Mary in favour of “a perfect absolute something” (vi.144), as Canto I predicted. The Canto ends with a declaration of a different hope: “[t]wice I have tried and failed: this time it shall not be a failure” (292). However, reference to his metaphor suggests that his mission has inbuilt failure.

#### Canto IV: Elusive Object

Canto IV is the briefest of Cantos, and contains Claude’s account of his fruitless pursuit of the Trevellyns through Italy. Micklus reads this Canto’s brevity as a structural device mirroring and reinforcing the debate on juxtaposition, the appreciation of contrasts through contiguity. (We might also note an inversion as this shortest of Cantos describes by far the greatest amount of physical distance travelled in any Canto.) Goode relates the Canto to Claude’s earlier letter on the type of attraction that moves one (II.xi and xiii). While reading Claude’s pursuit as frantic and meaningless, he also takes it as illustrating his sexual opportunism (288; see IV.iii.34).

Canto IV begins in Florence, where Claude finds he has missed the Trevellyns by five days. He determines to follow them north, declaring he is “sick of the statues and the pictures” (i.16) and that “the Venus [can] go to the Devil” (i.18). Claude’s reference to “the Venus” points to the artistic imitation of an “idea” (see Canto I) of love, the transmutation of both the mythical and sublime into the material; “Venus” represents an “idea” of sensual or sexual love. The inference is that he is exchanging a representation of sensual love for the actual thing, Mary, but of course Mary is also only a representation to Claude throughout this Canto (and indeed the poem), and this becomes clearer with letter iv’s “words of her writing” (42) and “no trace, no sort of remembrance” (43) as Mary’s self-written narrative diverges from Claude’s narrative.

There are striking parallels between this Canto and Claude’s predictive metaphor in I.xii. The landscape of Canto IV evokes the landscape of the metaphor in I.xii. Letter ii recycles the bewildering labyrinth of (I.xii.237-239) and the collapse of the “fancy” (I.xii.238) he follows there, as Claude reproduces the long “sequences” (I.xii.239) of possible routes the Trevellyns may have taken, which leaves him here “bewildered” (IV.ii.26) too. In letter v the lines “mountains seem to demand me, — / Peak and valley from far to beckon and motion me” (IV.v.46-7) reproduce the landscape of the “crag unto crag” (I.xii.248), and Claude’s eventual, reluctant decision to turn back to Florence mirrors the rope which “relentless, [upbears him] from spots [he] would rest in” (I.xii.247). In between Florence and the return to Florence, Claude lists ten places he has searched for the Trevellyns (Bologna, Parma, Piacenza, Lodi, Milan [IV.i]; Como [IV.ii]; Splügen, Stelvio, Porlezza [IV.ii]; and Bellagio [IV.iv]). His disappointment in each town corresponds to his “I die ten deaths” of the heroic metaphor (I.xii.249). The chief variation between the two scenes is the position of the “clue”. In the metaphor Claude is in possession of the vital clue: “in my bosom unbroken remaineth the clue” (I.xii.241), whereas in Canto IV no map suffices, and Claude must turn back to Florence to



seek information from the Ropers (whose name is more than likely a pun on the “rope” of the metaphor [I.xii.242]). The final elegiac of Canto IV asks, “*Hither, recovered the clue, shall not the traveller haste?*” (IV.83; original italics); the metaphor of Canto I supplies the answer, to be disclosed in Canto V.

#### Canto V: Abandoned Objects

Claude’s seven letters in Canto V deal with his final loss or renunciation of Mary. The letters are written from Florence, with the exception of the final one from Rome, which announces Claude’s imminent departure for Egypt. Claude’s position in Canto V corresponds to the “broad lofty spaces . . . the great massy strengths of abstraction” of the heroic metaphor of I.xii.250-51 and the action of the Canto corresponds to the part of his metaphor involving retrospection, “look[ing] yet abroad from the height o’er the sea whose salt wave I have tasted” (I.xii.252). Slinn argues, “Claude as the subject of his letter-writing discourse never loses what is effectively a condition of his very existence as psychological subject — the desire or need to ground his existence in some defining principle which will make sense of the transitions and passing conceptions of life’s voyage” (1991 113). For Slinn, whose comment evokes Bailey’s “interpretive agenda” (above), Claude’s grounding belief is in the “potential authority of Knowledge” (113), a concept that he has already discredited. In my reading of Claude’s relationship with Mary, I have taken Claude’s commitment to his view of himself as a type of classical hero as his grounding belief. In this final Canto, Claude indicates that the value of this narrative model depends entirely on keeping the right terminus in mind, or coming out of the tunnel in the end as he puts it in V.ix.

In letter ii Eustace has apparently urged Claude to continue his pursuit of Mary, proposing that “*Action will furnish belief*” (V.ii.20), or as Clough put it in a cancelled letter from Eustace, “Act and all will be clear” (note to lines 20-5 141). Claude responds

— but will that belief be the true one?  
 This is the point, you know. However, it doesn't much matter.  
 What one wants, I suppose, is to predetermine the action,  
 So as to make it entail, not a chance-belief, but the true one.

(20-23)

This response is disingenuous: he notes later, “[i]t is a curious history, this; and yet I foresaw it; / I could have told it before” (viii.171-72). In fact, he did tell it before, as reference to the metaphor of I.xii illustrates. Claude predicted events would turn out the way they have; however, rather than tending to confirm the objective ‘truth’ of the belief, action has simply reproduced the belief upon which it was predicated, thereby rendering the outcome merely a self-fulfilling prophecy. What has been disclosed is Claude’s subjective pragmatism, in which his actions proceeded according to his subjective assessment of desirable and likely outcomes, producing outcomes which from the start were infected by those judgements, and were, therefore, indeed “factitious” (V.viii.164) or predetermined. Being proven right in this instance is not exactly the same as discovering *the* truth.

Claude’s nostalgia for Mary (“the *old* perfect inscription” [V.ii.32]; “the *old* happy relation” [iv.52]; “the *old* image” [iv.57]; all emphases mine) is an indication that his adventure with her is over and done with: “I will not cling to her . . . I will let myself go . . . I will walk on my way . . . I will be bold [and] change . . . I already forget her” (V.iv.51-62). The Odyssean hero may, when confronted again by the demands of his wearying journey, look back with fond remembrance on his pleasurable side-trips, but he does not turn back to repeat them, as this would be “factitious” or “illegitimate” in terms of his heroic agenda. The Odyssean hero cannot “enfasten the roots of [his] floating existence” (V.v.66) for to do so would be to renounce his identity as one who odysseys. Accordingly, at the end of the poem, when Eustace offers the possibility of new leads that might put Claude in touch with Mary again, Claude insists, “Do nothing more . . . It will only vex me” (viii.168). He instructs Eustace, “forbear interfering” (viii.180),

and determines to leave Rome before he “[goes mad] about things o’er / Which I can have no control (x.189-90). These comments belie Claude’s controlling power as both hero and narrator of his adventure.<sup>11</sup>

In Canto V Claude asks, “After all do I know that I really cared so about her? . . . After all perhaps there was something factitious about it; / I have had pain, it is true; have wept; and so have the actors” (viii.156-165). These comments render Claude’s relationship with Mary a performance, consistent with his predictive metaphor in Canto I. However, his use of “pain” and “tears” (evoking the “salt wave” of I.xii) is important too. Actor’s tears are in a sense fake tears, insofar as they do not derive from a genuine emotional response to the action of the play; on the other hand, such tears are still genuine tears, drops of salty water overflowing from the eyes. While Claude’s phrase reduces the meaning of his tears to a requisite of his performance, at the same time it discloses that he has indeed acted. Claude’s tears are therefore the sign of and coda to his exemplary performance, the “salt wave” *he* has tasted and it is surely his performance that, in the end, has moved him. And keeps moving him, on next “to Egypt” (V.x.205).

### Conclusion

My reading has focused entirely on Claude’s metaphor and relationship with Mary. His narrative is not the only narrative in the poem, though. The important counter-narratives of the elegiacs (a narrative of Romantic heroism) and Georgina and Mary’s letters (a novelistic narrative of the commonplace) render this poem truly polyvocal. The result is a representation of life as a mesh of intertwined narratives or “voyages”. These narratives are also contexts in which individuals determine and pursue the objects of their desires. I have taken Claude’s dramatised desire for Mary to be a subplot or means of enacting other desires, his desire to live a heroic life, and to represent himself in heroic terms to Eustace. My reading has tended, therefore, to confirm Mary’s early view of Claude as “frightfully selfish” (I.xiii.270), although Mary’s view of Claude changes

over the course of the poem as she develops a view of what role he might play in her own narrative. Claude's enactment of a heroic narrative within the context of Republican Rome and Victorian Englishness is, no doubt, a little cruel. In the end we may conclude, along with Georgina, that he has not been entirely fair to Mary (II.xv.336), but we must also conclude that when a course of heroic desire has been adopted, it takes very little account of fairness to others.

Another way of characterising Claude's pursuit of his desires is suggested by Leo Bersani's characterisation of Proust's writings, which Bersani says represent "essentially a turning away from the world where desires are seldom realized, and [toward] a permanent commitment to the solitary cultivation of desire" (83). Claude's "cultivation" of desire in Armours de Voyage deploys the materials of the world to enact his imagined drama, and both are subsequently reinvented by Claude as text: Claude performs and Claude reviews his performance. Claude's behaviour, in this reading, has far more in common with the behaviour of Robert Browning's Don Juan (Fifine at the Fair) than has generally been noticed. The chief distinction between the two is that while Don Juan "glut[s] his hunger both to be and know the thing [he is]" (ciii) through a series of games with women he encounters, Claude views such engagements as merely diversions for passing the time until "that final discharge" (III.vi.119), whereupon he will *genuinely* have his being and know it (III.vi.128).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Reference is to Canto (upper case Roman numerals), then individual letter or lyric (lower case Roman numerals), and line number (continuous within each Canto).

<sup>2</sup> He also uses the word “form” to refer to the Christian cross in I.x.92; however, this usage is likely to mean icon or symbol. Claude’s description of children as “pure and delicate forms encompassing, moving about you” (I.ix.176) perfectly illustrates his idealising tendency, which draws on the notion of children’s natural innocence. No doubt actual children would disappoint Claude, much as Rome does.

<sup>3</sup> Claude’s view of Rome is echoed in Middlemarch: “Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence . . . All this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation . . .” (193).

<sup>4</sup> Goode notes the sexual imagery in this letter (285), as does Bailey, who, however, proposes that Claude’s sexualised imagery is “at odds with the innocence of the situation” (166), that is, with the actual status of his relationship with Mary at that point in time. Maynard (1993 60) takes this letter as an “ironic, self-mockingly heroic allusion”, also at odds with the actuality of his relationship with Mary. Slinn (1991 99-101) describes Claude’s “rope” as a metaphor for “reason and control”, arguing that Claude’s rhetorical device, abstraction, parallels and reinforces his commitment to the “great massy strengths of abstraction” (I.xii.251) of the letter.

<sup>5</sup> Obviously I disagree with those commentators who interpret these as illustrations of Claude’s fear of sex, for instance Houghton (1963) and

Bailey (166).

<sup>6</sup> As a consequence of his trip to Hades, Odysseus is described as the man who dies twice; Claude's note that he dies "ten deaths" (249), which appears simply as an instance of self-mockery in this letter, assumes a greater significance in Canto IV.

<sup>7</sup> Claude's phrase, "the clear and lawful perception" (II.iv.85) is a figure for desiring which resembles the imagery associated with the ideal mode of desire, Arthurian desire, in Tennyson's Idylls of the Kings, published around the same time. In Idylls, there is a strong pattern of perceptual imagery, looking and seeing, while the concept of "lawful" has both a representative figure in Arthur and a discursive model in the oath of the Knights of the Round Table. Claude, by contrast, is unable to find any grounds upon which to establish the meanings of "clear" and "lawful" other than his heroic metaphor; accordingly, in II.xi he "tremble[s] for something factitious, / Some malpractice of heart and illegitimate process" (271-72). Later still, Claude describes marriage as an affinity based on "the law of the land and the ruinous force of the will" (III.vii.155).

<sup>8</sup> Goode reads "experience" ironically here, proposing that it replicates Claude's 'experience' of the battle the previous day, an experience that was seen rather than lived (107) — or, in fact, not really seen at all.

<sup>9</sup> Slinn (1991) observes in relation to Claude's later distinctions between male and female views of marriage, "Women thus become mere objects which sustain [Claude's] role as central subject. Their nuisance value is that they somehow fail to observe the same system, behaving remarkably like subjects themselves. And of course no thought is given to the reverse possibility — that 'he' might be the temporarily sustaining object of someone else's tyranny as subject . . ." (97). I suggest, however, that it is precisely this possibility, suggested by Vernon's intervention, that threatens to upset Claude's delicately poised heroic narrative at the end of

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Canto II, although this perception is not disclosed until letter xiii of Canto III, with the reference to Vernon's "uneasy remarks . . . [a]s to intentions", which Claude assumes have been sanctioned by Mary herself.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed reading of this letter see Goode 294-296.

<sup>11</sup> It is certainly apposite to recall Odysseus' closing words to Alkinoos in Book XII of The Odyssey: "Why tell the rest of / this story again, since yesterday in your house I told it / to you and your majestic wife? It is hateful to me / to tell a story over again, when it has been well told." (Lattimore 197).

## SECTION THREE

## THE PURSUIT OF DESIRES

This section contains readings of Alfred Tennyson's "The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid", from Idylls of the King (1859-1886), and Robert Browning's Fifine at the Fair (1872). The focus in this section is on how the protagonists of these poems pursue their desires, and it is fitting that all three poems are narratives involving journeys: Geraint's quest on behalf of the Queen's honour, culminating in his marriage to Enid; Geraint's second pursuit of Enid through the wilderness, in furious response to her apparent infidelity; and, finally, Don Juan's promenade through the Pornic Fair and surrounding countryside with his wife Elvire.

As I have already argued, the analysis of the representation of desire in Victorian poetry requires close examination of the particularities and details of individual poems; such a close examination of the entire Idylls of the King could not be achieved within the constraints (time and length) of this thesis. Idylls of the King was selected over others of Tennyson's poems not only for its thematic relevance, but also because it contrasts with and complements the other poems in this study. For instance, the medieval sources and Arthurian setting are novel among the poems discussed here, as is the third person narration. Consequently, with these variations, there is a change in the way material is presented, including what is emphasised and what is elided. In these terms, any of the individual idylls would have been relevant to my enquiry; in the end I chose the Geraint idylls because they have received less critical attention than the other idylls.

Geraint's quests take place in a context constructed and dominated by King Arthur, and consequently I have described Geraint's desire as mediated. Mediated desire is a term coined by René Girard (1965) to describe a situation in which a subject's desires are constructed through the



mediation of an influential model (who may either actively seek to promote his desires to his disciple or who may be oblivious to his disciple's imitation). The dominant motive of the disciple is to be like his model, and to that end the disciple adopts his model's desires as his own. Modelled desire is also potentially managed or regulated desire when the model is a person of authority and power, as Arthur is. I will argue that Idylls of the King dramatises the management of subjects through the manipulation of their desires by deliberate mediation. In "The Marriage of Geraint", Geraint freely accedes to Arthurian desire, and in fact acts as an agent for its dispersal throughout the kingdom. In "Geraint and Enid", Geraint turns away from Arthurian desire, attempting to assert his own initiatives in its place; ultimately, he abandons this project, effectively becoming a 'good subject' again. Geraint's pursuit of his desires involves him less in self-interrogation than in interrogation of Arthur's programme. The theme of proving Enid's love, in both idylls, is analogous to Geraint's proving (that is, testing) of Arthurian desire.

By contrast, Don Juan in Fifine at the Fair hardly concedes to being a 'good subject' or to letting others dictate his behaviour to him. Don Juan does not seek to elude all society's attempts to constrain his free pursuit of his desires; rather, he plays with and against those restraints (as they are represented by Elvire). His desire is to add some spice to what he perceives as the inexorable tedium of life's ordered and orderly routines. The Don's games, moreover, attempt to disrupt the normalising and mediating functions of society.

The Don's project is the accumulation of "happy moment[s]", and he argues that the substance of a man is to be measured by his capacity to evoke and retain such moments in his "seeing soul". His pursuit of desire does not proceed in accordance with another's plot of desire (as Geraint's did), but through his own personally conceived productions. Don Juan prefers to see himself as a model rather than a disciple, although he also condemns the limitations of the starkly parasitic dualism:

Men, you make,  
 By ruling them, your own: each man for his own sake  
 Accepts you as his guide, avails him of what worth  
 He apprehends in you to sublimate his earth  
 With fire: content, if you so convoy him through night,  
 That you shall play the sun, and he, the satellite,  
 Pilfer your light and heat and virtue, starry pelf,  
 While, caught up by your course, he turns upon himself. (lxxi)

Wishing neither to follow some other man's desires, nor to accumulate disciples (who may undermine his power or seek his objects), Don Juan instead collects women: "Women grow you, while men depend on you at best" (lxxi). His manner, in this respect, is predatory and self-aggrandising, and thus the poem raises profound questions about the extent to which one should be free to manipulate others in pursuit of one's own desires.

Although the poems in this section seem at first glance to offer contrasting conceptions of the modes in which subjects pursue their desires, they converge in terms of strategy. In "The Marriage of Geraint", Geraint, in following Arthur's plan of desire, and Don Juan, in following his own artistic plan, manage their pursuits in terms of these predetermined objectives, and their responses to the contingent circumstances they find themselves in are formulated in terms of achieving the ends they have decided they desire. However, in "Geraint and Enid", Geraint acts with more emotion and less clearly conceived ends. His behaviour in this quest is less deliberately constructive than reflective of his desire simply to undo all that he has previously wrought, and while he appears more spontaneous his behaviour is still reactive. The poems show that what desiring subjects do in pursuit of their desired ends depends on both the nature of those ends and the contexts within which they find themselves.

## CHAPTER SIX

IDYLLS OF THE KING: “BY FAITH IN THE VISION OF THINGS”Introduction and Background

Alfred Tennyson’s Idylls of the King (hereafter Idylls) consists of twelve individual ‘idylls’ or poems, each based on a different episode in the various Arthurian myths.<sup>1</sup> Each idyll within the set describes an adventure involving the various knights and ladies traditionally associated with Arthurian myth, but the narrative of the rise and fall of Arthur is a thread running through the poem, binding the episodes together chronologically, from Arthur’s “coming” to his “passing”. Aside from Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, who each feature in individual idylls narrating their adventures and who also appear throughout the sequence, Geraint and Enid are noteworthy as the only figures to have two idylls specifically representing their adventures — “The Marriage of Geraint” and “Geraint and Enid” (idylls three and four in the sequence). “The Marriage of Geraint” begins some years after the couple have wed and retired from court, and the action commences with Geraint overhearing his wife’s declaration that “I fear that I am no true wife” (MG 108). Believing that Enid has been unfaithful, and overcome with rage, shame and misery, Geraint drives Enid from the castle before him, having commanded her to dress in her shabbiest dress. The poem then reverts to flashback with the account of Geraint’s first meeting with Enid and the story of how they came to wed. “Geraint and Enid” resumes the story of Geraint’s travails in pursuit of Enid after overhearing her self-accusation until, after various tribulations, his suspicions about Enid are set aside and the couple returns home.

The representation of desire in Idylls differs somewhat from the poems discussed in previous chapters. The representations of desire in the sonnet

sequences, dramatic monologues and first-person narratives discussed thus far have characteristically tended to represent the desiring subjects' experiences of their own desire. Each monologue (by which I intend all the first-person accounts of desire) foregrounds the speaker's character as an individual, and highlights the idiosyncrasy of his or her own desire, at least as each speaker sees it. By contrast, Idylls is a third person narrative dramatising a chivalric subject in epic style. These features construct a narrative that emphasises acts over thoughts, and character types over individuals. These formal properties, however, which tend to de-individualise and externalise desire, are particularly effective in representing the schema of desire which dominates Idylls, that is, the mediating and dominating desire of Arthur himself. In Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism (1988) Herbert Tucker describes Tennyson's poetry as "a poetry of aftermath" (13). Although he does not discuss Idylls at length, Tucker observes that Tennyson's characters are transfixed between the pull of personal desires on the one hand and the demands of some external power on the other hand. For the Knights of the Round Table and the women of Camelot, one such external power is Arthur, and any knight's desire for any particular woman is always preceded and conditioned by another desire, Arthur's desire. As such, the poem thoroughly complicates the notion of personal desire, which always arises and occurs within a social and historical context.

Criticism of Idylls tends to fall into two groups that shadow the structure of the poem: on the one hand, the exposition of the Arthur narrative that comprises the entire Idylls, and on the other hand, close readings of the action of individual idylls. By and large, the two Geraint poems are viewed as peripheral to the Arthur plots (his rise and fall, and the adultery of Guinevere and Lancelot). Nothing in the Geraint idylls directly influences or affects the development of those two major plots, and accordingly the Geraint idylls are usually barely mentioned in commentary focused on them, receiving merely an odd comment here and there. Discussion of the figure of Enid is usually confined to pointing out her function as a contrast to Guinevere, Isolt (Maureen Fries 1991 51) and/or

Vivien (Richard D. McGhee 1980 55; Rebecca Umland 1994 279). Analysis of Geraint and his quests is even less integrated into general analysis of *Idylls*, although he does receive limited comment in discussions of the representation of male authority in the poem (Linda Shires 1996 169; Cammy Thomas 1993 103; Margaret Linley 1992 384), and also in discussions of knowledge and certainty (James Eli Adams 1992 427; Donald S. Hair 1981 162; James Hood 2000 160).

There are very few readings specifically of the Geraint idylls. Clyde de L. Ryals briefly alludes to Geraint and Enid, reading their second idyll (“Geraint and Enid”) as dramatising Geraint’s successful quest to rid himself of “all notions of romantic love” (1967 139). Wendell Stacy Johnson (1975) describes the idylls as a vignette of pride and jealousy, focusing predominantly on Geraint’s “emotionally parasitic self-indulgence” (155). Paul Zietlow (1984) suggests that the Geraint idylls are an exploration of Geraint’s and Enid’s psychological development in which Geraint eventually learns to temper his aggressive assertiveness and Enid learns to overcome her passivity and submissiveness. Donald S. Hair (1981) also reads the Geraint quests as psychological odysseys in which Geraint learns “that the value of Enid’s love lies in her free choice to be faithful to him” (162). These readings are all oriented to the psychological exploration of Geraint as character or individual, and serve to de-contextualise the Geraint idylls from the action and meaning of the larger poem. Herbert Tucker (1992), who openly admits disliking the Geraint idylls, proposes that Tennyson’s ongoing revision and refashioning of the original single “Enid (the True)” idyll into the final version analysed here constitutes a *de facto* commentary or statement on the capacity of epic poetry “in contest with the novel” to represent adequately both mythological/historical and Victorian Britain (442).

As this brief literature review indicates, little has been said about either Geraint’s or Enid’s desire, either as it is dramatised specifically in the Geraint idylls or as it functions within the context of the whole poem. The reading that follows attempts to redress this imbalance by putting forward a

close reading of the Geraint idylls that is informed by analysis of specific accounts of desire dramatised in the wider poem, thereby suggesting answers to questions about the ‘value’ of the Geraint idylls and their place within the poem. I (alongside Tucker) read the Geraint idylls as constituting an embedded commentary on events in the poem. I read Geraint’s pursuit(s) of desire as occurring in the context of various ‘policies’ on desire articulated and dramatised by influential models elsewhere in the poem. These models include Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, who each take and represent various positions of/on desire. The reading that follows first gives the context of desire in Idylls, examining what these influential characters say about desire and how their desires are dramatised. Then each Geraint idyll is interpreted as both an instance of and a comment on Arthurian desire. In particular, “The Marriage of Geraint” is read as an account of Geraint’s pursuit of Enid, in which he attempts to integrate the motives of his knightly vow with the pull of passionate fascination. “Geraint and Enid” narrates Geraint’s attempts to disentangle himself and Enid from Arthurian desire, although, ultimately, Geraint is reconciled to the Arthurian model.

### Models of Desire in *Idylls*

The seminal essay on Arthurian desire is Clyde de L. Ryals’ “Eros and Agape” (1967 113-145). Ryals reads Arthur as “redeeming” his erotic passion (*eros*) by ethical (and Christian) love (*agape*) in the institution of marriage (144).<sup>2</sup> Ryals argues that, generally speaking, “Tennyson never praises . . . love as an end in itself” (114), and that in Arthur we see an ideal example of love as service.<sup>3</sup> Passion, by contrast to ethical love, is dominated by both false glorification of itself (passion as an end) and its object (it demands absolute possession of its object). True love, Ryals says, is characterised by constancy towards and realistic perception of the beloved. However, James W. Hood, in Divining Desire (2000), proposes that, in Tennyson, erotic devotion is a means whereby characters seek to “transcend the limitations of mortality, mutability, and uncertainty” (5). Hood argues that, although such transcendence is not possible, the process

of striving for it represents a success in its own right, producing a “state of ecstasy” (8) engendered precisely by the ongoing unfulfilment of desire. Hood includes a discussion of the “Lancelot and Elaine” idyll, in which he describes Elaine’s “perpetual season of . . . discontented fantasising” (178) as an erotic quest that is a counterpart to the knights’ chivalric quests. (Elaine’s death scene, which follows her own artistic script, might be seen also as a counterpart to Arthur’s own career — there is a conflation of imagery, such as her scripted design for having her “will” [LE 1040] and the barge trip on which she “pass[es] . . . far up the flood” [LE 1042-43], and there is also a suggestion that both characters, despite their failures, have transcended the “merely actual”, as Hood puts it [181]).<sup>4</sup>

Although Hood, like Ryals, reads *Idylls* as a “reticulat[ion of] the dank and desperate state of *eros*” (158), especially as it is disclosed in the adulterous relationships in the poem, his interpretive schema is more flexible than Ryals’, perhaps as a result of the historical context in which the readings were produced. For instance, Hood is able to read Elaine as a heroic figure, evincing “virginal potency” (169), “fervour” (176), and creative artistry. Elaine’s commitment to her flawed vision highlights the existence of the same intensity in Lancelot, that is, his “faith unfaithful” (LE 872), and the existence of the same flawed vision in Arthur, that is, his insistence on asserting his personal vision. By contrast, the polarised constructs of *eros* and *agape* used by Ryals can only produce a reading of Lancelot as being “caught” in the snares and webs of desire (123, 128). Thus Ryals describes Lancelot as undergoing a process of “decay” as a result of his erotic attachment to Guinevere (120), and views their relationship as an “alliance of passion and not of true love” (121). However, the rigidity of Ryals’ schematic is inadequate to the action of the poem. For instance, Clinton Machann (2000) suggests that neither king-worship nor woman-worship — central tenets of the knights’ vow — is consistent with the Christian ethos professed by Arthur and imputed by the term *agape* (218). The late twentieth-century reading of Victorianism, informed by Foucauldian theory, has disclosed a more complex picture of

Victorian desire than the received notion of the repressive hypothesis allowed (whether that be in the form of *eros/agape* or desire/duty). We are nowadays more likely to identify dialectical movements and interdependent constructs rather than hierarchical and essential positions in Victorian literature; in addition, we would read the Victorian compartmentalisation of desire into *agape* and *eros* as a political and social strategy in the construction of the sexualised subject. If, indeed, Arthur does attempt to redefine the relations between *eros* and *agape*, or simply meddle in the management of marriage, then he too is constructing sexual/sexualised subjects.

Most readings concerned with love in Idylls converge on the same textual instances I identify below, and most identify the co-existence of two motifs of love and desire, although these are given different theoretical definitions by different readers (as the discussion above has illustrated). I characterise the two motifs of Arthurian desire as the gaze and the contract, by which I mean that when an erotic or love relationship between characters is dramatised in the poem the symbols that dominate that representation are images of the gaze (seeing or being seen) and/or the contract (the knightly vow and the marriage vow). I characterise these as motifs of desire rather than as modes of loving (such as is suggested by the terms *eros* and *agape*) because the images are stable throughout the poem, but the values associated with them and the loving relationships they describe and constitute are more fluid. For instance, Carol Christ (1987) notes that in Idylls the gaze represents both a positively valorised power, such as the sense of potency Arthur derives from his sight of Guinevere in “The Coming of Arthur”, and a dangerous threat to being (386-395), such as characterises Elaine’s erotic fantasy of Lancelot. Moreover, if the gaze is closely associated with arbitrariness or non-rationality in love, in terms suggestive of an erotic fall or capture, the Arthurian vow is hardly less arbitrary or non-rational, as its subjects uneasily come to recognise.<sup>5</sup> As W. David Shaw observes, “we begin to suspect there is no wickedness like Guinevere’s in which [Tennyson] could not discover some virtue, and no blamelessness like Arthur’s in which he could not discover some deep



failing or fault. His epic poem disturbs and transforms the conventions of moral allegory . . . [and suggests individuals have] a duty to happiness” (1996 59).

The three central characters of *Idylls* are Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot. By virtue of this centrality, and of the exalted positions they hold in the kingdom, they are models of desire for the other characters in the poem. In “The Coming of Arthur” Arthur’s first glimpse of Guinevere is described:

But Arthur, looking downward as he past,  
Felt the light of her eyes into his life  
Smite on the sudden . . .

.....  
And Arthur, passing thence to battle, felt  
Travail, and throes and agonies of the life,  
Desiring to be joined with Guinevere. (CA 55-76)

Arthur’s instantaneous passion is so overmastering that he thinks, “for saving I be joined / To her . . . I seem as nothing in the mighty world, / And cannot will my will, nor work my work” (CA 84-7). (Ryals reads “joined” in this instance as referring to marriage and says, “[Arthur] regards marriage as the means to service and to a greater love, for in marriage passion is worshipped not for itself but as the highest value in the ethical sphere” [119]). However, while Arthur is smitten the text notes, “[Guinevere] saw him not, or marked not, if she saw” (CA 53).

If we are to agree with the poem’s assertion that Arthur is the “blameless” king (BB 472), then, in the light of these events, we must consider that love at first sight is a legitimate form of desire; nevertheless, Arthur suppresses his erotic passion (symbolised by the gaze here) both in his marriage to Guinevere and from his knights’ vow. Arthur does not see Guinevere again until the marriage, which is her first conscious sight of him, and she has no opportunity to reciprocate his impassioned desire. Although he perceives marriage to Guinevere as fundamental to his own happiness, he gives her no opportunity to fall in love with him. After the

single expression of attraction described above, Arthur's relations with Guinevere are organised around distance, mediation, politics and ritual. First, he sends three knights to Guinevere's father, Leodogran, to negotiate a marriage, saying nothing of his desire for Guinevere, but only, "If I in aught have served thee well, / Give me thy daughter Guinevere to wife" (CA 137-38). The archaic use of "wife" as a verb adds to the impersonality of the proposal. He thereby wins Guinevere as a prize for service to her father, not through winning *her* affections. According to the information in this first idyll, Arthur's first actual encounter with Guinevere is also a public occasion, their wedding by Dubric (CA 452-474), whereupon the marriage bond displaces personal attraction with a contract, the nuptial counterpart to the vows of Arthur's knights.<sup>6</sup>

A beam of light shining into the eyes institutes a kind of subjective blindness, as Merlin observes:

. . . the good King means to blind himself,  
And blinds himself and all the Table Round . . . (MV 781-2)

Arthur's "besotted" eyes (BB 354) cloud his vision and he appears genuinely unable to see that Guinevere does not reciprocate his love. Representation of the non-reciprocity of desire between Arthur and Guinevere occurs in numerous images of seeing/not seeing and looking/not looking. These images perform the dual function of establishing the look of desire as a textually authorised model of desire and also of highlighting its lack of operativeness in the relationship between Arthur and Guinevere. In "Guinevere", Guinevere retrospectively describes her first meeting with Arthur, in which she:

. . . glanced at him, thought him cold,  
High, self-contained, and passionless, not like him,  
'Not like my Lancelot' . . . (G 402-404)

The motif is continued in the account of the wedding ceremony, in which Guinevere performs her part "with drooping eyes" (CA 468). In "Lancelot

and Elaine” Guinevere describes Arthur as a “Sun in Heaven” whose “passionate perfection” cannot be viewed directly; his very faultlessness is a fault to her (LE 122) because it so exceeds her passion for him. She considers him so oblivious to her that “[h]e never had a glimpse of mine untruth” (LE 125). His look of desire is not directed at her she claims, but rather he is “[r]apt in his fancy” (LE 129) of the Round Table. In their final encounter Guinevere “grovelled with her face against the floor” (G 412) and “made her face a darkness from the King” (G 414), while Arthur finally speaks of his love (“I love thee still” [G 556]) as he looks down at her, before leaving with the words, “But hither shall I never come again, / Never lie by thy side; see thee no more — / Farewell” (G 575-77); his words are an eerie echo of Guinevere’s own renunciation of Lancelot earlier in the same idyll (G 374). Finally, desperately, as the King departs, she thinks, “If I might see his face, and not be seen” (G 584); however, his helm is lowered and “she did not see the face” (G 591) but merely the symbol of his kingship. In the end, she curses her own bad luck that she “would not look up” (G 638), knowing “[i]t would have been [her] pleasure had [she] seen” (G 654).

The representation of Guinevere’s relationship with Lancelot is in direct contrast to that of her relationship with Arthur: their relationship is “eye to eye” (G 99).<sup>7</sup> At a secret encounter in the palace gardens in “Balin and Balan”, Lancelot says, “with his eyes on earth, / ‘Fain would I still be loyal to the Queen.’” (BB 248-49); however, “[t]hen Lancelot lifted his large eyes; they dwelt / Deep-tranced on hers, and could not fall” (BB 272-73). From this point the look of desire dominates descriptions of their relationship. For instance, in “Lancelot and Elaine” the King observes (in an instance of his characteristic blindness where Guinevere is concerned) that if Guinevere does not attend the tournament she will not see “the great deeds / Of Lancelot . . . A sight ye love to look on” (LE 81-3), whereupon the Queen “[l]ifted her eyes, and they dwelt languidly / On Lancelot” (LE 83-4). The Queen’s look of desire for Lancelot has two aspects, actual looking and inner vision (her fantasy), and from her tower in the nunnery

she contemplates her painful renunciation of both:

For what is true repentance but in thought —  
 Not even in inmost thought to think again  
 The sins that made the past so pleasant to us:  
 And I have sworn never to see him more,  
 To see him more.'

And even in saying this,  
 Her memory from old habit of the mind  
 Went slipping back upon the golden days  
 In which she saw him first, when Lancelot came, (G 371-378)

Guinevere's passionate attraction to Lancelot is replicated and extended in the portrait of Elaine. Tennyson notes three times that Elaine "lifted up her eyes" (LE 243, 255, 258) to Lancelot's face, instigating "that love which was her doom" (LE 259). From that point Elaine's desire, like Guinevere's, is contained and played out between her actual sight of Lancelot's face ("she stood / Rapt on his face as if it were a God's" [LE 353-54]) and her private vision of it ("I behold him in my dreams" [LE 758]). Elaine represents an extreme of erotic fascination, as she "ever kept / The one-day-seen Sir Lancelot in her heart" (LE 741-42) and "lived in fantasy" (LE 396). Finally, she undertakes a project of desire, a strategy for forcing Lancelot to look at her. While Lancelot does look, it is a look that, by this stage, can never be reciprocated. "Lancelot and Elaine" foreshadows Guinevere's final attempt to look at Arthur which is likewise "so late" (G 646); and the moral of Elaine's story ("to be loved makes not to love again" [LE 1286]) is a lesson Arthur too will learn "so late".

Both Guinevere and Lancelot are specifically and individually bound to Arthur by vows. The nuptial vow is given in the ceremony performed by Dubric in "The Coming of Arthur":

And Arthur said, 'Behold, thy doom is mine.  
 Let chance what will, I love thee to the death!  
 To whom the Queen replied with drooping eyes,  
 'King and my lord, I love thee to the death!  
 And holy Dubric spread his hands and spake,  
 'Reign ye, and love and love, and make the world

Other, and may thy Queen be one with thee,  
 And all this Order of thy Table Round  
 Fulfill the boundless purpose of their King! (CA 466-74)

Lancelot is also bound to Arthur, by a vow of very similar content, sworn on the battlefield:

Whereat the two,  
 For each had warded either in the fight,  
 Sware on the field of death a deathless love.  
 And Arthur said, 'Man's word is God in man:  
 Let chance what will, I trust thee to the death.' (CA 129-33)

The bond constituted by this vow between Arthur and Lancelot is the model for the vow taken by all the Knights of the Round Table; however, their vows go beyond a personal commitment to Arthur to a commitment to the King's "vast design and purpose" (G 664). In "Guinevere", Arthur describes the Round Table as a "model for the mighty world" (G 462), and when Arthur, in "simple words of great authority, / Bound [his knights] by so strait vows to his own self" (CA 260-61), he bound them not only to himself, but also to his "new" order (CA 508).<sup>8</sup> One version of the content of the vow is revealed in the penultimate idyll, "Guinevere". According to Arthur's account here, he had had his knights swear:

To reverence the King, as if he were  
 Their conscience, and their conscience as their King,  
 To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,  
 To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,  
 To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,  
 To honour his own word as if his God's  
 To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,  
 To love one maiden only, cleave to her,  
 And worship her by years of noble deeds,  
 Until they won her. (G 465-74)

According to the version of the vow quoted above, heterosexual desire is a matter of cleaving, worshipping and winning. This vow is, in effect, an ideal model for each knight's behaviour in love, just as Arthur is an ideal model for each knight. In swearing Arthur's vow, the knights commit themselves to doing acts that fulfil this ideal, according to their own

interpretation of it, which is informed by their own observation and evaluation of Arthur's behaviour. Arthur goes on, in this speech, to accuse Guinevere of corrupting or profaning this ideal:

Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot;  
 Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt;  
 Then others, following these my mightiest knights,  
 And drawing foul ensample from fair names,  
 Sinned also, till the loathsome opposite  
 Of all my heart had destined did obtain . . . (G 484-89)

Desire, as Arthur describes it here, is both a model (ideal) behaviour and a modelled behaviour; it is desire according to another's "ensample". Arthur not only articulates a model of ideal desire, but he is also a model of desire. As Guinevere observes, he has sworn men to vows "[t]o make them like himself" (LE 131), and it is noted at the time of swearing the vows "through all their Order flash[ed] / A momentary likeness of the King" (CA 269-70). In swearing Arthur's vow the knights subordinate their individual desires to what René Girard calls "desire according to Another" (1965 4), in this case desire according to Arthur.

However, there is another account of the vow that problematizes Arthur's account in "Guinevere". In "Gareth and Lynette", Arthur says, "my knights are sworn to vows / Of utter hardihood, utter gentleness, / And, loving, utter faithfulness in love, / And uttermost obedience to the King" (GL 541-44). As Guinevere observes, this is an impossible vow (LE 130): if "uttermost" obedience to the King takes precedence over "utter" faithfulness to any lady, then "utter faithfulness in love" is, in fact, precluded, or rather it can only be utter faithfulness to Arthur's desire. Only Arthur himself can meet the terms of this vow.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the contractual bond in the form of a vow fails to tell the complete story of Arthur's desire. Although Arthur experiences impassioned desire for Guinevere, the Arthurian vow contains no reference to it. That is, he does not instruct his knights to fall in love, even though that was the fundamental basis of his marriage to Guinevere; nor does he instruct the knights that impassioned desire should or must be reciprocated. Arthur is a

model who says, 'do as I say, not as I do'. These elisions, coupled with the unsatisfactory state of his own marriage, a spectacle both seen and discussed by the knights, make Arthur and his vow flawed models for desire which, nevertheless, the knights are obliged to imitate. The pursuit of desire in the individual idylls can best be understood within the context of Arthur's desire (that is, both the overt and the suppressed aspects of it) as I have described it here.

"The Marriage of Geraint"<sup>10</sup>

Geraint's quest in this idyll is comprised of and complicated by two motives, redressing wrongs and falling in love, each of which is associated with an influential mediator of desire. First, Geraint, both as a type of Arthur and as a Knight of the Round Table, is bound to redress the nameless knight's insult to the Queen. This project must be enacted without reference to personal desires, as disinterested and dispassionate justice, so Geraint suppresses his "quick, instinctive" (209) reach for his sword as he is struck by the dwarf (as Arthur suppresses his passion from the vow). Geraint's being "[w]roth to be wroth" (213) indicates both his suppressed passion and his attempts to ameliorate it, suggesting that he is already pulled between the impossible demands of his vow of "utter hardihood, utter gentleness" (GL 541). However, Geraint's duty is complicated by Guinevere's farewell words, "And may you light on all things that you love, / And live to wed with her whom first you love" (226-27). In view of her own circumstances, these words take on a tragic meaning. The Queen is already captivated by her desire, as the lines "[I]ost in sweet dreams, and dreaming of her love / For Lancelot" (158-59) indicate. The Queen's wishes (if followed) complicate the ideological purity of Geraint's quest, the dispassionate redress of wrongs required by his vow, by adding (and, moreover, authorising, due to her influential status) the pursuit of a personal desire to the purpose of the quest. Geraint's quest is founded in these two disparate motives, and his conduct on the quest shows him attempting to reconcile and integrate them.

The flashback narrative of the marriage of Geraint and Enid begins with an encounter between Geraint, Guinevere and her maid. This encounter provides the ostensible motive for the action which follows (to avenge the nameless knight's insult), but it also performs several other functions, including establishing Geraint's status as Arthur's disciple and establishing mediated desire as a global context. The opening lines of the idyll have identified Geraint as "a knight of Arthur's court, / A tributary Prince of Devon, one / Of that great Order of the Table Round" (1-3). In the incident on the knoll, however, we also learn he is "like a dragon-fly / In summer suit and silks of holiday" (172-73). The dragon-fly reference both evokes and contrasts with Arthur as the "Dragon of the great Pendragonship" (G 594) and Geraint's gaudy dress contrasts with Arthur's first appearance as "a simple knight among his knights, / And many of these in richer arms than he" (CA 51-3). Geraint carries no weapon, "save a golden-hilted brand" (166), a weapon which resembles Excalibur in form but not in potency.<sup>11</sup> The specific linking of Geraint with these symbols of Arthur constructs him as a type of Arthur, but his belated arrival positions him more specifically as Arthur's disciple. Geraint arrives upon the scene, "[l]ate, late . . . later than we", as Guinevere observes (177). Like Arthur, there is a mystery associated with his arrival (which is never finally explained), but more importantly, he arrives in a context already dominated by Arthurian desire (if not Arthur himself, who is out hunting). In "Gareth and Lynette" Arthur dispenses justice by allocating knights to quests; in "The Marriage of Geraint", Geraint acts on his own initiative, but in accordance with the precedent established by Arthur in "Gareth and Lynette". Geraint's personal desire to see the hunt (179, 234) is displaced by his duty to defend and protect Guinevere in Arthur's absence, and accordingly he takes on the Arthur-role. However, in undertaking this quest on Arthur's behalf, Geraint also acts as a type of Lancelot, who undertook delivery of Guinevere to Arthur upon request. Geraint's duty of "uttermost obedience" to Arthur consists of his "utter faithfulness" to Guinevere, elided of any passionate intensity or personal desire for Guinevere, a feat not successfully managed by Lancelot.



The global context of mediated desire is established by linking Geraint to Arthur (as type), and to Guinevere (in person) in the encounter on the knoll, and also by the arrival of another threesome, a knight, a lady and a dwarf.<sup>12</sup> The nameless knight's "[i]mperious" (190) demeanour makes him an extension of Arthur's kingly self-authorisation, but his "vice of pride" (195) is an inversion of Arthur's ethos of service. His disciple, the dwarf, "lagged latest" (188) and "doubl[ed] all his master's vice of pride" (95). It is not indicated that the dwarf desires his master's lady, but what is clear is that the dwarf desires to be like, and even to exceed, his master and in desiring this he patterns his behaviour on his master's behaviour. Note also that Geraint later describes him as an "under-shapen thing" (412), a phrase that indicates both the dwarf's reduced stature and also his being badly shaped by his master.

When Geraint tracks the threesome to their estate it turns out to be an inverted microcosm of Camelot, a "rustic cackle" impersonating the "murmur of the world" (276-77, reworked 419-420). All action in the town is subordinated to the self-glorifying ends of the "Sparrow-hawk", the nameless knight who takes himself for a type of Arthur, as his title suggests (a small hawk). The barren town builds on the picture of besieged towns in "Gareth and Lynette" and foreshadows the Red Knight and his counter-kingdom in "The Last Tournament". Each of these small realms is dominated by a brutal leader who co-opts his subjects' labour to his own ends, and whose subjects seem blindly to work his will in a parody of Arthurian governance (constituting "foul ensample[s]"). Geraint's reception by the townsfolk dramatises their blind allegiance (dramatised by the failure of the three townsfolk to make eye contact with Geraint) and accordingly Geraint describes them as being "hawk-mad" (280), although he might as well have said besotted.

Being received with hostility by the townsfolk, Geraint seeks shelter (and arms) from the Earl of Yniol, whose "castle in decay" (245) sits just outside the town. Ricks notes that Tennyson has revised his original sources by making the Earl the innocent victim of his nephew's treachery

and by rewriting the nameless knight and the nephew into the single figure of Sparrow-hawk. These alterations authorise Geraint's quest in terms of his knightly vow (redressing wrongs), a motive which would not be applicable had the Earl been the one in the wrong. The precursor model of the Earl and his estate is Leodogran, the father of Guinevere, who finds himself likewise besieged and reduced by a hostile relative prior to the coming of Arthur. However, Yniol's "ever open-doored" (302) welcome and immediate acceptance of Geraint contrasts with Leodogran's suspicion of Arthur as evidenced in his prolific search for affirmation of Arthur's royal status. By contrast, the Earl of Yniol welcomes Geraint into his home, recognising him by his "state / And presence [as] one of those / That eat in Arthur's hall at Camelot" (430-32). Yniol recognises Geraint as a disciple of Arthur, bound by his vows, and therefore as no threat to him or his family, unlike Enid's previous suitors.

The Earl's welcome, which permits Geraint and Enid to encounter each other, is a contrast to Arthur's one-sided encounter with Guinevere. The contrast is strengthened by the first encounter being one of voice rather than sight. The displacement of the look of desire by the voice of desire, however, is only partial. The first of two similes that describe Geraint's response to Enid's singing indicates "the sweet voice of Enid moved Geraint" (334); however, it moved him in particular to "[c]onjecture of the plumage and the form" (333) of the singer, that is, her appearance. The second simile describes Geraint recognising the "liquid note beloved of men" (336) as a nightingale, an image which suggests Enid's appearance will not, in fact, matter very much to Geraint. In fact, Geraint is enamoured of Enid before even seeing her: "Geraint . . . thought and said, / Here, by God's grace, is the one voice for me" (343-44).<sup>13</sup>

The voice of desire has two aspects. The first, tone, captivates Geraint immediately, but the second aspect, the words spoken, also serve to characterise Enid, as the Earl notes: "Hark, by the bird's song ye may learn the nest" (359). Enid's song may thus be conceived of as another discursively constructed model of desiring, although its programme differs

from the programme of the Arthurian vow. Somewhat ironically, “[i]t chanced the song that Enid sang was one / Of Fortune and her wheel” (345-6). I say ironically because Enid’s song asserts the capacity of man to rise above the vicissitudes of fortune (“man is man and master of his fate” [355]), while at the same time Geraint is captivated (“had longing in him evermore” [393]) by just such a random manifestation of chance (recalling Arthur’s being smitten in “The Coming of Arthur”). The song introduces the notions of individual responsibility and freedom by asserting that man has some capacity to endure (“we go not up or down” [351]) and to recognise right (“our hearts are great” [352]) despite his limited control over his own historical circumstances. However, Enid’s song also calls on fortune to “lower the proud” (347), a motive which is at one with Geraint’s quest to “break [Sparrow-hawk’s] pride” (416). The “chance” meeting with Enid evokes Guinevere’s parting words to Geraint, as does his visual fixation on her: “[he] let his eye rove in following, or rest / On Enid” (398-99). His instinctive move to follow Enid (“the Prince, as Enid past him, fain / To follow, strode a stride” [375-76]) is prevented by the Earl, who, we are soon to learn, has seen off two suitors already and is characterised by his patient endurance. Enid’s song thereby reiterates the double (rather than integrated) manifestations of desire through the splitting of its content (man is free to choose) and its context (Geraint is captivated).

The two aspects of desire, impassioned longing and disinterested righteousness, are both motives in Geraint’s challenge to the Sparrow-hawk, and they are integrated through the device of the “golden sparrow-hawk” (484), which is both the source of the nameless knight’s nickname (the physical symbol which must be won in order for the actual name to be revealed) and the “prize of beauty” (485) that is awarded to the lady whose knight wins the tournament. The Earl’s comment to Geraint that, “thou, that hast no lady, canst not fight” (493) functions at multiple levels. It provides the basis for Geraint’s adoption of Enid and her family’s cause, and it points the way to Geraint reorienting his desire from Guinevere to Enid. Although Geraint’s impassioned longing is indicated by his “eyes all bright” (494) and his claims “[he] never saw, / Though having seen all

beauties of our time, / Nor can see elsewhere, anything so fair” (497-99), his promise to “make [Enid] truly [his] true wife” (503) makes a distinction between the truth in his heart and eyes, and the truth that is the marriage bond, thereby integrating the dual aspects of desire into one mission, attainable by winning the golden sparrow-hawk.

The theme of proof, which is so important to “Geraint and Enid”, first arises here, as Yniol (unlike Leodogran) seeks to prove Enid’s heart before agreeing to a marriage. What is most interesting about this section is that Enid does not say anything:

Nor did she lift an eye nor speak a word,  
Rapt in the fear and in the wonder of it;  
So moving without answer to her rest  
She found no rest . . . (528-531)

Enid’s response to her mother’s “proving” involves neither of the signs of desire identified so far in the poem, aside from intra-subjective turmoil; she has inner agitation, but she neither speaks nor looks. Enid has been raised in fallen estate without “rich apparel, sumptuous fare, / And page, and maid, and squire, and seneschal, / And pastime both of hawk and hound, and all / That appertains to noble maintenance” (709-12). Having been (depending on how one views it) sheltered or excluded from the mediating influence of Arthurian desire, she has no pattern for desire: she has neither taken vows nor fallen in love before. Her desire is, so to speak, unshaped.

Geraint’s appearance at the tournament contrasts with his previous well-attired state, but nevertheless the poem notes that “[p]rincelike his bearing shone” (545). Geraint’s donning of the rusted armour reverses the sartorial distinction between him and Arthur noted above, re-characterising him as the type of Arthur described by Lancelot when he says, “the fire of God / Descends upon thee in the battle-field” (CA 127-28). In the account of the tournament that follows, many of the images of Arthur’s great battle are reprised, including the elaborate staging (CA 95-96, MG 548-555), the awe of the crowd (CA 108, MG 564-5), and the supernatural imagery (CA 106,

MG 566). The Earl of Yniol's cry to "[r]emember that great insult done the Queen" (571) strengthens the parallel with Arthur, who in that battle also fought for Guinevere. The strengthening of the parallel between Arthur and Geraint serves to characterise Geraint as an emissary of, or even coloniser for, Arthurian desire, particularly in its aspect of social responsibility.

After overthrowing the Sparrow-hawk, or Edym as he is henceforth known, clothing imagery becomes increasingly elaborate, as the couple prepares to go to Camelot. Enid's "faded silk" (617) becomes the focus of her fears. Enid's fears could be interpreted as displacement in psychological terms (that is, as a metaphor for her fears of "unworthiness" [533]), but the emphasis on clothing here is also consonant with the representation of mediated desire. Enid's fearful dream that she will be a fish out of water at court and be "cast . . . on the mixen [and] die" (672) illustrates that she really has no idea that what she despises in herself (represented by her faded silk) is part of the authorised pattern of desire that Guinevere has bequeathed Geraint: "though she were a beggar from the hedge, / [I] will clothe her" (230-31). Geraint's plan to take Enid to court is based on his desire to place her under the Queen's influence, metaphorically expressed three times as having the Queen "clothe her for her bridals like the sun" (231, 789, 836). Geraint's demand that Enid wear her faded silk rather than the dress given to (and perhaps made for) her by her mother reflects his hope that he can "bind / [Guinevere and Enid] together" (790-91). (Geraint's desire, in this respect, will later cause him a great deal of unhappiness, but at this stage there is neither rumour about the Queen and Lancelot nor any evidence that they have deceived the King.) The second aspect of Geraint's demand is "that at a word / (No reason given her)" (806-07) she should obey him. Geraint thus tests Enid's capacity to bind her desire to a discursive model, in this case Geraint's word but presumably later the wedding vow.

"The Marriage of Geraint" concludes with the couple's wedding at court where Enid is accordingly inducted into Arthurian desire. Geraint seems to

have integrated both aspects of Arthurian desire successfully, or at least to have managed them without overt conflict between the two motives.

“Geraint and Enid”<sup>14</sup>

The second of the Geraint idylls, “Geraint and Enid”, has received a little more critical attention than the first. Considering how few readings there are, though, there is a high degree of divergence among them. Ryals, as I noted above, devotes only a page to both idylls, concentrating mainly on “Geraint and Enid”. He argues that in this idyll Geraint begins to question everything about Camelot, especially his vows and his King, when he hears the rumours about Guinevere and Lancelot. In order to ameliorate his jealousy and his doubts about Enid, he attempts to keep her continually before his eyes, thereby neglecting his duty of service. However, when Enid eventually “proves herself” (139) he abandons his romantic notions and returns to his duty of service. Johnson puts forward a reading of “Geraint and Enid” that is focused on Geraint’s failings as a husband, which he proposes are “a result of the husband’s personality, not of Guinevere’s and Lancelot’s sin breeding want of trust” (155-56). Hair reads “Geraint and Enid” as Geraint’s “inner quest” (160) and “symbolic death and rebirth” (160) in which he overcomes his moral failings (projected as outer quest). He argues that the idyll dramatises Geraint’s final integration of the domestic (returning home and having children with Enid) and heroic (service to Arthur). Zietlow, by contrast, argues, “The Geraint idylls provide a transition into ever-increasing darkness, complexity and psychological realism from the gratification of wishful sentiments that is the dominant effect of the preceding story” (741). While the traumas of the quest permit both Enid and Geraint to rise above their personal failings and achieve “inner transformation” (741), Zietlow argues, “the happy ending is overshadowed by the seductions and betrayals, the disillusionment and tragedy of the idylls that follow” (742). Cammy Thomas says of this idyll:

Though Enid is thoroughly good, she has a bad effect on her

husband, Geraint. He is so smitten with her that is 'manhood was all gone, / And molten down in mere uxoriousness' (MG 59-60). When she saddens because she hears others make fun of him, he is suspicious that she has been tainted by her association with Guinevere, and has become unfaithful. When Geraint turns all his energy into proving his faithfulness, he ignores his knightly duties and his not available to do the work of the kingdom. In a sense, he takes on Arthur's problem, accusing his faithful wife, as Arthur's unfaithful wife goes unpunished. Guinevere's infidelity infects the entire kingdom, corrupting all its relations. (103)

Ryals' reading does not account for Geraint's visual obsession with Enid prior to his hearing rumours about Guinevere; nor does he discuss the roles of Edyrn ("Sparrow-hawk"), Arthur and the various villains on the quest. The psychologically oriented readings tend to view these figures as projections of Geraint's disturbed mind. The reading that follows details Geraint's disillusionment with Arthurian desire, and his journey is seen as an attempt to escape it, and to assert the immediacy of his own desire in its place.

The story of Geraint's second quest begins in the framing narrative to "The Marriage of Geraint" (MG1-144), which describes Geraint and Enid at court after their marriage, followed by their retirement to Devon and the incident that provokes the second quest, Enid's self-admonition. At court (MG 1-41) Enid is under the influence of both Geraint and Guinevere, as indicated by the metaphor of clothing (MG 6-18), and the observation that Enid and Guinevere were "close" (MG 22). However, the "common love" (MG 23) that Geraint had rejoiced in becomes a source of fear and discontent when he hears "a rumour" (MG 24) about the Queen and Lancelot. Geraint begins to fear "lest his gentle wife, / Through that great tenderness for Guinevere, / Had suffered, or should suffer any taint / In nature" (MG 29-32). Wishing to remove Enid from the Queen's influence, Geraint seeks a "pretext" (MG 33) for returning to Devon. Geraint's pretext is "[t]o cleanse this common sewer of all his realm" (MG 39, GE 894).<sup>15</sup> The double use of "common" in this section accompanies the shift from a positive conception of influence ("common love") to a negative one ("common sewer"). The characterisation of unwholesome influence as

being sewer-like evokes the Victorian concern with contagion and its spread, and foreshadows Arthur's rebuke to the Queen in "Guinevere", when he characterises the unfaithful wife as "a new disease" (G 515) that "[c]reeps, no precaution used, among the crowd" (G 516). Geraint's fear that Enid's "tenderness" (MG 22, 30) might be the entry point for her moral corruption recalls Vaughan's claim in The Angel in the House that the fallen women's "first crime was unguarded love" (I.xi.i); both claims depend on the supposition that women have a natural proclivity to love and tenderness that leaves them especially vulnerable to negative influences, and that, moreover, any actual lapse is irreversible. Accordingly, Geraint imposes a visual *cordon sanitaire* around Enid ("He compassed her with sweet observances / And worship" [MG 48]), and devotes all his attention to watching her for signs of a "taint" (MG 31, 68).<sup>16</sup> During the encounter with Limours, Geraint says to Enid, "ye are wedded to a man . . . With eyes to find you out however far, / And ears to hear you even in his dreams" (425-29). Geraint is alert to all and any signs of desire (word and look) in Enid, and is determined to root them out. Moreover, disillusioned with Arthurian desire, Geraint attempts to construct a new desire, that of ensuring that "if ever yet was wife / True to her lord, mine shall be so to me" (MG 46-47). Geraint thus sets himself up as arbiter of truth and his second quest can be read as his attempt to assert his own desire in place of the Arthurian desire he has turned away from and to assert himself as the source of his own desire.

Geraint's departure from Camelot for a land of "bandit earls, and caitiff knights, / Assassins, and all flyers from the hand / Of Justice, and whatever loathes a law" (MG 35-37) symbolises his withdrawal from the dual manifestations of Arthurian desire (the vow and being in love). Geraint's "boundless love" (MG 63) is a trope for the unbinding of his vow. His "worship" (MG 49) of Enid is a subversion of his knightly oath, which in fact demands "worship . . . by years of noble deeds" (G 473) and his resultant forgetfulness (MG 50-55) parallels Guinevere's forgetfulness at the start of the earlier quest, in which instance she is preoccupied with her inner visions. Geraint's "uxoriousness" (MG 60, 83) describes a state of



excessive or foolish love, and is symbolised by his “never leaving [Enid]” (MG 49). His suspicious surveillance is a corruption of the adoring gaze that is the trope for impassioned desire. In watching Enid’s face (MG 67) he neglects his inner vision and fantasy and his ideal lover is replaced by a tainted object of suspicion (MG 68).<sup>17</sup>

The second quest begins with the reversal of the signs of Arthurian desire. Enid is dressed in the faded silk she wore before meeting Geraint and being clothed by Guinevere, and Geraint throws away his purse, akin to his “gilded arms” (GE 21) worn on his earlier quest (MG 166) in which he exported Arthurian desire throughout the kingdom. He commands Enid to ride “[e]ver a good way on before” (15) so he cannot see her face and he orders her “[w]hatever happens, not to speak to [him]” (17). The injunction to silence symbolically elides any words of desire (and reverses his captivation by Enid’s voice in “The Marriage of Geraint”). His demand for her obedience (a demand repeated several times throughout the idyll) evokes the demand for obedience to the King, and indicates Geraint’s adopting that position for himself, although his injunction to silence offers only a negative vision rather than a substitutive agenda. Having arranged Enid in this fashion, Geraint then “broke the sentence in his heart” (41), symbolising a decisive break with his past submission to Arthurian desire.

The encounters with the bandit knights show Enid repeatedly attempting to evoke Geraint’s desire by looking at him face to face and by speaking to him; however, this has the effect of making him “wroth the more / That she *could* speak” (113). Her dilemma reproduces the dilemma of the knights in their vow of “uttermost obedience” to the King, and the dilemma Geraint faced on hearing the rumours about Guinevere:

[‘] I needs must disobey him for his good;  
 How should I dare obey him to his harm?  
 Needs must I speak, and though he kill me for it,  
 I save a life dearer to me than mine.’ (135-38)

As the couple rides on, they encounter numerous bandits who threaten their

lives. In the first ambush, Geraint kills the bandits and strips them of their armour, which he retains; this pattern is repeated in the second ambush. Geraint makes no attempt to induct these knights into the Arthurian order (as he did, for instance, with Edym in the previous idyll) by teaching them the error of their ways, and it seems that Geraint has no intention of becoming a model of desire in his own right. He seems rather to be concerned with erasing all desire from the land, rather than substituting his own imaginative vision for Arthur's. There is a certain irony in Geraint's delegating responsibility for the knights' horses to Enid, whereupon they come under her "firm voice and tender government" (194).

When they take a room in a town en route they are visited by Earl Limours, a dissolute Knight who had previously been one of Enid's suitors sent away by her father in "The Marriage of Geraint". If the two sets of three bandits represented physical threats to Geraint and Enid, the Earl of Limours represents a more insidious threat, stealthy seduction by the corrupted speech of desire. Hair reads Limours as a "fallen version of the courtly lover" (162) whose name suggests the term *amours* and who replicates Geraint's behaviour upon his return to Devon.<sup>18</sup> Limours represents the inversion of the Arthurian vow. He is a man who

. . . jested with all ease, and told  
Free tales, and took the word and played upon it,  
And made it of two colours; for his talk,  
When wine and free companions kindled him,  
Was wont to glance and sparkle like a gem  
Of fifty facets;           (290-295)

Limours evokes the capacity of language to mean more than one thing, in contrast to the solemn and univocal character of the Arthurian vow. Limours' speech to Enid is dominated by references to speech itself: "I call mine own self" (311), "You do not speak" (321), "lovers' quarrels" (324), "men may bicker" (325), "wretched insult on you, dumbly speaks / Your story" (328-29), "speak the word" (336; again 342), and the poem notes that he was moved by the "tender sound of his own voice" (348). The emphasis on speech in this episode suggests that without the stabilising

effect of the vow, language itself is a treacherous mode of desire: a symbolic system without fixture. Aptly, Enid deflects Limours' desire with a lie of her own (352), an event she redeems by fully disclosing her "craft" to Geraint. Enid, however, by this point has learned that her speech offends her husband, and her warning to Geraint (about Limours' impending assault) is a silent one, a pointing finger, which enables her to keep "the letter of his word" (455) not to speak.

After Limours is slain, Enid "answering not one word" (495) continues onwards, ostensibly shorn of one manifestation of Arthurian desire. However, this renunciation of speech, according to Geraint's command, does not comfort Geraint, but rather constitutes a "loss" (498) symbolised as a hidden wound, which he does not tell Enid about, and which causes him to pass out. The Earl of Doorm is the final of the bandit knights to encounter Geraint and Enid. As Enid attended to the prostrate Geraint, "many past, but none regarded her" (520) until Doorm, with "rolling eyes of prey" (538) sees her. He is attracted to Enid's comely face, and offers assistance to Geraint because of it. He represents a distorted version of the look of desire, an objectifying gaze that seeks no reciprocal look of desire. A number of visual tropes are associated with Doorm and his followers: dilated eyes (596), rolling eyes (538, 609), staring (630), beholding (619, 676,) and close inspection (669, 713). The incident of the fabulous dress (678-710) inverts the incident of the faded dress in "The Marriage of Geraint". However, Enid resists the Earl's covetous eye, and his command to "[I]ook yourself" (616), declaring she cannot be happy until "my lord arise and look upon me" (649).

Having proved Enid "to the uttermost" (588; an echo of the knights' vow), Geraint finally comes to Enid's aid and kills Doorm. He has not managed to eliminate Enid's desire, but has satisfied himself that she desires only him. As the couple returns to Devon they have one final encounter, with Edyrn and Arthur, who have themselves ridden to overthrow Doorm. If the bandits have represented lawless or non-Arthurian desire, Edyrn serves to illustrate the beneficial aspects of

Arthurian desire. The mediating influences on himself have included Enid's "true eyes" (845), Dubric's "holy oratory" (865), and the generally refined and noble manners of Arthur's court. The encounter with Edyrn thus completes Geraint's reconciliation with Arthurian desire as an ideal and idealised self-regulating behaviour rather than as the simplistic imitation of idealised models.

### Conclusion

If the Geraint idylls are read as commentaries on Arthur's desire, and its cultural encoding, they obtain a richer texture and more significant place within Idylls as a whole. The structuring of the narrative into two distinct and temporally discrete quests produces an exemplar of Arthurian desire ("The Marriage of Geraint") and a critique of it, which nevertheless, ultimately, returns to it ("Geraint and Enid"). It certainly appears that Geraint and Enid are able to attain the type of sanctified passion suggested by the symbols of vow and gaze, and this largely appears to be a consequence of the mutuality or reciprocity of affections they share. In all, these poems explore the dilemmas of marriage without love and lovers who cannot marry, mainly through the development of iconic figures (Geraint and Enid) who aim for the actual rather than the ideal, and thereby more closely approach the ideal.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Citations of individual idylls use the standard abbreviations.

<sup>2</sup> McGhee makes a similar point when he describes *Idylls* as dramatising “the dialectic between certainty and uncertainty, between loyalty and treachery, between the realism of *agape* (in Enid) and the naturalism of *eros* (in Nimue, or Vivien)” (55).

<sup>3</sup> Ryals’ reading is a forerunner to Donald S. Hair’s (1981) reading of *Idylls* as an exploration of “use”, which Hair defines as “a devotion to human civilisation, and both the ability and readiness to serve humanity” (127).

<sup>4</sup> Arthur L. Simpson, jr. (1992), by contrast, reads Elaine’s desire for Lancelot as delusional erotomania, and Elaine as a woman “victimized and self-deluded by stereotypical, limited, and wrong-headed views of what maidens and women should be” (347).

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Linley, 1992, discusses the contesting ideologies that both make up and disrupt the Arthurian ideology.

<sup>6</sup> Debra N. Mancroff (1996) describes the wedding as a joyous occasion, followed by failed hopes and broken promises (266). Certainly Arthur and his knights seem to enjoy the wedding, but Tennyson’s description of Guinevere’s “drooping eyes” in this idyll, and her comments later in “Guinevere” do not suggest she enjoyed the wedding.

<sup>7</sup> Vivien sets out a parody of the scene of Arthur falling in love with Guinevere when she claims Guinevere mistook Lancelot for Arthur from her castle watch and “fixt her fancy on him” (MV 775).

<sup>8</sup> The play of words on bound and boundless in this idyll is reworked in

“Lancelot and Elaine”, when Lancelot argues that “free love will not be bound” (LE 1368), and Arthur replies, “Free love, so bound, were freest” (LE 1369). Geraint’s “boundless love” (MG 63) also participates in this motif.

<sup>9</sup> The imbedded irony in Arthur’s vow resembles the Oedipal injunction, the No-of-the-Father, whose edict to “be like me” runs up against the prohibition “do not be like me”. In *Idylls*, the character most “marred” (LE 246) by the impossible vow is Lancelot, whose “faith unfaithful kept him falsely true” (LE 872).

<sup>10</sup> This section focuses on Geraint’s pursuit of Enid in his first quest, and discussion of the framing narrative (lines 1-144) is included in the following section, which gives the account of Geraint’s second quest. Unless otherwise indicated, all references in this section are to “The Marriage of Geraint”.

<sup>11</sup> Hair notes that Geraint’s bright clothes contrast with the drab clothing of the Sparrow-hawk’s townfolk, characterising Geraint as a “sun god” come to bring new life to the town (157). In that case, the Geraint image foreshadows Guinevere’s description of Arthur in “Lancelot and Elaine”: “But who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven?” (LE 123).

<sup>12</sup> Almost all the action in “The Marriage of Geraint” occurs in sets of three: the initial group, the group led by the nameless knight, Geraint’s enquiries in the town, Enid’s family members, the three days of the quest, Enid’s three suitors, the three rounds in Geraint’s fight with Edym, the threesome who return to court, Guinevere’s three trips to the tower. This pattern continues in “Geraint and Enid”. Hair interprets this pattern as a manifestation of both chivalric and fairytale patterns (particularly of “Sleeping Beauty”). However, the dominance of the pattern also evokes the triangle of Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, and is, moreover, the basic structure of mediated or modelled desire.

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this event foreshadows Elaine's response to Lancelot, when she is "[w]on by the mellow voice before she looked" (LE 242).

<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all references in this section are to "Geraint and Enid".

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Ricks notes that in Mabinogion "this is no pretext" (325), but Tennyson's revision here foreshadows Lancelot's "pretext" in "Lancelot and Elaine".

<sup>16</sup> For the representation of desire and disease in Victorian literature see Pamela M. Gilbert, Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Novels (1997).

<sup>17</sup> It may well be that Freudian and Lacanian analyses of paranoia and jealousy can further contribute to the interpretation of this pattern. Freud (1922/1957) reads the jealous delusion ("she loves him") as a defence against the homoerotic proposition, "I love him". The rumours about Guinevere cause Geraint to turn away from his loving submission towards Arthur (his psychic father). Jacques Lacan (1957/1977) reads Freudian paranoia, including jealousy, as a symptom of the "foreclosure" of the paternal metaphor, or the Name-of-the-Father (1957/1977 201), which renders a rent in the fabric of subjectivity. Without the paternal metaphor the subject cannot assume a masculine identity, and is thus characterised as effeminate. The jealous subject attempts to repair this fundamental elision by inserting himself into the paternal position, that is, by attempting to be the phallus. Idylls predates by some years these formulations of jealousy, but nevertheless seems to foreshadow them with the representation of Geraint's effeminacy (MG 59, GE 20) and the collapse of his relationship to the Symbolic Order, which is dramatised as his concern with his name and his manhood (MG 92, MG 128). Elliot L. Gilbert (1983/1996), in "The Female King" cites epigrammatically both Freud's reading of the paranoia of Dr. Schreber (1911/1957), and Lacan's reading of Freud on the

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same case. Gilbert's interest is in Arthur's "maidenly" character, and the King's attempt to "reign without the authorization of patrilineal descent" (237). The flaw in the structure of subjectivity might be stabilized for the subject in the paranoid delusion, but the 'reality' that the delusion substitutes cannot outlast the paranoid subject anymore than Camelot can outlast its king.

<sup>18</sup> Hair, applying the "critical commonplace" that an outer quest symbolises an inner quest, reads all the assaults on Geraint and Enid, including Doorm's, as being projections of Geraint's own spiritual ill-health. The bandits represent Geraint's objectification of Enid; Limours represents Geraint's effeminacy and appetite; and Doorm represents Geraint's anger (162-66). According to Hair, Geraint needs to overcome these character flaws to regain his spiritual health and to perform his knightly duties. I read these episodes differently, as representing Geraint's attempts to dislocate himself from the cultural context of Arthurian desire.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

FIFINE AT THE FAIR: "PURPOSE WITH PERFORMANCE  
CROWN'D"

Introduction and Background

Robert Browning's Fifine at the Fair (1872) is a poem in 132 lyrics, plus epigraph, Prologue and Epilogue. Fifine at the Fair is a dramatic monologue, spoken by Don Juan to his wife, Elvire, who also either speaks directly or is paraphrased by her husband (notably in xxii, xl, lx, lxiv, lxix, lxxxi).<sup>1</sup> The entire speech occurs as Don Juan and Elvire stroll, first down to a fair, then on to a beach and to a druid monument, and finally back to their home. The Don's physical motility is a counterpart to his verbal agility. The poem begins with Don Juan expressing his admiration for and interest in the Pornic Fair-folk, and in Fifine, a young acrobat, in particular. The body of the poem includes and elaborates his justifications for this attraction; however, although the figure of Fifine recurs in several of the Don's speeches, she and the Pornic Fair are not the sole focus of his monologue: "[o]nce fairly on the wing" he flaps "far and wide" (lxi) in the elaboration of his subjective vision, discussing art, music, religion and metaphysics.

Readings of Fifine at the Fair tend to be accounts of ambivalence and conflict. Samuel B. Southwell (1980), in a book-length reading, argues that there is a discontinuity between the dramatic content of the poem (the Don's debate with his living wife) and the symbolic content of the poem (the predominance of imagery of a dead wife). According to Southwell, these somewhat contradictory features cannot be reconciled with reference to the psychology of the Don because there is insufficient textual characterisation to permit a reading based on the Don's motive(s). Accordingly, Southwell eschews the psychology of the Don for the psychology of the poet, and concludes that Fifine at the Fair "expresses,

and in some large measure constitutes, Browning's effort to escape the combined and undifferentiated effects of memory and inhibition while yet remaining loyal to the memory of Elizabeth [Barrett Browning]" (12). In other words, Southwell interprets the poem as Browning's attempt to represent and resolve poetically the problems he faced in his own life after Elizabeth's death, chief of which was the inhibitory effect the shadow of his dead wife cast over his present day sexual and romantic desires. In Southwell's analysis, Browning's personal situation is dramatised in the poem by the figure of Elvire (and to varying degrees the other phantom women) standing between Don Juan and the satisfaction of his immediate sexual desires, represented by the figure of Fifine.

Other readings focus less on Browning's ambivalence than on Don Juan's. Wendell Stacy Johnson (1975) interprets the poem as articulating a conflict between the Don's desires for "a natural, oceanic existence" (or "free sexuality") and "sanctioned, conventional marriage" (246), while Richard D. McGhee also refers to a conflict between desire and duty, symbolised in his reading by Don Juan's movement between "the carnival and the domestic prison" (1980 96).<sup>2</sup> According to McGhee, marriage is an ethical choice, a public act of subordinating aesthetic desires to duty in the interests of community (71). Both Johnson and McGhee assert that Don Juan's *natural* desire for Fifine is in conflict with his duties to the community, represented by Elvire. This interpretation is comparable to Clyde de L. Ryals' distinction between *eros* and *agape* (discussed Chapter Six), in which the two motives, there *eros* and *agape*, but here aesthetics and ethics, are polarised, and correspond roughly to (selfish or improper) desire and (selfless or proper) love.<sup>3</sup> However, while Ryals proposes that *eros* may be redeemed by *agape* in the institution of marriage, Johnson's and McGhee's readings imply that *eros*, or aesthetics, or desire, must be sacrificed or circumscribed in favour of *agape*, or ethics, or love as marriage, and that Don Juan's unwillingness to make this adjustment is the basis of his ambivalence towards Elvire.

In "Browning and Victorian Poetry of Sexual Love" (1974), Isobel

Armstrong interprets the poem as a critique of culturally prescribed gender roles.<sup>4</sup> In her reading Don Juan's ambivalence is a consequence not of a conflict primarily between his nature and his culture, but of a conflict within Victorian culture itself. This conflict consists of the predominant and dominating dualistic paradigm of woman as either whore or angel. These two paradigms, whore and angel, are "typified" (lxxiii) by Fifine and Elvire respectively, while particular aspects of these figures are also elaborated in the phantoms Helen, Cleopatra and Saint. In Armstrong's reading these fantasy women are cultural rather than personal projections, and she believes the poem illustrates both the positive and the damaging consequences of these mythical objects of desire for men.

E. Warwick Slinn (1982) focuses on the Don's rhetoric rather than on his feelings for particular women. For Slinn, the poem is not about a choice between flesh and spirit (or this life and the next, or this wife and that mistress), but about how the Don verbally co-opts each of these variables for his own self-aggrandising ends, and about how Browning represents and evaluates such subjective relativism. In Slinn's reading, the function of the pageants the Don describes is to provide him with an analogy for or explanation of reality. The Don uses the Pornic Fair to illustrate that "freedom is limited by the requirements of physical survival" (138); the procession of women illustrates "the reality of subjective evaluation" (140); Fifine's stage drama demonstrates that "illusion characterises both art and life" (142); finally, the Venetian dream fair shows that "the meaning of the masquerade can only be understood through handling it, through personal experience" (144).

### A Conceptual Framework

Three terms figure frequently in this chapter: aesthetic personality, seduction and dreadful game. The first, aesthetic personality, is borrowed from Søren Kierkegaard's "Diary of the Seducer" (Either/Or 1843/1946 251-374). The essays in Either/Or set out Kierkegaard's philosophy of

ethics and aesthetics; as his title suggests, for Kierkegaard, the two terms or motives are oppositional. “Diary of the Seducer” is a fictionalised philosophy of aesthetics, in the form of a ‘diary’ purporting to describe the seduction of a young girl by an older man. This ‘diary’ had been obtained by a moralist, who published it in order to denounce the actions and philosophy of the ‘diarist’. Kierkegaard’s ‘diarist’ accomplishes the physical act of sexual intercourse usually implied by the term seduction, but the act itself is subsidiary to his construction and conduct of a perfect campaign to arouse the girl’s erotic passion and to achieve her utter capitulation, after which she is immediately abandoned. Within this campaign, sexual intercourse is only one aspect of seduction, its full stop or its residue. Rather than sexual intercourse, seduction in this text primarily refers to a deliberate use of strategies to deploy some other for the seducer’s own pleasure; the term seducer predominantly describes an “aesthetic personality” rather than a sexual agent. The aesthete is both an artist and his own artistic production: “[The seducer’s] poetic temperament . . . is not rich enough, or, perhaps, not poor enough to distinguish poetry and reality from one another. The poetical was the *more* he himself brought with him. This more was the poetical he enjoyed in the poetic situation of reality; he withdrew this again in the form of poetic reflection . . . his whole life was motivated by enjoyment. In the first instance he enjoyed the aesthetic personally, in the second instance he enjoyed his own aesthetic personality” (253).<sup>5</sup> In “Diary of the Seducer” artistic pursuits are indistinguishable from the pursuit of desire.

Jean Baudrillard (1979/1990; henceforth 1990) puts a post-modern spin on Kierkegaard’s seducer. He says, a seducer composes himself within the context of a game, whose arbitrary rules parody law, and whose actions do not involve belief but “stakes and challenges” (142). For Baudrillard seduction ‘reverses’ desire, and adherence to rules, characteristic of games such as seduction, frees participants from the law. (I assume that the ‘law’ seduction eludes is the desire of the Other.) Baudrillard shows that aesthetics is not the natural opposite of ethics, but of nature. He says, “Seduction . . . never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice —

never to the order of energy, but that of signs and rituals . . . Seduction continues to appear to all orthodoxies as malefice and artifice, a black magic for the deviation of all truths, an exaltation of the malicious use of signs, a conspiracy of signs” (2). Baudrillard describes the seducer’s strategy as “ironic”, because, as “a perfect crime[,] a work of art[,] a stroke of wit [and] a spiritual, but also pedagogical ordeal” for its victim (112), seduction’s success is also its failure. The corruption or compassing of the object renders the object no longer interesting to the seducer and “[w]hat should have been a triumphant setting [becomes] no more than the doleful site of a defunct story” (118).

The seducer seduces another in order to seduce himself. Because of this very selfish characteristic, and the ruthlessness of its trajectory, seduction is, from an ethical stance, a “dreadful game” (Nancy Morrow 1988). Morrow uses this term to describe situations that have the form of play, but which lack the positive qualities of play, which she identifies as open-endedness, spontaneity, joy, freedom, relaxation and harmony (4). By contrast, dreadful games are characterised by conflict, competition, fatalism, and, ultimately, the polarisation of desire and satisfaction. Play, according to Morrow, balances desire with satisfaction; the ‘end’ of play is harmony, while the ‘end’ of a dreadful game is mastery, revenge or victory. Accordingly (as Baudrillard notes of seduction, but for different reasons), playing a dreadful game is an inherently ironic act: victory in the game is a loss in real life.

These three constructs (the aesthetic personality, seduction and dreadful game), as cited in their original contexts, do participate in a number of dualisms: Kierkegaard opposes aesthetics to ethics, Baudrillard opposes seduction to desire/law/nature, and Morrow opposes dreadful games to play. However, it is not necessary to infer from those oppositions that Don Juan (or anyone else) is necessarily subject to conflict deriving from the incompatibility of these dualisms as internalised motives. In fact, the scandal of Kierkegaard’s seducer is precisely that he feels no such conflict. This scandal is also incarnated in Browning’s Don Juan, for whom “self-

sustainment” is “morality” (xvi), albeit that his “morality” is entirely the ‘ethics’ of personal privilege and pleasure.

### The Artist at Work

Kierkegaard’s seducer views himself predominantly as an artist: he describes his “vision” in which “all [the range of] feminine natures” coalesce into “one composite picture” in his mind’s eye (274); he defines his “love affairs” in terms of “creative period[s]” (283); and he says “[e]very erotic relation should always be lived so that one can easily reproduce a picture of it, in all the beauty of the original scene. To make this successful one must be especially observant of the surroundings. If one does not find them as one wants them, then one must make them so” (324). His artistry depends on the detail; he visualises each scene between himself and the girls, and he maintains directorial control over every ‘performance’. His art is “rich in inward emotion” (335), such that he enjoys the work he is undertaking while he is undertaking it, and his art takes into account the nature of the clay with which he works, such that a different technique is required for each individual girl he seduces and so offers him variety. However, there is always a disjunction between his “soul’s eye” (268) and his soul’s “demand for more and more reality” (277) that drives him on until he has exhausted the potentialities of every project and it (the girl) no longer interests him.

Browning’s Don Juan is also an artistic man: he sketches (xliv-l); he sculpts (lii-lix); and he plays music (xcii). His entire monologue, as Slinn has observed, has an air of pageantry and performance about it. It is clear, however, that his monologue is not wholly impromptu: over the course of the poem the temporal order of events preceding the visit to the fair is slowly disclosed. Don Juan had heard the fair entering town the previous evening (xci), he went swimming in the morning (lxiv), he played some music (xc-xcii), and he had the dream of the Venetian masque during the subsequent nap (xcii-cxxi). His circuit with Elvire follows the contours of these earlier “rounds” (xci), beginning with the fair, passing the beach and

concluding at the Druid monument just as his dream did. This replication of events on the Don's part points to a deliberate design behind his apparently spontaneous outing with Elvire, which is certainly suggestive of a performance or pageant. And as Slinn observes, "an audience is required to watch [a] pageant in order to sustain its existence" (150). This requirement accounts for the strange circumstance of Don Juan taking his wife with him to (possibly) arrange an adulterous liaison with Fifine. Given this context, it would be a mistake to reduce Don Juan's motives to being only sexual desire or sexual conquest, with Fifine as his sole object. Elvire is more than just the Don's audience: she is watching him, but he is also watching her, and he is watching himself. His desire is to perceive his own instrumentality in affecting Elvire, and thus to accrue some "gain through [his] own mode / Of practising with life, upon some soul which owed / Its treasure, all diverse and yet in worth the same, / To new work and changed way!" (lix). In other words, he desires to realise (make real) his soul's vision. If Fifine offers an "electric snap and spark" (xci), then Elvire is the "fuel" (xli) that spark is to ignite, producing a "flame" (xli) that both entertains him and affirms his own artistic skill.

While the Don contends that each person possesses a kind of "elemental flame" (lv), he also argues that this flame is "inert . . . stuff for transmuting" (lv) until it is evoked (lv), found (lv), conquered (lvi), transferred (lvi), and/or imagined (lvi) by another "seeing soul" (lv). Don Juan develops another combustive trope for this process when he says, "Beneath the veriest ash, there hides a spark of soul / Which, quickened by love's breath, may yet pervade the whole / O' the grey, and, free again, be fire" (xlirii; see also, "you still blew a spark at brood / I' the greyest ember" [lix]). In all instances, the spark is already (if barely) present as potential fire, but some external force is required to perceive it and then to ignite it. Slinn observes that the Don believes "a person's 'inward grace', or essence, depends on how it is construed by another" (140); however, while a pageant requires an audience to construe and complete its meaning, these instances the Don describes go beyond construal to intervention ("Howe'er produced" [xlirii]).

Through Don Juan's obviously artistic examples (sketching, sculpting and playing music) his own particular theory and interpretation of art, which in his case involves the manipulation of the materials (women) of daily life, is disclosed. In xlv-li Don Juan makes some rough sketches in the sand to illustrate his argument that "Art, working with a will" (xliv), is able to correct (li) the perverse bungleings of nature (xliii) as evinced by the ugly appearance of some individuals ("wrong enough and ravage" [1]). His analogy is that if "hand-practice" can disclose the traits and types of person with a few "retrenchment[s] and addition[s]" (xlvi) in the lines of a sketch, then "soul-proficiency" can "amend" (li) — that is, imagine the whole perfection of — one's beloved, with a "[r]esult more beautiful than beauty's self" (li). For Don Juan, beauty does not reside in natural states, which offer the "monadic mere intent" (xlviii); rather it derives from the expert refinements of "hand-practice" and "soul-proficiency" (l) on nature.

In lii-lix Don Juan begins by describing a partially complete sculpture he had purchased, having recognised it as a Michelangelo. From the state of the sculpture as it was, he was able to envisage its potentially completed form, which he himself made in plaster. The Don's artistry in this episode centres, first, on the acuity of his perception, which enabled him both to recognise the knife marks on the marble (and thence to strike a bargain with an unsophisticated vendor) and to discern the sculpted "man-[shape]" in the natural-seeming rock that to other eyes evidenced only a "plain abortion". Secondly, the Don's artistry is a function of his imagination, or his capacity to envisage the statue's completed form ("the lines / Plain to my soul"). Finally, he possesses some technical skills that enable him to bring his imagined sculpture to fruition (he "worked . . . until the apposite / Design was out of him"). Finally, having seen it, he smashed his sculpture and "[r]ecalled the same to live within his soul as heretofore" (lvii). Like Kierkegaard's seducer, Don Juan's soul's "gain" (a word repeated three times in lyric lviii alone) is obtained by the violent destruction of the very object of his fascination. Having obtained his desired end, the object no



longer offers him anything in the way of exercising his instrumentality; the physical destruction of the object is an expression of rage at the project's conclusion. Also, like the seducer, the Don works "[i]n silence and by night" (lvii) in order to ensure that he possesses that which no other may enjoy.

Finally the Don discusses Schumann's "Carnival" (xc-xciii), which he had played that morning after his swim. Don Juan, in this section, approaches the limits of aestheticism (in Shaw's fine phrase) in the form of a weary realisation that some other before him had felt as he felt.<sup>6</sup> His allusion to his speculative fancy of Fifine "tugging her *tricot* on" (xci) is followed immediately by his summation of the piece of music as "each old theme / I' the new dress" (xcii); the sartorial linkage certainly suggests his sexual ennui and lack of genuine interest in Fifine. He then moves swiftly to a gastronomic analogy of diners finding not "novel" food but rather the "selfsame fare" dished up with a different sauce, and thus to poetry "cooked again in rhyme", art "[d]ished up anew in paint" and music "sauce-smothered fresh again in sound". This analogy suggests that the "spice-nut" (xci) Fifine represents will not prove to be a new flavour after all, but will merely represent his own "fall / Into the same old track" (xciii). The urbane Don, who suspects that there is no novel sensual experience awaiting him and who is aware that Fifine is easily obtainable, substitutes for sensual novelty a psychic challenge. As Elvire observes in relation to the boating analogy: "the man's allured / By liking for the new and hard in his exploit!" (lxxxix). Elvire mistakes the object of allure: it is not the "change of boat" he pursues, but the "change of tactics" (lxxxii) that the change of boat requires.

### The Strategy of the Seducer

Baudrillard argues that seduction deploys the "mythical power" of desire (87) against its victims. The seductress uses man's desire against him with a strategic display of finery that seduces his gaze (98), and the seducer counters that by weaving a "finery of strategy" (98) with which to

destroy her natural power. Baudrillard says the seducer “becomes a skilful mirror” (105), who reflects back to the girl a captivating image of her own erotic potential, thereby ensnaring her. The image of the girl that the seducer shows her (‘reflects’ back to her) is an illusion; it is his fantasy. It exercises its effect when she mistakes the illusion for herself, and, without recognising his manipulations, she becomes what he wants her to be, all the while believing that she is seducing him. Seduction is thus an exercise of power that goes unrecognised by the victim (at least until it is too late for her to save herself).<sup>7</sup>

Baudrillard says that for “seduction to occur an illusion must intervene and mix up the images” (103). The Pornic Fair seduces in precisely this way. The first description Don Juan gives of the fair stresses the transfiguration of “raw and brown, rough pole and shaven plank” (ii), the raw structural components of the fair, which have been transformed like “butterfly from grub” (ii). This image of natural process (which looks back to the butterfly of the Prologue) highlights with stark contrast the “flower-bed in full blow”, the un-natural fruition of nature’s parts under the artistry of the fair-folk. (For instance, the evolution of grub to butterfly “comes from sun and air”, while the evolution of the fair takes place during the “night”.) In the next lyric, Don Juan turns his attention to the human elements of the fair: “the human beauty, Mimi, Toinette, Fifine, / Tricot fines down if fat, padding plumps up if lean” (iii), then, “shedding petticoat”, the female acrobats are transformed to “gamesome boys”.<sup>8</sup> Also of interest to the Don is the “six-legged sheep” (xi), which on the fair’s last visit was advertised as “the Twin-headed Babe, and Human Nondescript”. The Don is particularly cruel in his association of Fifine with the fair’s “ape” (xxv), but in his eyes all the fair-folk are characterised by a similar sort of virtuous interchangeability. For instance, Fifine’s conjectured husband is, in the space of one lyric, called the “ogre”, “lord of all”, “Brute-beast-face”, and “Strong Man” (xxv). In xv Don Juan “read[s] the signs” of Fifine, with emphasis on her capacity to mix the markers of identity. In his reading she is represented as a collection of parts: a “gypsy” this, a “Greek” that, a “Hebrew” the other. Her appearance, and

thus her identity, refuses a unitary categorisation of ethnicity and nationality, and also gender (she has “breasts”, at which point “commence / The boy”).

These examples suggest, first, that the artistry of the circus and its freak show parodies nature and natural process, and, second, that the fair-folk have a particular skill in manipulating the signs they employ to deceive the town-folk. The fair seduces not because it is natural but because it is unnatural, and not because its appearance compels belief, but rather because it invites suspension of disbelief. Much later in the poem Don Juan returns to this theme, and again praises the mode of the fair, which he calls “honest cheating” (lxxxvii). The fair is seductive to the extent that it puts on a deliberate performance, and, like any stage show, it is successful only to the extent that its deliberate falseness is perceived but disregarded for the duration of the performance (“Wherein but there can be the attraction” [lxxxv]). Just as actors “feign” and so get “grace” (lxxv), so also the audience also pretends and enjoys the performance. (There is, more than likely, also a pun on the meaning of getting “grace” in this lyric, insofar as grace is a form of reference for a duke.)

Fifine’s seductive appeal is precisely as Baudrillard characterises the appeal of the feminine, a display of visual finery that displays the female body of masculine scopophilic fantasy, or that exploits the male “taste . . . for things external” (xxviii). In xxxi-xxxii Don Juan “decompose[s]” Fifine’s attributes and, from them, explains her value or “one appeal” to him. In xxxi, Fifine reverses social values, when she “puts in evidence” and “displays” the signs of sexual experience that make her a “Pariah” in the eyes of society’s ladies. (Browning’s line “you must not think she winced at prick as we” contains a vulgarity that makes it particularly amusing today!) Her strategy is to attract the male gaze: “I call attention to my dress” (xxxii). It works: in xi Don Juan lingered over Fifine’s “each muscle . . . each vein” exposed to view as she performed her trapeze act and in xxxii he refers to her “lithe memorable limbs”. Certainly the men respond to Fifine with “mouth, eyes, one gape and stare” (xi). (Don Juan,

as an artist, certainly understands this obsession; when he makes his putative offer to the vendor he promises to provide the vendor's women with "as multiplied a coating as protects / An onion from the eye" [xii]). The Don concludes his description with Fifine's approach to Elvire and him: "here she fronts us full". The ambiguous "fronts" can be read both as a contraction of confronts, indicating Fifine's challenge to the Don and Elvire, and as a reference to Fifine's being composed essentially of only a 'front', or appearance. (Later, in xxiii Don Juan will enjoin Elvire to "confront" herself through his device of the phantom Elvire, with which he hopes to destabilise her self-image, and to seduce her into either attacking or becoming her phantom self.)

Fifine "call[s] attention" to her debauched appearance and "all that eye-glance over-skims" because she trades only in externals: "know all of me outside" (xxxii). In this respect, Don Juan says, she is like her tambourine, "sound hollow: mere smooth skin / Stretched o'er gilt framework" (a simulation of an artist's canvas stretched over its frame, perhaps). The value of Fifine, however, is that she may be purchased then abandoned: she appears to be a seductress, an exotic erotic fantasy woman, but she represents no real threat to male autonomy. She is an appearance of free sexuality, but is in fact a token in a masculine economy of exchange, who may be purchased for "five sous" (xi), and thus become an "instrument" (xxxii) for someone else's tune. Fifine, in these terms, is an effigy of an effigy, or an appearance of an appearance and Don Juan perceives her as the effaced power of the feminine (effaced because he is able to "decompose" her surface meaning). As such she contrasts with the other seductresses of the Don's pageant, whose seductions are in deadly earnest. These "women-worthies", Helen, Cleopatra and the Saint, use their seductive finery to ensnare and destroy men. In xxx a "happy angle makes Fifine reverberate / Sunshine", in contrast to the glittering devices carried by the other phantom women: Helen's "adamantine shield", Cleopatra's "Asian mirror" and the Saint's "tinted pane of oriel sanctity". These feminine devices "absorb [and] regorge", "fix [and] tame" and make "[pale and] meek" the sun, the figurative Don, in contrast to Fifine's capacity to

simply reflect it/him. (In lxxi he returns to this image: “you shall play the sun, and he, the satellite”.) The implicit subtext of these mirrors is the mirror of Medusa, the feminine mirror that seduces the male gaze and turns men to stone.

Don Juan’s strategy of seduction (worked on Elvire) is to ensnare her in *his* vision: “See yourself in my soul!” (liii), he says. To this end he offers her a number of images to identify with: the phantom Elvire (xx-xxiii, xxx-xxxiii, xxxviii-xxxix, liii), the Rafael (xxxv-xxxvi), a rillet (lxxiii-lxxiv), a dolphin (lxxviii), and the sea and land (cxxix-cxxx). All of these images are characterised by selflessness; thus, they are his refractions of the value Fifine represents for him, a person who has no self to be taken into account.<sup>9</sup> Were Elvire to identify with any of these images, the resultant “self-vindicating flash” [xxix] would vindicate not her, but Don Juan. As the Don says, “Elvire / I seize - by catching at Fifine!” (lxviii). (Don Juan ‘seduces’ Fifine by means of a different strategy: he offers her not the five sous suggested to be her asking price, but a “whole franc”. He appeals to the fair-folks’ desire to cheat the town-folk by appearing himself to be an easy mark “just to foil suspicious folk” [cxxxii].)

The power of the feminine is appearance; Don Juan neutralises (in Baudrillard’s term) Elvire’s feminine power by producing an illusion of an appearance of her. First, Don Juan compares Fifine to a lily (xvii) and Elvire to a rose (xviii). With these identifications he reverses the symbols’ customary sexual associations (lily with purity and rose with sexual passion), thus mixing up the signs. However, in his description of the phantom Elvire, she becomes the lily, which is here associated with purity (“with folds and flowings virginal” [xxxviii]). The example illustrates the Don’s adept or duplicitous manipulation of symbols, such that they come to represent whatever it is he wants them to represent. Using the imaginary pageant and the lily image, Don Juan figuratively unites Fifine and Elvire in defiance of the social convention that separates them in real life (as referred to in xxiv). The point, surely, is not that Fifine and Elvire are sexual and social opposites, but are part of the same continuity of the

feminine as perceived by the vampiric Don, for whom they are all a “slow sure supply of the effluent soul within” (xxxix).

Don Juan’s association of Elvire with the Raphael (which must surely remind us of another Browning Duke and *his* art collection), declaredly intended to stress her worth to him, in fact duplicates his strategy of the pageant. This time, the association between Elvire and Fifine occurs through the reduction of woman to artwork: Elvire is Raphael and Fifine is Doré, but both signify as part of the whole collection of artwork in his gallery, including “sketch or scrap, pochade, caricature” (xxxvi). As artwork, moreover, Elvire, like Fifine in the early lyrics, is merely a symbol of monetary exchange: if Elvire identifies herself with the Raphael she would then be submitting to being an object of exchange (a “prize”) in a masculine economy comprised of Don and Prince. Four times in xxxv, the Don refers to the “Prince”, the capitalising rendering an appearance of personification; the Prince *is* a person, but the punctuation reduces him to a caricature of a role or identity rather than a specific individual, in much the same way the fair-folk are reduced to personae. The Don’s negotiations with the prince for the purchase of the Raphael parallel the Don’s negotiations with Fifine’s husband for the purchase of her, and his comment about “[g]loating o’er [his] gain” reprises the husband’s allusion to Fifine and the “gain o’ the ape” in xxv. The distinction between the Don and the Strongman devolves merely on the stakes involved in the contest. Moreover, we are left with the impression that much of the value of his particular gain lies, for the Don, in his expertise in acquiring the painting — his figurative “thrust / I’ the vitals of the Prince”, which parallels the fair-folks’ glee at cheating the town-folk.

Don Juan claims “Women grow you” (lxxi), but the metaphor of the rillet also illustrates that this growth occurs at the expense of the woman’s individual identity: “the feminine / Rillet . . . Goes headlong to her death i’ the sea” (lxxiv). The Don confesses that he preys on women (“from Fifine to Elvire” [lxxiv]) by manipulating them into sacrificing themselves for his

own aggrandizement — comprised of his expanding collection of “victories . . . stored up and guaranteed [his] own / Forever” (lv). The meaning of the Don’s allusion to Arion and the dolphin is that it is entirely proper and natural that women sacrifice themselves to men’s aesthetic designs (women are characterised by their “one proud humility of love”). Fifine and Elvire are linked in this section by the repetitive imagery: “frisk” and “phosphorescent” used in xxxiii to characterise Fifine, are used here to characterise dolphins/Elvire. The example of Arion is represented as a permissible sacrifice: masculine art (Arion is a poet) is erected on feminine selflessness (“some exquisite sea-thing / Will surely rise to save” [lxxviii]).<sup>10</sup>

The success of Don Juan’s ‘seduction’ of Elvire may be measured by several factors. First, does she identify with any of the images he offers her? Subsequent to his comparison of her with the Raphael he comments, “[f]or which I get the eye, the hand, the whole / O’ the wondrous wife again!” (xxxvii). However, he returns to the imaginary pageant with not quite so much success. For instance, in xl, Elvire undercuts the Don’s flamboyant description of her phantom with the wry and bathetic question:

‘And where i’ the world is all  
This wonder, you detail so trippingly, espied?  
My mirror would reflect a tall, thin, pale, deep-eyed  
Personage, pretty once, it may be, doubtless still  
Loving, — a certain grace yet lingers, if you will, —  
But all this wonder, where?

Particularly important, I feel, is Elvire’s suggestive use of the phrase “my mirror”, linking back to the mirror images of the women in the pageant, which indicates that she does not depend on the Don for her self-image or her sense of identity, and that she has not been seduced by the ‘mirror’ he has held up to her (“See yourself in my soul!” [liii]). Furthermore, in lx she offers a lengthy critique of his arguments to that stage, turning several of his images back on him (for instance, “Oh, the loyal bee endeavours for the hive! / Disinterested hunts the flower-field through”), ending with

another question: “Who is it you deceive — / Yourself or me or God, with all this make-believe?”. Clearly it is not she, and she is not willing to play compliant audience to his performance. And, again, in lxxxii, she observes that the Don has argued (xliiii-xliv) for each soul a supplementary “Best” that defies his claim for unceasing accumulation. And near the poem’s end the Don seems to acknowledge defeat too: “[t]he wanderer brings home no profit from his quest / Beyond the sad surmise that keeping house were best” (cxxxix). (In fact, these words seem to concede to Elvire’s rebuke in lx.)

However, the Don’s success might also be measured in terms of Elvire’s engagement with his efforts, which might indicate that she has been, however unwillingly, seduced by his stratagems and arguments. For instance, Don Juan has provided Elvire the opportunity to rescue him from an inunoral liaison with Fifine and that she has been seduced by this possibility is permitted by lxxviii, where he observes that the encounter with Fifine had prompted a change in direction. There is thus, in lxxviii, a certain ambiguity in his comment that their discussion has resulted in “evidence [of] / The cultivated mind in both”; but who has been cultivating whom? In xv he asks Elvire, “[w]hy are we two at once such ocean-width apart?” The “ocean-width” refers back to the image of the sea in the Prologue, which provides “noon disport” (xvi) and “exempt[ion]” (xi) from the mundane cares of the world. It also looks back to the “ocean-idleness” of v, which separates the fair-folk from their home far away from “world and world’s annoy”. Throughout the poem “ocean” is used as a sustained metaphor for the psychic distance between Don Juan and Elvire. However, in lxxxii, Elvire takes up Don Juan’s metaphor when she describes herself and Fifine as types of boat: “And good Elvire is moored . . . [while] here’s a cockle-shell, / Fifine”. Elvire’s rebuttal here thus depends on the Don’s metaphorical schema of the ocean and, by characterising both herself and Fifine as types of boats, she concedes to his broader design of characterising all women in similar terms. Thus Don Juan announces with both glee and disappointment, “Thanks therefore to Fifine! Elvire I’m back



with you!” (bxxxiii). (The subsequent lyric, discussed later in this Chapter, thus represents another denouement.)

### Dreadful Games

In his artistic model the Don speaks of the passive material (which is “inert . . . stuff for transmuting” [lv]) and the active artist (“in the seeing soul, all worth lies” [lv]); when the material concerned consists of people the artistic analogy discloses violence. The Kierkegaardian opposition between aesthetics and ethics devolves upon the depersonalisation of the other when the other is treated merely as material for (someone else’s) aesthetic purposes, and no consideration is given to the freedom of the other (for instance, the other’s freedom to play or not to play is compromised when they are played with without their knowledge). Aestheticism, or seduction, involves an abuse of power when not all of the participants apprehend that a game is being played, when not all are privy to the rules of the game, and when not all understand the stakes involved. The players are thus disproportionately matched, and the sacrificial aspect of the game predominates. These are the features that characterise “dreadful games”.

The opening words of the poem proper, “O trip and skip, Elvire!” suggest the visit to the Pornic Fair is a form of play or amusement, destined to engender harmony between the couple (also suggested by the phrase “like husband and like wife”). However, the evocation of play is merely a front for the dreadful game that ensues (in which case “trip” takes on more sinister connotations). Don Juan’s overt declarations of his playful and harmonious intent are undermined at every turn by his reference to the ethos of conflict and contestation that underlies each example. His language continually adverts to power and influence, and particularly to his own power and influence. For instance, the play of the body that occurs in the swimming analogy, begins with carefree relaxation (“So, all of me in brine lay soaking: did I care / One jot?” [lxv]), but is turned into a contest, characterised by such terms as “strife”, “resist”, “beat against”, “snatch and

gain" (lxv) and "capture and control" (lxvii). The analogy of the swim goes to the Don's relations with others, whom he characterises as "the wash of the world" (lxvii) and whom he makes "bound acknowledge" (lxvii) him. In the process the Don actualises himself as "firm and true" while all others are reduced to "false fluidity" (lxvii).

Don Juan uses a preponderance of martial imagery. For instance, the pageant of women is quickly transformed from an amusing spectacle to an aggressive contest, in which the phantom Elvire is enjoined to "confront" (xxiii), "prove the best of" (xxiii), "beat" (xxiii), "wage successful warfare" (xxxiii), and advance her claim to predominance over the other phantoms. Even the encounter of "soul" with "soul" is described as conflict: "the soul strives" (lv) and "tries conclusions with" (lv; an echo of the Jove image in xxvii), and the accumulated gains are "victories" (lv). The Don's description of his perception of and interaction with the Venice dream fair (his analogy for the whole world) is also overtly militaristic:

Force, guile, were arms which earned  
My praise, not blame at all: for we must learn to live,  
Case-hardened at all points, not bare and sensitive,  
But plated for defence, nay, furnished for attack,  
With spikes at the due place, that neither front nor back  
May suffer in that squeeze with nature, we find — life. (ci)

Apart from the martial imagery, the Don also explicitly uses the language of games. The Don's 'life as game' analogy (Morrow argues such analogising serves to disguise the harmful consequences of dreadful games) is set up as early as the epigraph to the poem, a few lines from Moliere's *Don Juan* and Browning's translation of them. In the epigraph Elvire observes, "Fie, for a man of mode, accustomed at the court / To such a style of thing, how awkwardly my lord / Attempts defence!" The word 'defence' here specifically frames the encounter between the Don and Elvire in terms suggesting contest and conflict. This epigraph is well evoked in the poem proper when the Don characterises their interaction in very similar terms: "You waste your quarte and tierce, / Lunge at a

phantom here, try fence in fairy-land” (xvi). This ‘riposte’, which combines the language of card-games and fencing, also draws attention to the stylized nature of game interactions and their inherent elements of make-believe (features which they share with pageantry).

Don Juan also discloses the antagonistic underbelly of the Pomnic Fair through imagery of games (i-xvii and lxxxv-lxxxvi). The fair involves not only the idea of a pageant, as observed by Slinn, but also five discreet (although functionally interdependent) aspects of games and game-playing: construction or provision of a gaming space (such as a board or field); suspension of the usual operating laws within that space; submission to specific, limited and limiting rules and restraints on player behaviour; adoption of temporary roles or identities; and an attitude of contest and competition (accompanied by the desire to win and/or beat one’s opponent).<sup>11</sup> The fair is distinct from the town and is marked by delineating borders that construct a physical space dominated by “an airy structure” (v). The Pomnic Fair-folk symbolise “lawlessness” (vi); having “cast allegiance off” (vii) they are “estranged” (viii) from society to the extent they “have and use / The hour what way they will” (vi) and “all we hold so dear they count so cheap” (x). Within their own society, however, the fair-folk follow certain rules to ensure their survival, best represented by the Don’s characterisation of Fifine as “self-sustainment made morality” (xvi): the first rule of any game is ‘stay alive’, for only then may one continue to play. Finally, the playful appearance of the fair and its inhabitants is discerned by the Don to be a strategy in a competitive game where the desired end is a kind of victory rather than mere survival. The Don observes that the fair-folk love to “play . . . a prank” (ii), “steal a march” and “risk the lure” (iii); their gains are “filched” (ix) all “at somebody’s expense” (vii). These images are consistent with an underlying ethos of contestation or competition (at the expense of, say, harmonious or fair trade) and even suggest that cheating is an acceptable strategy if it ensures profit (one of the Don’s most frequently used words is “gain”). Don Juan suggests that the game played by the fair-folk is not in itself a dreadful game, because their desire to cheat is known, or could be

known, to all who 'play' with them; the possibility, or indeed probability, of its being a dreadful game resides in its victims' not knowing that they are playing a game, or being played with, and therefore not having freely chosen to play.

Perhaps the most sinister allusion to games comes in xxvii, where Don Juan appropriates the Euripidean myth of the phantom Helen (from the play of the same name) to justify his construction of a phantom Elvire:

This creature, Helen's self, never saw Troy at all.  
 Jove had his fancy-fit, must needs take empty air,  
 Fashion her likeness forth, and set the phantom there  
 I' the midst for sport, to try conclusions with the blind  
 And blundering race, the game created for Gods, mankind:

This analogy serves several functions. First, the Don's analogy of himself with Jove, coming on top of his earlier association of himself with "Louis Onze" (xix), reinforces his grandiosity and indicates his self-perception of himself as master of the game. Second, the construction of phantoms disguises (or neutralises) Don Juan's juxtaposition of Elvire and Fifine in the same the way the analogy of life as game disguises the real and harmful consequences of 'the game' for others (as, for instance, Jove's "sport" takes no account of the loss of human life at Troy). The literary connotations of his analogy also tend to have the same effect by characterising the strategy as art. Thirdly, the analogy discloses Don Juan's intention to "try conclusions" with Elvire. Finally, the Gods of Greek literature were often symbols for the element of chance in human affairs. Don Juan's evocation of chance on the one hand disguises the degree of deliberate manipulation underlying his apparently unplanned promenade with Elvire; on the other hand it indicates his fascination with chance, uncertainty and risk.

Don Juan is vain: he wants not only to win his games, but also to win with flair and style (that is, artistically). In lxxv-lxxx the Don proposes that different modes of behaviour and speech must be deployed in variously

influencing, dealing with, leading and ruling men and women. He proposes in lxxv that one deals most effectively with men by making oneself “one of themselves and not creation’s upstart lord!” (lxxv). This strategy is aptly exemplified in the Don’s dealing with the fair-folk (who would curse attempted patronage in xii) and in his contempt for the (phantom) preaching Cure (in cxxiii). He claims that the “way to take with men you wish to lead” (lxxvii) is to appear to follow “the general mind” (lxxvi). That is, the Don proposes that in order to influence men one must sink to their level and thus rule them through and in disguise. He continues,

. . . But you have to deal with womankind?  
Abandon stratagem for strategy! (lxxvi)

Don Juan’s “strategy” for dealing with womankind even designates the correct posture: “swell out your frog the right ox-size” (lxxvi). (Although Don Juan observed in xxv that Ffine “prefers sheer strength to ineffective grace, / Breeding and culture!” there is no real inconsistency here because the “right” size obviously depends on the individual or type of woman being dealt with.) The difference between “stratagem” and “strategy” is not simply quantitative, but is also qualitative. While one device and one tone, that of appearing ‘one of the boys’, is sufficient to deal with men, dealing with women requires not only multiple strategies but also a different attitude, one that might be defined as an attitude of general-ship. General-ship requires not only tactical mastery, but also the *display* of virtuosity and finesse. While the martial connotations of the term “strategy” disclose the Don’s disguise of the game as play, the idea of display also designates his game as an artistic endeavour.

While a war may be concluded, each of the Don’s victories simply clears the way for another contest; “life” itself becomes simply a “battle without end” (liv). It is apparent that that Don’s analogy of life to contest is in itself both a motivation behind his actions and a source of ongoing conflict between himself and Elvire. The Don’s reiterated use of the word

“gain” aligns him with the Pornic fair-folk, of whom he says in vii, “our pearl picked from your rubbish-heap. / You care not for your loss, we calculate our gain”. The Don too is on a circuit in pursuit of ever more gains, each affording him but a momentary pleasure (his “fortnight . . . In Paradise” [xxxv] akin to the fair-folks’ “relish” [vii] at their gains); nevertheless, in the end, “promotion proves as well / Defeat” (cxxviii).

### Conclusion

Kierkegaard’s seducer speaks of a “sadness which darkens like a veil of mist deceptively over the manly strength, [that] is one of the things contributing to the masculine erotic” (363). For the seducer, the sadness is an effect set in motion by his infallibility and it comes to fruition with each victory. Each campaign, once begun, moves inexorably towards its end, and then “it is over” (363). A little of this sadness is disclosed at the poem’s midpoint. As the couple pass the village and approach the beach, Don Juan seems to experience a climactic moment:

For this is just the time,  
The place, the mood in you and me, when all things chime.  
Clash forth life’s common chord, whence, list how there ascend  
Harmonics far and faint, till our perception end, —  
Reverberated notes whence we construct the scale  
Embracing what we know and feel and are! (lxii)

However, although the visit to the Pornic Fair is over — “here’s the beach” (lxiii) — the promenade, and life, and the contest, and desire go on. Don Juan’s averred freedom is restricted to repeating a recurring cycle, within a lifetime that is characterised by a temporal structure that frustrates his capacity to reach a final, conclusive epiphany, to end on a high note:

Though you refuse to speak, your beating heart, my friend,  
I feel against my arm, — though your bent head forbids  
A look into your eyes, yet, on my cheek, their lids  
That ope and shut, soft send a silken thrill the same.  
Well, out of all and each these nothings, comes — what came  
Often enough before, the something that would aim

Once more at the old mark: the impulse to at last  
 Succeed where hitherto was failure in the past,  
 And yet again essay the adventure. (lxiii)

Each climax is sacrificed (like the “feminine rillet” of lxxiv) to the ongoing “adventure”; life is no more than the questionable pursuit of “happy moments”, whose interest lies in the obtaining rather than the accumulation:

How quickly night comes! . . .  
 .....  
 [Land and ocean] both retire, as if their part  
 Were played, another force were free to prove her art,  
 Protagonist in turn! Are you untterrified?  
 All false, all fleeting too! And nowhere things abide,  
 And everywhere we strain that things should stay — (lxxxiv)

Don Juan is never ready to leave the stage, nor to let another play protagonist or artist. The relentlessness of the process is more than adequately exemplified by the circular nature of the Don’s promenade, and by his fleeing from the door of his home once he reaches it (cxxxii). Accordingly, the most apposite emblem for Don Juan himself is the flag at Pomie Fair, “the pennon from its dome, / Frenetic to be free, makes one red stretch for home” (v). (The phrase “frenetic to be free” is repeated in the next lyric, emphasising its significance.) The flag, like Don Juan, is characterised by ceaseless motion (it flutters), but also stasis (it goes nowhere). The phrase applied to Don Juan expresses two meanings at once: first, it describes his desperation to be free, second, it describes his freedom as freneticism. Like the flag, Don Juan cannot be still or reach his home; he can only flap in the winds of his desire.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> References are to lyric number.

<sup>2</sup> McGhee's reference to the carnival evokes the Bakhtinian conception of the carnival as an emblem for heteroglossia, and thus as a mode of resistance to the univocalist tendency of the dominant discourse. Don Juan's comments about the relationship of carnival to town, and his admiration for the fair-folk's capacity to undermine law and propriety, suggest the disruptive function of the carnival in a Bakhtinian fashion; however, the representation of the carnival is predominantly a strategy in the Don's pursuit of discursive domination, rather than a properly dialogic instance as the carnival does not represent itself, but it is co-opted by the Don to his own ends. We should also remember that Bakhtin specifically called poems univocal texts, insofar as they are characterised and unified by the authority of the author as a man of singular vision. The Victorian dramatic monologue both epitomises and challenges (as Bakhtin claims the novel does) this formulation of poetry, because it so plainly represents a subject in terms of agenda and interest, thereby highlighting both the discursive context and the partial viewpoint.

<sup>3</sup> As this thesis has shown, interpretation of Victorian poetry is often constructed with reference to some or other theoretical dualism. For Ryals it is *eros* and *agape*; for McGhee it is desire and duty. In the case of Fifine at the Fair the latter dualism is given both a Kierkegaardian twist as aesthetics and ethics and a Bakhtinian flavour as carnival and prison. The psychoanalytic correlate to these dualisms is Freud's nature/culture opposition (he says, "[c]ivilisation is the fruit of renunciation of instinctual satisfaction" [1915/1958 215]).

<sup>4</sup> In the same article Armstrong also discusses these issues in Patmore's The Angel in the House.



<sup>5</sup> W. David Shaw, like McGhee and Marlon B. Ross (1989 196-220), uses Søren Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical stages as heuristic paradigms or "scaffolding" for his analysis of Browning's "dialectical temper", while noting that there is no evidence that Browning was familiar with Kierkegaard's work (62-63; nevertheless, there are striking similarities between Kierkegaard's seducer and Browning's Don Juan, as well as thematic and symbolic crossovers between the two texts.) It is unfortunate that Shaw does not discuss Fifine at the Fair, as Shaw's Kierkegaardian formulation of rhetoric at the aesthetic stage (pp. 65-113) highlights many of the processes, pleasures and pitfalls apparent in the Don's monologue. For instance, in his readings of other aesthetically-inclined Browning monologues, Shaw describes an aesthete's "bondage to his senses" (79), his "comic extravagance" (88), his construction of enigmas "designed to satisfy the pleasure of deciphering" (89), his "ceremonious posturing, play acting and verbal artifice" (94), his "boredom [which arises from] an excess of make-believe" (112) and his "closed cycle of frustrated passion" (113). Shaw proposes that "the inner limitation of the aesthetic stage is boredom or despair" (63).

<sup>6</sup> Don Juan's reference here, and to his collection of artworks (xxxv-xxxvi, li-lviii), and the hypothetical speech by the phantom Fifine as Elvire (xxxiii) perfectly illustrate the notion of boredom due to accommodation, which is the idea that a stimulus loses potency when the subject becomes habituated to it through repetition. The concept of accommodation was generalised from anatomical sciences (in particular from analysis of nerve excitation) to the evolving psychological sciences during the Victorian period. See Herbert Spencer, 1881.

<sup>7</sup> In The Angel in the House Felix Vaughan writes to Honor:

'Your graces, which have made me great,  
'Will I so loftily admire,  
'Yourself yourself shall emulate,

'And be yourself your own desire.  
 'I'll nobly mirror you too fair,  
 'And, when you're false to me your glass,  
 'What's wanting you'll by that repair,  
 'So bring yourself through me to pass. (II.vi.1)

Vaughan's declared intention is to reflect his idealised vision of Honor to her, for her to imitate. He desires to change her into his fantasy of her, but his tactic is strategically passive. Thus the real Honor becomes a "false" Honor, and his fantasy image becomes the reality she must attain, by changing herself to match it more closely.

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard also discusses transvestism as a parodic emphasising of sexual identity that discloses femininity as nothing more than the "signs with which men rig it up" (14).

<sup>9</sup> Isobel Armstrong also notes Don Juan's tendency to "polarize" Elvire and Fifine, arguing that his reduction of them to sexual stereotypes enhances his sense of power over them. As I argued in Chapter Four, in the discussion of mother as object, the apparently polarised female images (whore/angel) serve the identical function structurally. The same effect is operating in this poem. The Don's descriptions of Fifine and Elvire are overtly contrasting, but covertly continuous. For instance, where Fifine is lily, Elvire is rose (they are both flowers); where Fifine is Dore, Elvire is Rafael (they are both artworks, conceived of as possessions); where Fifine is for a moment, Elvire is forever (their time belongs to him); where Fifine is all exterior (xxx1), Elvire is "the eye, the hand, the whole" (they are collections of parts).

<sup>10</sup> Arion is an apposite example for the Don, because he represents artistic (poetic) not merely tactical mastery. However, the Don's use of this example is ambiguous, as he has suppressed an alternative version of the Arion legend, which has him not "fearlessly" leaping into the sea, but being thrown overboard by his crewmates, weary of his prolixity!

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<sup>11</sup> This list is my own, but an excellent summary of game theories is available in Morrow, pp. 1-21.

## SECTION FOUR

## DESIRE AND SATISFACTION

This section contains a reading of George Meredith's Modem Love (1862), and it addresses the topic of desire and satisfaction.

Desire has been seen thus far to involve three kinds of experience: heightened self-consciousness and self-examination; realisation of a self-conception within discourse; and use of behaviours and strategies designed to realise the desiring subject's desired ends. Within the discussion of these experiences as they are dramatised in individual poems, desire's satisfaction has had diverse meanings. In Sonnets from the Portuguese the experience of romantic desire engendered a sense of self-fragmentation and identity-loss; the protagonist's desire's satisfaction meant the development and internalisation of a new identity, self as lover. In The Angel in the House Felix Vaughan's satisfaction comprised two elements: obtaining a mutually enjoyed sexual relationship with Honor, and writing a poem about it. In Mother and Daughter the protagonist desired to express and intensify her maternal passion; the realisation of a maternal speaking subject disclosed the processes by which this might be obtained (that is through speech and writing). In Amours de Voyage Claude's desire involved constructing a script of desire disclosed in his letters to Eustace; his desire's satisfaction meant enacting then recounting that narrative. In Idylls of the King Geraint adopted an Arthurian prescription of desire, a way of thinking about and conducting courtship and marriage; his desire's satisfaction was achieved in accepting and internalising this model. Finally, in Fifine at the Fair, Don Juan's juxtaposition of unlike elements was a design for an amusing diversion; his desire's satisfaction was achieved through the enlivening and enjoyable effects of realising his design.

However, none of these outcomes, no matter how pleasing to their

protagonists, extinguished desire (although that was not necessarily their aim). In Sonnets from the Portuguese the protagonist's newly developed self-conception (self as lover), once achieved, became a means of pursuing a different desire (that of forming a relationship with her beloved). Claude, in Amours de Voyage, headed off to Egypt. In Fifine at the Fair Robert Browning's structure of apparent climax mid-poem (in lxii), followed by a lengthy denouement, suggested even more strongly the elusive nature of desire's satisfaction. These poems showed that while  $a$  desire for something might be extinguished and/or satisfied, desire itself endures, either as a "forward-reaching restless life-force", as Annette Baiers described it (in Marks 58), or as an ontological condition that defines subjectivity in Lacanian terms. An alternative formulation of these different modes of desire is unconscious desire and conscious desire. Fuery (1995 22) describes the relationship between these modes when he proposes that under the Lacanian formulation desire, by which Lacan means the desire of the Other or unconscious desire, is mediated or deployed through the pursuit of achievable desires, which Lacan terms *objets petit á*. The pursuit of conscious desires is organised by unconscious desire, but conscious desire never attains anything other than a substitutive outcome for unconscious desire.<sup>1</sup>

If it is granted that there persists throughout an individual's life a mode of unsatisfiable desire (which might be termed unconscious desire or desire of the Other), and that, moreover, the subject is conscious of this mode and its unsatisfiability, he might adopt a variety of dispositions towards that contingency of being. As I discussed in Chapter One, there is a range of dispositional attitudes towards illimitable desire within different theoretical discourses of desire. For instance, for Jacques Lacan the desire of the Other is characterised tragically as "the pathos of the postoeidial subject" (in Butler 192). By contrast, Jacques Deleuze derives a Spinozan delight in the subject's capacity for being affected — in Deleuzian terms the subject's capacity for producing multiplicities and intensities — by and in his ongoing engagements with the world's alterity (see Butler 212). The

poems in this study have also evinced a range of dispositions towards illimitable desire. Claude, in Amours de Voyage, characterises his subjection to desire as tyrannous when he speaks of his wish to “eliminate . . . [t]his vile hungering impulse, this demon within us of craving” (III.viii.178-79). In Fifine at the Fair, however, Don Juan speaks in epicurean metaphors of abundant gains: “all the glints and gleams . . . pass into the soul itself, add worth to worth, / As wine enriches blood” (liv); and, “[j]ust so I glut / My hunger both to be and know the thing I am” (ciii). Don Juan, even while not being full enough, can never be too full. Thus, at these points in the poems, the infinitude of desire appals Claude while it delights Don Juan.

The poem that opened this study, Sonnets from the Portuguese, dramatised an identity fragmenting under the influence of an exceptional desire, then reforming with a new sense of purpose and self. Modern Love, the poem that will close this study, also dramatises an individual’s fragmentation; there is, however, no optimistic renewal. Modern Love renders a finely detailed portrait of unstable desires, which coheres and fractures around the protagonist’s desire for his wife. He wants to know: he acts in ways that prevent him from knowing. He wants morality to be black and white: his own behaviour undermines such a formulation. He wants his wife: he spurns her. He wants to save his marriage: he commits adultery. As I will show in the following chapter, Modern Love begs the question of what satisfaction there can be for desires, conscious or unconscious, that are so mutable, contradictory and incoherent.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In The Theory of Absence Fuery offers another formulation: “pleasure, no matter in which way it is developed, is ephemeral whilst desire is atemporal” (1995a 37).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

MODERN LOVE: "THE EYE, THE HAND, THE HEART, THE WHOLE  
/ O' THE WONDROUS WIFE"Introduction and Background

Modern Love, George Meredith's 1862 sequence of fifty sixteen-line 'sonnets', has received extensive commentary, a fact that attests to both the poem's importance within the Victorian canon and its fascinating complexity.<sup>1</sup> The poem describes a husband's responses to his belief that his wife is having an affair, the husband's own retaliatory affair, the couple's unsuccessful attempt to reconcile, and the wife's subsequent suicide. The poem reads like a frantic diary, recording the husband's swift mood changes and designs, as he adopts one after another interpretation of events, and strategy after strategy for responding to them.

Modern Love has predominantly been read as a representation of a dead or dying marriage. For instance, Patricia Ball says, "a disintegrating relationship is the subject, and it is a process whose stages must be traced" (1976 108), while Wendell Stacy Johnson says, "although adultery enters into the story, as both husband and wife turn to others for sexual and emotional release, it is evident that this is a symptom and not the cause of their marriage's having failed" (1975 51). Rod Edmond, however, reads the poem as both a comment on Meredith's own unhappy marriage and as "a critique of the institution which [had] come to define and distort love and sexuality" (1988 209), which he later calls "the hellish closed circle of bourgeois marriage" (211). Kerry McSweeney reads the poem as Meredith's attempt to describe the need in marriage for a "new kind of post-romantic love", by which McSweeney means companionate love, which is to be the basis of a mutually satisfying marriage (1998 111). According to McSweeney, Modern Love (as a whole) illustrates that the chief obstacle to successful marriage (or the chief cause of marital disappointment) is a



sentimental attachment to the notion that “love has a lasting spiritual dimension” (101) that renders it immune to the vicissitudes of time and circumstance. If the subtext to Johnson’s and McSweeney’s comments is that adultery will not penetrate the confines of a well-shored up and happy marriage, the implication of Edmond’s reading is that, given the horrors of Victorian matrimony, it is surprising there wasn’t rather more adultery.<sup>2</sup>

Needless to say, because of the very definition of adultery as extra-marital sex, a poem about adultery is also a poem about marriage. However, a limitation of these readings is that, while they examine the topography of Victorian marriage as it is represented in the poem very closely, they do not contextualise the poem within other Victorian discourses of adultery. In recent years a great deal of work has been done on representations of adultery in nineteenth-century novels, and on a sub-category of that subject, representations of ‘fallen women’ in both novels and poetry. A brief glance through the poetry of the period discloses a similar fascination with adultery that has not been so thoroughly discussed in the critical literature. However, aside from the desire to explore this critical black hole, I am also interested in the translation of the locus of desire from the adulterous subject to the betrayed husband in Modern Love. As far as adultery is concerned, the privileged literary subject of desire has typically been the adulterer or adulteress him or herself. Not only has the adulterer been the central character in this drama, he or she is the represented character who desires the most passionately, who feels the most intensely, and who risks the most. (For instance, in Idylls of the King it is Guinevere and Lancelot who are characterised by their passionate attraction to each other, while Arthur is described by Guinevere as “cold” and “passionless”.) Modern Love inverts this model, disclosing little about the passions and desires of the adulterous wife, but rather focusing on the passions and desires of the husband. In the reading that follows, I will first describe some representations of adultery found in other Victorian poems, then I will trace several reiterated motifs or symbols the husband seizes upon as he responds to his wife’s adultery. These disjointed symbols (such as her eyes, her hand, her heart) become fetishist objects of

the husband's desire, and also of his loathing as, each sought and obtained in turn, fails to provide him any real satisfaction.

### The Contours of Adultery in Victorian Poetry and Modern Analysis

Adultery is central to the narrative of one poem already discussed in this study, Tennyson's Idylls of the King. The adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere follows the general rule of nineteenth-century adulterous literature that adultery never ends well for the culpable participants. Modred's exposure of the pair is followed by Guinevere's escape to the convent, the location of a scene containing Arthur's denunciation and repudiation of his wife as she grovels at his feet (in "Guinevere"). Looking down at her, Arthur says:

For think not, tho' thou wouldst not love thy lord,  
Thy lord has wholly lost his love for thee.  
I am not made of so slight elements.  
Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.  
I hold that man the worst of public foes  
Who either for his own or children's sake,  
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife  
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house:

.....  
Worst of worst were that man he that reigns!

("Guinevere" 505-520)

Arthur's language of shame, scandal and falseness highlights the moral and social context of adultery in that poem; his confession of love does no more than suggest his personal pain.

Adultery is frequently represented in scenes and images that, like the one above, symbolise not only fragmenting marriages but also fragmenting selves. In the scene above, Arthur is split between personal desire for his wife (he still loves her) and his desire for social stability (achieved through the power of the vow to organise and uphold social relations); his internal fracture is reinforced by the staging of the scene, in which Guinevere lies prone while Arthur stands, and in the inability of the actors to see each

other's faces (which effects a fracture in the symbol of the look of desire). Earlier in the same poem, Geraint's perception of Enid's unfaithfulness ("I fear that I am no true wife" [MG 108]) results in two conflicting impulses in Geraint: the desire to punish her (he "felt that tempest brooding [which] would break perforce / Upon a head so dear" [GE 11-13]), and the desire to forgive her ("ruth began to work [and] he fain had spoken to her" [GE 101-105]). Although I have read these two idylls in the context of the Arthurian model of desire rather than as psychological odysseys, the frequent, violent encounters of this journey mirror Geraint's internal conflicts, as does his symbolic sundering of his marriage through positioning Enid ahead of him and requiring her not to speak. In a compassionate treatment of what could be called accidental adultery, Tennyson's poem Enoch Arden, Enoch is presented standing outside his former home, gazing through the window at his wife and her new husband. Enoch faces the stark choice between revealing his return from 'death', thereby exposing his wife to public humiliation and shame as her bigamy is revealed, and concealing himself, thereby denying himself any chance of re-uniting with his longed-for wife. As with Arthur, Enoch is split between his personal desires and the social context in which he finds himself (paradoxically staged as *his* exclusion from domestic culture), a culture that takes a black and white view of women who 'fall'.

Although Fifine at the Fair contains no obvious moral judgement on adultery, aside from suggesting the unpleasant repercussions it can have on domestic harmony, Robert Browning frequently took a more murderous approach to suggestions of adultery, and dramatised the ultimate externalised split. For instance in both "A Forgiveness" and "My Last Duchess" the wife's adultery, or inferred adultery, was punished by her husband with death. The protagonists of these poems choose a dead wife over an unfaithful one, thereby fulfilling their desires for absolute control and mastery over their wives, even as the objects of that mastery are forever removed from their control. Thus the Duke of Ferrara becomes merely master of the curtain over his wife's portrait. These poems contrast with Tennyson's by restricting the meaning and effect of adultery to its

personal drama; the focus in these poems is on the individual's response to adultery rather than on society's judgement of it. At the same time, the responses of these cuckolds display no ambivalence. Like Tennyson's Arthur and Enoch, they choose a course of action and follow it through.

In The Ring and the Book, however, Browning inserts adultery within a social context clearly influenced by the changing status of adultery in Victorian England. I refer to the courtroom drama. The 1857 English Matrimonial Causes Act permitted divorce to a man on evidence of his wife's adultery and to a woman on evidence of her husband's adultery and his also having committed a heinous offence such as rape or sodomy (Gay 1984 174). Barbara Leckie's (1999) analysis of nineteenth-century English novelistic representations of adultery shows that during this period "fantasies of adulterous desire [were] replaced by fantasies of spectacular surveillance as the novels in the English tradition [chose] to approach adultery not from the perspective of a character involved in adultery, but rather from the perspective of the betrayed party" (9). (In fact, all the poems of adultery listed above do predominantly take the point of view of the betrayed husband.) Leckie associates this novelistic change not just with the conventions of fictional realism but also with the increasing reportage of divorce proceedings in the press, which, she proposes, when translated to a literary context, replaced the narrative of adulterous passion with the "domestic detective story" (14), a more fractured narrative resembling divorce court documentation, itself a product of the shift of divorce from canon to civil law in 1857, which reconfigured adultery as a crime rather than as a sin.<sup>3</sup> The Ring and the Book almost exemplifies the "fractured narrative [of] divorce court documentation" to which Leckie refers, as witness upon witness gives his or her testimony.

The shifting representation of adultery in nineteenth-century literature encompassed a pan-European context, and French fiction was at its forefront. D. A. Williams (White and Segal 134-144) has described some of the changes in French novels of adultery during the nineteenth century and analysed the ways these fictions promote particular different

interpretations, discussing examples from George Sand, Stendhal and Balzac.<sup>4</sup> He says that there was a shift in the fictional representation of adultery, which he dates to the publication of Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1857 is both the date of the English Matrimonial Causes Act, and the date of Madame Bovary's publication). He says, "Madame Bovary differs from earlier fictions of adultery in that the narrative is shorn of the interpretative commentary which, in previous narratives, placed the adultery of the heroine within clearly defined ideological confines" (142).<sup>5</sup> The significance of Madame Bovary in transforming the contours of the representation of adultery, in Williams' view, is twofold. First, the absence of authorial condemnation works as an implicit pardon of adultery and thus constitutes an attack on the nineteenth-century ideological image of the family. Second, the representation of adultery as comprising the same "platitudes and oppression" as marriage thereby undermined the "coordinates for the ideological formation underpinning the fictions of adultery" (143), such as the impassable distinction between prescribed and proscribed sexual activity, and a parallel distinction between wives and mistresses. Williams goes on to argue that changes in the fictional representation of adultery were diffused into the wider society (of France), transforming both the meaning and the value of adultery there.

Are the changes in the representation of adultery that Leckie and Williams speak of relevant to Modern Love? Certainly the literary allusions that abound in Modern Love suggest strongly that the poem is concerned not only with adultery, but also with the representation of adultery. It might be proposed that the modernity of "modern love" lies in a combination of factors, each of which locates it within the emerging literary conception of adultery as discussed by Leckie and Williams. First, the poem represents adultery in a context dominated by a judicially-conceptualised rather than morally-conceptualised understanding of the act. For instance, we have the legal language of X ("crime", "arraigned", "sentence" and "Laws"), and the husband's statement of XLIII ("I see no sin: / The wrong is mixed"). The husband declares, "modern dames" (XV) are not frightened by Othellos; the punishment for adultery is more likely

to be divorce than death. Second, Modern Love takes a different train to reach the same platform as Madame Bovary: distinctions between adulterous sex and marital sex, as well as wives and mistresses, have broken down by the end of the poem. Under a “mortal lease” (XXIX), that is a de-spiritualised context, “[a] kiss is but a kiss” (XXIX), and both marriage and adultery are characterised as “dreadful games” (a “contagious game” between husband and wife in XVII and a “game of Sentiment” between husband and mistress in XXVIII).<sup>6</sup>

Another reason we should look to French fictions of adultery, though, is Modern Love's specific reference to an unnamed “French novel” in sonnet XXV. In the French novel the “actors are . . . the usual three”, the adulterers are guilt-stricken and remorseful, and all “hangeth” on “one tremendous IF: —”, if the wife will renounce her lover. The unnamed French novel suggests that without confession and forgiveness, the marital plot cannot be regathered; however, if the wife chooses her husband over her lover, as is ‘natural’, the lover can simply be written out of the story and the adulterous plot erased. Modern Love's husband's recapitulation of this plot ends with his arch comment: “My dear, these things are life: / And life, some think, is worthy of the muse.”<sup>7</sup>

Sonnet XXV seems half to suggest and half to mock the idea that if “Madam” would follow this script, confess, and renounce her lover, her husband too would follow the script and forgive her. For instance, in XXV, Auguste forgives his wife “ere the tear is used”; already in XXII the wife has tearfully approached her husband, and he has refused to grant her an interview. Isobel Armstrong notes, “The ‘grand question’ of blame and remorse between the couple is consummately presented as the ‘dialogue’ which could be possible, but which never takes place, there by implication and with a potential existence, but not in fact” (1993 448). Why does this dialogue not occur? Time and again, the poem depicts adultery roiling unspoken “[b]eneath the surface” (VI) of placid fireside or dinner-table (XVII) conversations, or lurking mutely behind the outwardly calm façade

of common household encounters between the couple (V, XXII, XXXIV). Yet, time and again the husband cuts off discussion before adultery surfaces: “I will not ask” (XXII); “Niagara or Vesuvius is deferred” (XXXIV); “I felt the pained speech coming, and declared / My firm belief in her, ere she could speak” (XLVI). The “pure daylight of honest speech” (XLVIII) turns out to be, rather, a “fatal knife” (L), and the husband concludes, “silence best can speak / The awful things” (XLIX).

The wife’s confession is forestalled because the husband doubts he has either the moral authority (“If for those times I must ask charity, / Have I not any charity to give?” [XX]) to absolve his wife, or the strength of character to forgive her (“The less can I forgive! / The less can I forgive” [XXIV]). At the same time, however, Modern Love is not without self-disclosure. Modern Love is very nearly a dramatic monologue, but its sonnet sequence format enables it to dramatise its own “nervous twitch” (XXII) about the stories of adultery that it is producing, while Meredith’s sixteen-line variation on the sonnet illustrates at a formal level the pressure to speak the husband is experiencing. Modern Love differs from the poems of adultery listed above, by articulating, as it unfolds, a discourse rarely heard in literature, that of the conflicting desires of the betrayed husband.<sup>8</sup> Modern Love forces the reader to take the husband’s response as its central theme because it occludes many of the usual elements of the representation of adultery. Thus while the poem is indubitably about adultery, it is not a conventional narrative of adultery: it does not lay out the whos and whys and whats of assignations and exposure and punishments. We cannot judge the merits of the wife’s affair, either from a hypothesised Victorian viewpoint or from our modern liberal one, for we do not know her motive or, in fact, if she is even having an affair. The poem is not, then, a courtroom drama or detective story, although it has been read as one.<sup>9</sup>

In the scene between Arthur and Guinevere described above, Arthur, much like Auguste of the French novel, is cool, reasonable and dispassionate, in every way against the “blameless” husband. He is sad, but he adopts a single course of action and carries it through. In Modern Love,

we see Arthur's counterpart. On the one hand the husband desires to punish his wife; on the other hand, he desires to forgive and reconcile with her. These two conflicting desires engender different foci and interact with each other. His desire to punish her is mediated by his desire to forgive her. This conflict leads him to search for indisputable proof that might justify his punishment, with the result that her infraction is forever before his eyes, even while he cannot bear to believe it or see it. His desire to forgive her leads him to continual steps of rapprochement and displays of affection, but these are undermined by his coldness and sternness, expressions of his desire to punish her. The result of these competing and indeed contradictory desires is a fitful series of "restraining start[s]" and "checked impulse[s]" (V), perfectly enacted by the stop-start structure of the sonnet sequence. The poem's structure thus discloses and supports the tension between the husband's reiteration of adultery as theme and his desire to suppress its articulation, and thereby to foreclose it from the marital narrative. The husband hopes to negate the adultery by suppressing its articulation; at the same, he reads adultery into every sign and articulates nothing else.

#### The Gaze: Desire for Recognition

There is a sustained pattern of scopic imagery in the poem, from the "waking eyes" of the opening sonnet to the phrase "look in" that the wife dared not say in the penultimate sonnet. McSweeney argues that "[t]o the jaundiced eye and blighted sensibilities of the husband . . . everything suggestive of romantic love appears polluted and degraded" (100). I would suggest, however, that despite the husband's "jaundiced eye", his wife's gaze, and the gaze as metaphor for romantic love, still exert a powerful pull on the husband. Images of looking and being looked at have two meanings in the poem. First, the husband desires to be the object of his wife's loving gaze: "Only mark / The rich light striking out from her on him! . . . what a sense it is when her eyes swim / Across the man she singles . . . See that I am drawn to her even now!" (III). Second, his own suspicions cause him



to read infidelity in every look she bestows on him: “Her eyes were guilty gates . . . Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask” (II); “he saw hypocrisy designed” (V); and “from her eyes, as from a poison-cup / He drank” (IX). What is seen and what it signifies is only what the frame of reference permits (a formulation which lends a touch of irony to the husband’s contention in VI that he “will believe what honours her the most”). As Comstock observes, there is “no possibility of communication when he is prepared to see ‘hypocrisy designed’ even in a message filled with “household matters” (132-3), and later, that the “erosion of a reliable ground of perception evokes [a sense] of unpredictable causality and fragmentation“ (136). Both the wife’s gaze and his own gaze are contaminated by the suspicion of adultery (thus the “light striking” reference above takes on a more sinister connotation). Thus he seeks her gaze, but her gaze affords him no satisfaction other than the affirmation of his suspicions.

Adultery’s interference in the marital plot is symbolised by images of changing perspectives and jumbled signs. As the poem shows, there are always several ways to “read” (VII) another person. In sonnet VII, for instance, the husband observes, “[Cupid’s] art can take the eyes from out my head, / Until I see with eyes of other men”. What is seen with the eyes of love, and what is seen with the eyes of dispassionate disinterest (“the eyes of other men”) are different. At the same time, his words suggest that he is taking the position of interloper in his own marriage; the split perspectives represent his split self. Yet later, the “surface-eyes” of XVII play “a most contagious game [of] HIDING THE SKELETON”; this time the couple’s performance of loving looks deceives “the eyes of other men”, that is, their dinner guests. There is no perspective the husband can adopt to ensure the authenticity of his perceptions; there are only changing views. The unavailability of the wife lends her a desirable aura: in V he observes “a changed eye finds such familiar sights / More keenly tempting than new loveliness”; and in XXIV he confesses, “that nun-like look waylays / My fancy”. However, the new view is no less deceptive than the old view: “by its reflected light its worth is found. / Yet for us still ’tis nothing!” (XLI).

At other times, though, it is the signs themselves that deceive: “She had no blush” (VI); “Nature swears there is no change / To challenge eyesight” (XI); and “Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam / Of heaven’s circle-glory!” (IX). The evidence of his eyes belies the evidence of his other senses, which produce visceral signs that he can read by their emotional effect on him: her “venomous” retraction in I; and the “passing hour[s]” that have lost their “keen-edge flavour” in XII.

Failing to obtain satisfaction and affirmation in his wife’s gaze, the husband seeks it in the gaze of another woman, through what Ball calls “a swaggering display of grosser demands and lowered expectations” (1976 118). Demanding that the affair be public, he demands, “And men shall see me as a burning sphere; / And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan” (XXVIII). But the female gaze is a double-edged sword: “For I must shine / Envied, — I, lessened in my proper sight!” (XXVIII). While the female gaze confers desirability, it also undermines self-esteem; it implies his lack of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Moreover, not all loving looks are equally satisfactory, and the mistress’ gaze does not supplant his desire for his wife’s loving eyes, no matter what is seen by “the eyes of other men”.

As the poem progresses it becomes clear that any distinctions between the wife and mistress are merely superficial, and that they both fulfil the same function in his fantasy life: poisonous seductress (see IX on the wife). Thus in XXVII the husband asks rhetorically, “Is the devil’s line / Of golden hair, or raven black, composed?”, and later, in sonnet XXXII, “Who seeks the asp / For serpents’ bites?”. The husband’s reference to his mistress’s “[g]lory . . . springing from the mould” in XXIX, thus refers both to her association with earth, nature and sex, and also to his construction of her as a type of Woman, meaning that any attractive (or poisonous) qualities the women might have are effects of his desire for them, or his desire to see them in a particular way. His comment, “no longer can I cast / A glory round about this head of gold” in the same

sonnet refers to his inability to perceive any value in any gaze bestowed upon him.

Moreover, he finds himself disconcertingly the object of his wife's and his mistress's subjection, *their* tendency to view *him* in the same way. Thus of his wife it says in V, "She treated [me] as something that is tame" and, in relation to his mistress, he says of women in XXXI that they prefer "the little lap-dog breed". This mental convergence of wife and mistress is physically actualised in XXXVI, where he draws a more direct comparison between them (their mutual tendency to slander other women surreptitiously) as they stand together on the terrace: the wife and mistress are now a matched pair, with the husband the outsider ("At the two I stand amazed"). Attempting to use his mistress as a strategy in his campaign against his wife ("If the spy you play, / My wife, read this!" [XXXIII]), the husband finds himself a pawn in their "game[s]" (XIV, XVII, XIX, XXXV).

#### The Hand: Sexual Desire

The pre-eminent symbol for sexual desire in the poem is the hand, and throughout the poem there is sustained representation of the wife's hand in particular, as the wife's hand becomes a symbol of cumulative significance for the husband. However, the hand gains its sexual connotations as early as the first sonnet, in which the husband's "hand's light quiver by [his wife's] head" in "their common bed" sets the scene for the lack of intimacy between the couple: she responds to his touch by lying "mute" and "stone-still". In the next sonnet, with its Macbeth allusion to "some old dull murder-spot", the imagery of hands continues. Here the wife is characterised with the words "lurid" and "infamy". In the concluding line, the husband turns his own hand on himself ("And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain" [II]). The paired sonnets thus contribute to the pattern of attempted rapprochement followed by withdrawal: first, the husband reaches out to his wife, and second he punishes himself for so doing. Sonnet VI reverses both of these images: "She has a pulse" and

“Behold me striking the world’s coward stroke”. In IX he expresses again his desire to punish her: “she in his grasp; none near . . . Here thy shape to squeeze”.

However, it is another Shakespearean reference upon which much of the hand motif devolves. In sonnet XV, the husband approaches his sleeping wife (note the sexual inference of her “abandoned arm”) in the role of Othello, “[t]he Poet’s black stage-lion of wronged love”, bearing evidence (a love-letter) in hand. The husband’s self-conscious allusion to Othello discloses his murderous desire to punish his wife, but at the same time suggests his hope that he, like Othello, is mistaken in his suspicions. (Edmond also describes the husband as a modern Othello, “passionately jealous, hating while still loving his wife, and of course, quite possibly wrong about her infidelity” [213].) The letter in XV evokes the handkerchief in the play (a play on handkerchief and handwriting), but this letter seems to meet a higher standard of evidence because it contains

Her own handwriting to me when no curb  
Was left on Passion’s tongue . . .

. . . . .  
I show another letter lately sent.  
The words are very like: the name is new.

The letter in XV seems to prove the wife’s adultery, because it has the same content, words which are “very like” those in the earlier letter to her husband, but its probity is defined by its destination. The second letter is the wife’s attempt to institute a sexual plot, “[h]er own handwriting”, on the same terms as her relationship with her husband (“[t]he words are very like”), that is, on sexual terms (“no curb [on] Passion”). Moreover, the letter also imputes the ‘modernity’ of “modern love”, or, one should say, of modern adultery. The modern Othello need not murder his unfaithful wife, but may simply divorce her upon evidence of her adultery. However, the letter, which itself seems convincing proof of the wife’s infidelity, is itself strangely ‘abandoned’ following this scene. Why? An answer is suggested in the subsequent sonnet. Recalling a scene from their “old shipwrecked

days”, the husband quotes himself: ““Ah, yes! / Love dies!’ I said: I never thought it less” (XVI). The husband is haunted not only by the sound of his wife’s sobs and the taste of her tears on hearing his words then, but is also struck by his casually told lie. The words echo ironically in his mind, seeming now to have come to pass; at the same time they offer the kernel of hope that his wife’s own words may similarly be false evidence.

In XXII, the husband’s phrase “[s]he has desires of touch” refers to his wife’s estrangement from “all the household things”, including her estrangement from her husband (they are “[I]eague-sundered by the silent gulf between”). His reference to *her* “desires of touch” imputes his own desires of touch, and illustrates that in his eyes nothing she does is regarded neutrally, but rather everything is regarded through the perception of her sexual infidelity. Thus her “desires of touch” condemn her. We can look back to sonnet XXI for an explanation. There, her “lost moist hand clings mortally to [his]”. These words seem on the surface to suggest the wife’s desire to reconcile with her husband, but the subtext suggests otherwise. The word “lost” evokes the husband’s reference to her “abandoned arm” in XV, and his use of the *Othello* allusion there. The *Othello* allusion seems to be deliberately re-evoked in this sonnet, directing the reader to Iago’s lines, “Give me your hand: This hand is moist, my lady . . . This argues fruitfulness, and liberal heart:— / Hot, hot and moist; This hand of yours requires / A sequester from liberty, fasting and prayer, / Much castigation, exercise devout; / For here’s a young and sweating devil here” (III.iv). Given the sexual connotations of moistness, the “lost” also assumes a sexual connotation, suggestive of fallenness. Every sign is ambiguous to the husband. When he sees hope, he also sees deception; the wife’s hand which now “clings” to his, and which he had so desperately desired, has become a corrupted prize (much as the “lurid star” of sonnet II), which he, nevertheless, desires desperately.

The wife’s hand itself is the focal point in the scene of discovery:

What two come here to mar this heavenly tune?  
 A man is one: the woman bears my name,  
 And honour. Their hands touch! (XXXIX)<sup>10</sup>

The wife's hand is a hand which has been given in marriage, and which thus "bears" her husband's "name" and "honour", the socio-cultural coordinates of his identity and status, in the form, no doubt, of a wedding ring. Her touching hands with her lover thus has a specifically worldly meaning, metonymically signifying the violation of the legal contract of marriage. It also has a psychic meaning. The husband's "name" has been foreclosed from the marital narrative, and supplanted by another "name" ("what's the name? / The name, the name, the new name" [VI]), effacing symbolically his entire identity and role within the marital plot. The elision of his name emasculates him both socially and psychically.

The husband's perception of this scene is, however, cloaked in irony. It occurs amidst his description of post-coital bliss, engendered by the consummation of his affair with his Lady (his mistress is here his "bride of every sense"), replete with overwrought and excessive imagery: "O visage of still music in the sky! / Soft moon! I feel thy song, my fairest friend!" etc. By contrast, the wife's 'adultery' seems positively restrained and even trivial. The touching hands seem too small a symbol to bear the cumulative weight of rhetoric and figuration (McSweeney calls the imagery "portentous" [99]) that has preceded them: "gaping snakes", "poison-cup", "[d]evilish malignant witch", "Shame [and] Pride and Pain" and "Foul Demons". Even the exclamation mark after "touched" seems to mock the excited syntax that preceded it. However, this symbol has another counterpart in *Othello* that lends it more weight. Iago says, "Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of her hand? Didst not mark that? . . . Lechery, by this hand; an index, and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts" (II.i). Ironically, it is the husband who is here thinking "foul thoughts". If the touching hands do not prove adultery, they do connote it for the Othello-like husband with his fetishist obsession with his wife's hands.

In the remaining sonnets, the symbol for his wife's adultery then becomes a corrupted symbol for marriage, as the subsequent sonnets show the husband "grasp[ing]" (XLI) for his wife's hand. This process recalls the instance of the twin love letters in XV, as the husband here attempts to instigate a sexual plot with his wife on the same terms as her lover's (the touching hands). There, the terms of marriage became the terms for adultery; here, the process is reversed. In XLI he catches her wrists, signifying an attempt to reclaim her (which somewhat misses its mark). In XLVI he sees her "not alone" and makes "proffer of [his] arm", again symbolically reclaiming her; however, her response, which is to take it "simply", suggests that she is unaware of the symbolic weight he attaches to this gesture. Finally, in XLIX, "[s]he took his hand, and walked with him, and seemed / The wife he sought". In this instance, her voluntary taking of his hand erroneously suggests to him her willing re-commitment; however, the description here of her being "shadow-like and dry" contrasts with the moistness of her hand in XXI and also suggests that the touching hands are now a symbol which has been evacuated of its most central meaning to the husband, that is as the object of his sexual desire. Thus, reclaiming his wife's hand represents a pyrrhic victory, or merely an illusory satisfaction, as this hand no longer has, for him at least, its sexual meaning.

#### The Heart: Desire for Love

In the epistemology of "hard life", which is a thing of "laws", adultery signifies only as "filthiness of body" (VII), sexual infraction, and it is measured by "hard" evidence: her letter and her guilty tremble in XV, or a glimpse of her "shoulder in the glass, / Through that dark rain" (V), as she proceeds to an assignation. However, Sonnet X also shows another epistemological system within which adultery signifies. In the epistemology of "Love", which is "a thing of moods" adultery is also understood and experienced in terms of feelings and abstract qualities understood at an emotional level.<sup>11</sup> It is "faithlessness of heart" (VII) as perceived by the heart: it is known through its "bitter taste" (II) or "breath

of poison-flowers” (II); it is what drives one mad (“he went mad / And raged deep inward” [II]); and it is the perception of the wife’s desire for another (“The love is here; it has but changed its aim” [VI]).

Adultery’s signification across these two systems means adultery is both not only about sex and only about sex. For instance, in XXIV the husband announces:

The misery is greater, as I live!  
To know her flesh so pure, so keen her sense,  
That she does penance now for no offence,  
Save against Love. The less can I forgive!

The phrase “her flesh so pure” means that from one perspective, the worldly context, no adultery has occurred, although in the realm of “Love” an “offence” has occurred, both in the sense of an offence against the husband’s love and an offence against the duty owed to the (emotional) imperatives of Love. If Modern Love does not explicitly disclose the wife’s sexual behaviour it is because sexual infraction is not the whole truth of adultery.

One of the more interesting patterns which develops in the poem is the husband’s characterisation of women as subject to a ‘natural’ propensity for love, which is itself related to the contemporaneous notion of female sexual anaesthesia (this topic was discussed in relation to the gendering of desire in the Introduction to Section One). This theory proposes that women’s sexual practices are governed not by their sexual desires but by their specifically feminine emotional desires. These characteristics (which include compassion, the desire to please others, a weaker will and a less well-developed moral capacity) render women more susceptible than men both to falling in love and to subsequently ‘falling’ in its sense of sexual transgression. The influence of this theory can be seen in the husband’s comments that “[w]hat’s best in her impels her to the worst” (XLIV). Later, in XLVIII, he claims of women generally, “[t]heir sense is with their senses all mixed in”, and describes her “[j]ealous devotion” as “nobleness”



expressed in an ignoble act through her inadequacy of “brain”. (The husband applies the same conception to his mistress, when he declares “my Lady in her noblest mood / Has yielded” [XXXIX]). The theory itself becomes part of the husband’s problem: that which he idealises in women is the very quality that makes them potentially faithless. Thus in sonnet VI he claims, “The love is here; it has but changed its aim”. This formulation renders his wife’s fidelity and her infidelity — her loving heart and her faithless heart — simply continuations of the same trait, females’ propensity to and for love.

The wife’s heart/love is a mirror image for his own damaged heart, as sonnet XXVI indicates: “I had the eagle in my bosom erst: / Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed”. The self-same heart with which he offers to “pardon” his wife also promises to show her all the “venom” it contains. Moreover, he “moves but in the tracks of his spent pain” and is confined “to a narrow range”; his whole life is restricted to the examination of his own pain and the examination of his wife’s infidelity. Thus, the heart, which symbolised love, has now come to symbolise its opposite, as another sonnet makes clear. In sonnet XXXVIII, in an attempt to persuade his Lady to have sex with him, he declares, “’Tis Love, or Vileness! Not a choice between, / Save petrification!”. The utility of the phrase is clear: his Lady is flatteringly associated with “Love” and his wife with “Vileness”. Because not to love is an “offence” (XXIV), if he and the Lady are in love, then not to have an affair would also be “Vileness”. Under this slippery formulation, marital *fidelity* on the husband’s part would be a capitulation to “Vileness”. But, what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the other goose; if his wife has acted in accordance to the dictates of love she has committed no wrong. Accordingly, marriage and adultery are disclosed as merely each other’s “side-lie[s]” (XXVI), and, for the husband, there is no actual choice between “Love or Vileness” for they are the same thing.

In sonnet XL, the husband describes his dilemma:

Know I my meaning, I? Can I love one,



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All references are to sonnet number.

<sup>2</sup> In unsympathetic readings, John Lucas (1971) cites F. R. Leavis' charge that the poem is "the flashy product of unusual but vulgar cleverness working upon cheap emotion" (32); and Patricia Ball notes the "sudden surges of debasing passions" (1976 113) and the husband's "melodramatic" self-perception (112). Isobel Armstrong, whose early comments on the poem elsewhere are also unsympathetic, says of Modern Love that it is "a tragedy of silence but a comedy of language, as the verbalising and imagining which takes place in the silences spin a net of constructions in which both [the husband and wife] are caught, and take them and the text's reader further and further away from understanding what 'reality' may lie behind its formal artifice" (1993 448).

<sup>3</sup> While Leckie uses Foucault's analysis of the repressive hypothesis to account for the discursive explosion of fictional adulterous plots during the late nineteenth century, the translation of adultery from the category of sin to the category of crime is also relevant to her discussion. By shifting the prohibitive orientation on adultery from desire management (coveting, as exemplified by the older definition of adultery, which applied to all sex outside marriage) to behavioural regulation (sexual acts in violation of the matrimonial bond), the Victorian re-characterisation of adultery established the "maligned identity" of the morally bankrupt sexual agent, the adulteress. In other analyses of Victorian adultery, Naomi Segal sets out a feminist interpretation of adultery and maternity (heavily influenced by psychoanalytic models) in The Adulteress's Child (1992), and with Nicholas White, co-edits Scarlet Letters (1997); while Amanda Anderson concentrates on the adulteress in Tainted Souls and Painted Faces (1993).

<sup>4</sup> An extended account of Balzac's Physiologie du Mariage (1829),

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including his account of cuckoldry, is available in Peter Gay's The Bourgeois Experience (Vol 2. 1986), pp 67-74.

<sup>5</sup> It is a critical commonplace to characterise Madame Bovary as being without authorial commentary, but I'm not sure that is really the case. There are no obvious addresses to the reader, but Flaubert's cynical representation of Emma Bovary is hardly neutral.

<sup>6</sup> Madame Bovary in particular has a double significance to Modern Love. Kerry McSweeney (1998) suggests the novel's influence on the tone of the poem. He refers to Meredith's comments elsewhere on Madame Bovary, specifically in relation to its characteristic realism and "stern analysis" of adultery; however, McSweeney concludes (rather oddly in my view) that the husband's final "sympathetic insight" into his wife's being illustrates Meredith's doctoring (to continue McSweeney's metaphor for Modern Love) of Flaubert's "remorseless ironies" (110). Central to that irony is Madame Bovary's addiction to romantic love, a connection McSweeney makes good use of in his critique of romantic passion as the basis of an enduring happy marriage. Ball, however, argues that irony is sustained in the poem through the "special bitterness of intellectual voyeurism" (1976 110) to which the husband subjects himself.

<sup>7</sup> In her extended analysis of sonnet XXV, Cathy Comstock (1987) says that the function of sonnet XXV is to draw the reader's attention to the *similarities* between the French novel and the narrative of Modern Love, suggesting it is not only a parody of but also a paradigm for Modern Love, the differences between the two chiefly consisting of the presentation of the characters. Modern Love, in her view, substitutes psychological realism for the French novel's "flat, formulaic characters" (139), and Modern Love's husband tries "postures" rather than diets. In other words, Comstock has noticed that while the particulars of the adulterous plot in XXV and the others in Modern Love differ, there are enough similarities to

correlate them all as ‘fictions’ of adultery. Secondly, Comstock proposes that the self-conscious allusion to literary construction (“and life, some think, is worthy of the muse”) should undermine “our reliance on the narrator/husband as a center of understanding [because] literary structure . . . is continually open to rewriting to suit the needs of the genre or of our interpretive framework” (139). (Comstock herself performs a little of this re-writing when she compares the husband of Modern Love to Edmond, the lover, rather than to Auguste, the betrayed husband.)

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Watt (1984) couches this shame and rage in psychological discourse, and devotes an article to analysing the husband’s “neurotic responses” to his wife’s adultery, which he says are evocative of the protagonist’s “infantile” inability to exert mastery over his mother. According to Watt, the husband has a single desire, to break with his wife “cleanly, honestly and stoically” (50), but his desire is frustrated by neurotic trends (desire for reunion, desire for revenge and brutality), which impede his taking the straight path forward. While this reading might be accepted, Watt’s argument that the narrator has a “recurrent tendency to incorporate the external universe” (59), such that he is “really an infant in disguise” (59), both falls into dogma and also seems to suggest that there is some alternative ‘healthy’ way of responding to adultery that promotes “self-growth” (62). We might compare this view with Ball’s characterisation of the husband as “melodramatic” (1976 110), which also suggests there is a reasonable way of viewing a spouse’s infidelity. Comstock offers a critique of psychological analysis of this poem (135).

<sup>9</sup> The question of whether the wife in Modern Love actually has adulterous sex has been extensively debated in the critical literature. Rod Edmond includes an interesting comment from Meredith in his chapter on Modern Love: “Thirty years after its publication, when asked if the wife had a sexual relationship with the other man, he replied, ‘her husband never accurately knew; therefore we ought not to inquire’” (207). As

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Edmond interprets it, Meredith is suggesting that we do not inquire of the author whether the wife had sex or not, but rather that we should draw our conclusions from the poem. Unfortunately, the poem does not explicitly say either way. Some readers have concluded that this indeterminacy is even the point of the poem. Thus McSweeney: “[The central difficulty of the poem is] the husband-narrator’s uncertain knowledge of, and possible unreliability concerning, both his wife’s thoughts, motives and actions (especially those that concern the other man) and her knowledge of, or beliefs concerning, the state of her husband’s relations with the lady. The effect of these obstacles on the reader is continuing uncertainty concerning what actually happens and why. The indeterminacy of meaning enacts at the level of the reading experience the epistemological uncertainty and the equivocal nature of modern love that the husband is experiencing at the narrative level” (105). Pauline Fletcher (1996) concludes that the wife in Modern Love does not commit adultery at all; the focus of her reading is on the husband’s pathological misapprehension of his wife’s behaviour. She proposes the husband is a type of Othello, reading too much into ambiguous signs, thereby constructing a self-perpetuating web of guilt about his wife. Fletcher reads Modern Love as a dramatisation of monomania or psychopathology akin to Browning’s “My Last Duchess” and Tennyson’s Maud. In the classical Freudian account of jealousy (1922/1957) the difference between “normal” and “pathological” jealousy turns largely on the question of whether the spouse’s infidelity is actual, in which case it is normal jealousy, or imagined, in which case it is pathological jealousy (although it is unclear for instance, whether the pathology is inherent to the *imagination* of infidelity or whether it manifests only in the *response* to the supposed infidelity). In these terms, if we agree that the wife does not commit adultery we might also agree with Fletcher that the husband’s jealous obsession is pathological.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Ball refers to the “reversion to cheapening exclamation” in the incident of the touching hands, but I think rather that the construction is

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exclamatory because it is so significant.

<sup>11</sup> Ball argues that “Petrarchan sonneteers began from the accepted premise that love was a phenomenon of enduring worth [to the individual, but that] Meredith starts from the denial that there is any such phenomenon over and above the relationship which creates it” (108). Thus she interprets the line “Love [is] a thing of moods” as an image that discloses the caprice of the “unreliable and unpredictable nature of an emotional bond” (109).

<sup>12</sup> I am somewhat confounded by McSweeney’s reading of the couple’s kiss in sonnet XLIX, which he says “is neither supernal like their early kisses, nor merely sexual like their embraces in section 43; it is the expression of a loving intimacy” (111). He describes this kiss as a non-degrading “figure for the moments of post-romantic love tenderness between husband and wife” (111), a rather romantic reading of the wife’s suicide which would seem rather definitively to eliminate any possibility of companionate love between the pair.

## CHAPTER NINE

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The reading of love in Victorian poetry has been organised according to three factors: the emphasis on marriage, the “repressive hypothesis”, and the tendency to conceptualise desire as a wish for an impossible, all-encompassing, and thus self-defeating, union with another. The readings in this thesis, by contrast, have disclosed a Victorian poetry of desire in which marriage is of incidental concern, in which desiring subjects seek means of intensifying their passions by articulating them (at considerable length) and performing them, and in which the preservation of personal autonomy as a means of both experiencing and sustaining desire takes precedence over self-obliteration in the desire — or arms — of another. Not only is the possibility of such an all-encompassing union with another viewed sceptically within many of these poems, such a union is not even considered desirable in most of them.

The springboard for these readings has been the critical interest of recent years in the notions of consciousness and subjectivity: to be and to want are not easily differentiated states for those not yet in nirvana. Taking these newly conceptualised, or at least newly invigorated, terms to literary analysis, and then in turn to Victorian poetry, readers have disclosed wealth beyond imagination. However, while the Victorian dramatic monologue, with its fascinating cast of maniacs, murderers and whores, has been the object of re-evaluation and new appreciation, the Victorian lover, practically an oxymoron in itself, has not been rehabilitated to the same extent. (And, as Chapter Four suggests, the rehabilitation of the ‘selfless’ Victorian mother is also well overdue.) The lover of Victorian poetry has been assumed to lack the robust sexuality of the epic lover, the wilful idiocy of the impassioned courtly lover, and the tormented angst of the Romantic lyricist. Rather, Victorian lovers have been condemned with deathly nouns like “sincerity”, “duty”, and “companionate love”.



Between the variant discourses of individual desire disclosed in the readings of individual poems, I have found unifying threads that weave what I call the discourse of desire in Victorian poetry. One thread is to be found in the titles of the chapters here: each chapter takes its title from a line of a different poem discussed in this study.<sup>1</sup> The Angel in the House and Fifine at the Fair name each other! Although these two poems have found themselves discussed in single books before, the point of such studies has been to stress the differences between the poems according to the oppositional matrices of duty and desire, ethics and aesthetics, or *agape* and *eros*. In this study they are united by the performance of self-interest, by which I intend both the protagonists' interest in their own desires and their interests in achieving the most satisfactory outcomes for themselves.

The authors of the poems share a common project, to articulate the specificity of Victorian desire. Looking back through time, and alluding self-consciously to earlier literatures of desire, the protagonists of these poems situate their own desires in history and place. They confront their circumstances, for the most part, without self-pity or fear, but are rather both playful and ironic. Nostalgia is typically supplanted by a renewed commitment to "yet again essay the adventure" (in Don Juan's words [lxiii]); moments of despair are, in a characteristically Victorian fashion, overtaken by optimism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The references are as follows: Chapter Two, “I do not know myself without thee more” is from Modern Love, VIII; Chapter Three, “new work and changed way” is from Fifine at the Fair, (lix); Chapter Four, “With joy half memory, half desire” is from The Angel in the House, I.i.1; Chapter Five, “the fancy’s free to spend / Its special self aright in manner, time and place” is from Fifine at the Fair, lxxxviii; Chapter Six, “by faith in the vision of things” is from Amours de Voyage, II.xiv.310; Chapter Seven, “purpose with performance crown’d” is from The Angel in the House, Prologue to Book I.5; and Chapter Eight, “the eye, the hand, the heart, the whole / O’ the wondrous wife” is from Fifine at the Fair, xxxvii.

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