

**Loving “Stranger-Wise”: Augusta Webster’s
Mother and Daughter and Nineteenth-Century Poetry on Motherhood**

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<1>In the years since Angela Leighton’s *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992) drew renewed critical attention to several non-canonical Victorian women poets, Augusta Webster (1837-94) has emerged as a key figure. Much of the first wave of the criticism on Webster that followed focused on the dramatic monologues she wrote relatively early in her career, collected in *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* (1867) and *Portraits* (1870). Poems such as “A Castaway,” “Too Faithful,” “Faded,” “Circe,” and “Medea in Athens” feature jilted, mistreated, and socially marginalized women from a range of historical periods and locations, who speak out against both patriarchal injustice writ large and the depredations wrought by specific men. It is not surprising that these works have drawn much of the early interest from scholars, given not just their frequent rhetorical brilliance but at least as significant, their remarkably direct feminist message. In the past few years, several scholars, including most notably Patricia Rigg, have begun to address Webster’s previously underexplored and often less overtly feminist writings, including her closet dramas, her translations of Greek drama, and her career as a critic and essayist for the *Examiner* and the *Athenaeum*. Perhaps the most promising new area of exploration in Webster scholarship has been her final work, *Mother and Daughter: An Uncompleted Sonnet Sequence* (1895).⁽¹⁾ In the context of Webster’s career, *Mother and Daughter* marks a masterful late turn from dramatic monologues, individual shorter lyrics, and closet dramas towards a capacious new form – the sonnet sequence; more broadly it represents an important turn *against* a common sub-genre for nineteenth-century women writers, sentimental poetry about motherhood.

<2>Much of the recent scholarship on *Mother and Daughter* has explored how it responds to and was influenced by Victorian male authors. Florence Boos, for example, has situated the sequence among a number of female-authored texts influenced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The House of Life*, while Marianne Van Remoortel has challenged Boos’s relatively sanguine model of male literary influence on female authors, arguing that Webster produces a critique of Rossetti and other male poets’ “troping of creativity” (484) by means of maternal metaphors. Despite their differences, both of these treatments of *Mother and Daughter* present Webster in relation to a preceding male tradition. What has been lacking thus far has been a full appreciation of a more immediate and pressing literary and cultural context for Webster’s treatment of motherhood: the largely female-authored late eighteenth and nineteenth-century sentimental poetry on the subject. In this essay, I will define the terms of what had become by 1895 a well-established

female-authored poetic discourse of motherhood, for by doing so, we can more fully understand how Webster critiques its logic and vocabulary. Following this, I will describe how through a pair of parallel approaches, Webster substitutes for the dominant sentimental language of motherhood a remarkably ambitious lyric exploration of a modern mother's state of mind, and specifically the nature of her love and desire for her child. First, Webster adapts (without significantly critiquing) the typically male Petrarchan motifs of heterosexual romantic address, failure, and aesthetic containment to express the mother's amatory feelings for her daughter; second, she applies a contemporary aesthetic vocabulary to describe the daughter's elusive mortal beauty and the pleasure it produces in the mother. In effect, this uncompleted sequence does the mother in different voices, and in its acute responsiveness both to recent poetic topoi and an earlier male-dominated sonnet tradition it ranks with such major Victorian sonnet sequences as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata*.

1. Maternal Love in Late-Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century British Poetry

<3>In *Mother and Daughter*, Webster's depiction of both of these elements – mother and child – stands in notable contrast to a common set of poetic tropes, settings, and situations first established by prominent women poets such as Joanna Baillie, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Felicia Hemans. Many of their poems about mother-love occur in a domestic setting, and in describing the child they establish a common age restriction that Webster seems pointedly to resist: for these poets, the child is typically of an age that allows only for smiles, gesticulations, coos and giggles, or (as I shall describe below) wordless sacrifice. For example, Baillie's "A Mother to Her Waking Infant" (1790) and "To a Child" (1821) both feature very young children who are limited to that charming Rousseauian stage of mild "infantine coquetry" before unregulated play has been replaced by schoolwork and other organized activities ("To a Child" 18). Some day soon, and "the time is coming," the child "shalt sit in cheerless nook, / The weary spell or horn-book thumbing," but for now the child enjoys a "youthful pleasure" (18) that the speaker observes from a distance. A more extreme version of this combination of affection and distance appears in Anna Letitia Barbauld's "To a Little Invisible Being Who Is Expected Soon to Become Visible" (1825), where the speaker addresses a child who is not yet born, and hence both out of sight and without the distractions of language.⁽²⁾ Webster's sonnets, by contrast, follow the child from early childhood to young adulthood, allowing her at times to speak back to the mother "half defiant," and with surprising force and wit (VIII: 1). Where there is a sense of distance between mother and child in Webster, it appears as part of a developing narrative that describes the mother's reactions to the daughter's increased maturation and independence.

<4>With its distinctive focus on the mother's shifting emotional landscape within the household, *Mother and Daughter* stands apart from a related development in the preceding female-authored poetry about mothers and children, which is its depiction of mother-love, both inside and outside the home, as essential to national strength and progress. This earlier sentimental tradition has been described by Tricia Lootens and others as both patriotic and in some respects oppositional, deploying the notion of the natural sympathy of mothers not just to defend the nation but to critique aspects of it, including the treatment of women by men.⁽³⁾ As Julie Kipp has noted,

Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* of the 1780s and 1790s "transformed "the sonnet...into a receptacle for voicing the unique sufferings of mothers" by means of an overtly politicized vocabulary of sympathy" (73). Kipp observes that "[m]otherly sympathy" in the *Elegiac Sonnets* provides "a foundation for...radical politics," for Smith presents mother and child as "thoroughly united in a common struggle against the oppressive forces of male persecution which masks itself in antiquated chivalric codes" (73). This connection between mother and child stands in contrast to the situation in later social protest poems such as Caroline Norton's "A Voice from the Factories" (1836) and *The Child of the Islands* (1845), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" (1844); in these works, the distance between mothers and children, and the estrangement both suffer from the domestic space, point to the threat posed to traditional family bonds by modern industrial capitalism, which is usually gendered as male. Each of these later works describes a prelapsarian childhood threatened by the patriarchal new economy, and in response, Barrett Browning's speaker asks the reader, "Do you ask them why they stand / Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers / In our happy Fatherland?" (Barrett Browning 156).

<5>In many Romantic and early Victorian mother-child poems of social protest, the child is not just in jeopardy – she is dead. Indeed, for a contemporary reader of these poems about maternal love, perhaps their most striking feature is a repeated emphasis on dead children.(4) Dorothy Mermin, Josephine McDonagh, and Julie Kipp have each underlined the political significance of the dead child in Romantic and Victorian-period literature, where the representation of childhood as a period of perfect innocence combines with that of motherhood as a trial of heroic martyrdom. Unlike in Webster's *Mother and Daughter*, where the daughter is very much alive throughout (indeed, it is the mother's mortality that is increasingly at issue) and the emphasis is on the mother's semi-autobiographical first-person perspective, in these earlier poems the children's deaths are commonly described at a remove, through a third-person speaker or foreign first-person character who is clearly not identifiable with the author. Their stories, too, often are set in exotic or unfamiliar landscapes. In a well-known example, a child's death across the Atlantic becomes thematized for the purpose of domestic political protest in Hannah More's 1795 abolitionist poem "The Sorrows of Yamba, or, the Negro Woman's Lamentation." The mother-child dyad is presented here as a universal source of Christian sympathy, as their joint destruction binds them with the reader in common cause against an inhumane enemy, the institution of slavery.

<6>The dynamics of sympathy in these poems about mothers and children becomes significantly more complex when the child's death is caused by the mother herself. In her essay on infanticide in Romantic-period literature, Josephine McDonagh marvels at the "sheer quantity of references" to the practice (216). While in early Romantic poems like Wordsworth's "The Thorn" (1798) a woman is suspected of having committed infanticide, by the 1820s Felicia Hemans would write poems of explicitly heroic homicidal motherhood such as "The Suliote Mother" (1825) and "Indian Woman's Death Song" (1828). The latter poem features a Native American mother betrayed by her husband who adds herself to the ledger of loss by throwing herself off a waterfall with her child in a triumphant dramatic arc. For Hemans it is clear that these women are tragic victims because of the "civilized" community's indifference to their plight, despite the monstrosity of their individual actions.(5)

<7>The child is at work, cut off from the mother; the child is abandoned with the mother; the child is dead at the hands of the mother. In these common late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century scenarios, maternal love is established in spite of slavery, capitalist exploitation of children, and men's cruelty.(6) In the 27 sonnets of *Mother and Daughter*, Webster turns away from the explicit politicization of motherhood for patriotic purposes or national critique, and toward an exploration of the phenomenology of mother-love from the semi-autobiographical perspective of a deeply reflective middle-class mother. In resisting the topoi of the dead child and the mother-as-martyr, Webster returns to the terrain of mother-love in the home described so influentially by Baillie and Barbauld, but it is a return with a difference. Her speaker explodes what had become sentimental clichés, presenting a child who is neither an adorable babbling infant nor a victim and *exemplum* of modern barbarism; instead, she is a responsive, idiosyncratic, at times difficult only child. More crucially, Webster presents a mother who is neither an untroubled, mildly affectionate observer in the nursery nor a melodramatic martyr but rather an anxious, passionate lover in pursuit of both her beloved and an understanding of her love. In exploring the shifting sensibility of a mother across the relatively capacious new landscape of a sonnet sequence, Webster in effect lyricizes motherhood, marking it as an area of poetic subjectivity deserving of extended exploration.

2. Mother and Daughter: Webster's Anti-Sentimentalism

<8>Although Webster was capable of writing straightforward sentimental verse about adorable infants in poems such as "Baby Eyes" (1881), Webster's anti-sentimental streak is evident early in her career in such poems as "A Castaway" (1870), whose speaker, Eulalie, forcefully refuses the condescending liberal sympathy sometimes afforded to Victorian prostitutes. It is especially clear in her 1870s *Examiner* essays that were collected in *A Housewife's Opinions* (1879), where she mocks and satirizes, among other Victorian shibboleths, sentimental-moral literature for children, the notion that marriage as a social institution need have anything to do with love, and the extravagant displays characteristic of Victorian mourning rituals.(7) Turning to *Mother and Daughter*, we can see Webster on the attack against common notions of the stability and endurance of maternal love, as exemplified in poets such as Baillie and Hemans. In Sonnet XI, one of a pair of titled sonnets that occur roughly a third of the way through the sequence, the expectation of a public performance of a woman's love (as both mother and wife) is a burden placed on her by men, who assume that the more a woman suffers, the greater is her capacity to provide love and support to her family. In fact, the speaker says, female sympathy is a limited resource, and the well is running dry.

XI - *Love's Mourner*

'Tis men who say that through all hurt and pain
The woman's love, wife's, mother's still will hold,
And breathes the sweeter and will more unfold
For winds that tear it, and the sorrowful rain.
So in a thousand voices has the strain
Of this dear patient madness been retold,
That men call woman's love. Ah! they are bold,
Naming for love that grief which *does* remain.

Love faints that looks on baseness face to face:
Love pardons all; but by the pardonings dies,
With a fresh wound of each pierced through the breast.
And there stand pityingly in Love's void place
Kindness of household wont familiar-wise,
And faith to Love – faith to our dead at rest.(8)

<9>This sonnet describes the gap between traditional expectations and current reality, between the story that has traditionally been told and what the news for women is today. A womanly love that had seemed inexhaustible is really the desiccated remnant of a “faith to Love,” or to this unrealistic idea of love. A woman’s grief is not, as with Hemans, coterminous with her love but rather a sign of its depletion, for it is the remnant of a “void” emotion. At the end of this sonnet, the speaker presents the possibility that, worn away by unnamed personal losses, a wife and mother’s love may well be a form of display that women adopt because it is both expected and habitual, a “[k]indness of household wont familiar-wise” (13). It is important to note that Webster is not challenging the idea that her speaker may have had “natural” feelings of love at one point, but she makes it clear that such feelings are not exclusive to women, nor are they inexhaustible. Present circumstances – national, familial, personal – have conspired to make a woman’s love a kind of domestic dumb-show. The performance may have been sincere at one point, but now she is just going through the motions.

<10>“Sonnet XI: Love’s Mourner” offers a direct critique of a long-standing element in the sentimental discourse of mother-love – specifically the positive association of maternal love with self-sacrifice – but the elegy for love that it offers, along with that in the sonnet which precedes it, “Love’s Counterfeit,” is unusual in a sequence that for the most part dramatizes and also analyzes mother-love, with its exquisite pleasures and frustrations. With few exceptions, Webster’s critique of common notions of sympathetic motherhood works indirectly, through offering contrasting ways of expressing and defining mother-love. Perhaps chief among these is her adoption of the language of a Petrarchan lover.

3. Petrarchism in Mother and Daughter

<11>Notable features of Petrarchism that Webster adapts in *Mother and Daughter* include her use of the sonnet sequence form itself and a lyrical intensity exhibited in elaborate conceits and amatory address, but the most crucial element lies in the persona of the speaker. As Heather Dubrow notes, an integral element of Petrarchan poetics is the professedly self-tortured narrator, who performs a “tempestuous tossing back and forth between representations of success and failure, agency and impotence, control and helplessness” (159).(9) Webster’s speaker behaves like a Petrarchan lover in her agonistic concern with the impending loss of an emotional connection with her beloved, as the child advances from a very young age (in Sonnet III) to near-adulthood (in Sonnet XX). From the first sonnet in *Mother and Daughter*, Webster’s speaker repeatedly turns to and from the subjects of the impermanence of the daughter’s love and the diminishing satisfactions of memory, expressing concerns that are both familiarly Petrarchan and, with changes in the roles of both the speaker and the beloved, bracingly new. The speaker wishes to capture the immediacy of her own pleasure in song as “the spring joy that has no why

or how, / But sees the sun and hopes not nor can fear” (Sonnet I 5-6), but this untroubled voice is in danger of being replaced by a retrospective viewpoint, that “sadder sweetness” that mothers may feel about their daughters after they have left the home (9). How to gain purchase on a primal intimacy with the daughter, and the costs of seeking a return to that intimacy even as it fades away, are the key challenges here: as she says in sonnet VIII, “Is [this] Love, Love, or some remembered ghost?” (12).

<12>Sonnets XIII and XIV, located in the middle of the sequence, manifest these characteristic binaries of confidence and despair, of amorous vitality and the consciousness of death, especially clearly. Here the speaker marks the strength of her still-powerful connection with the daughter even as she looks forward to its seemingly inevitable weakening as the daughter matures. Sonnet XIII is unusual in quoting the daughter directly: in the octave, she reassures the mother that despite the mother’s modest claims to the contrary, “something in thy tones brings music near, / As though thy song could search me and divine” (7-8). In the sestet, in a characteristically Petrarchan gesture, the mother turns inward to reflect on the previous statement, addressing her own “voice”: soon enough, it will “dull – and even to her – will rasp and mar . . . / Thou echo to the self she knows not yet” (9, 12). Though she urges it to outlive its natural lifespan, her voice will degrade for two reasons: first, because the daughter will eventually discover its ordinariness as she matures; and second, because while the mother’s song will remain the same, its subject, the daughter, will change, becoming that “self she knows not yet.” What is now a vehicle for a primal connection will be but an “echo” in retrospect to the maturing daughter.

<13>The companion poem, Sonnet XIV, is equally proleptic, turning from a celebration of the mother’s love for the daughter in the present to a future shift in the daughter’s own nature. The poem concludes,

Yes, I am jealous, as of one now strange
That shall instead of her possess my thought,
Of her own self made new by any change,
Of her to be by ripening morrows brought,
My rose of women under later skies!
Yet, ah! my child with the child’s trustful eyes! (8-12)

The speaker is “jealous of” (in the sense of being protective of) this unknown future daughter, this floweret who will become a rose, but who also in some sense will forever remain a bud to her.⁽¹⁰⁾ Like a Petrarchan lover, she shifts perspectives forward and back again between present pleasures and the “ripening” to come of time and of her daughter’s body.

<14>While Webster’s use of Petrarchan language and themes is complex and pervasive in *Mother and Daughter*, she addresses Petrarchism directly as a characteristically male tradition only once, near the end of the sequence, in Sonnet XXVI. This sonnet makes explicit Webster’s otherwise implicit attitude towards Petrarchism throughout the sequence, as her speaker holds up its rhetoric of male heterosexual amorousness as a parallel to her own mother-love. A mother’s devotion to her only daughter, her speaker argues, is as single-minded as a conventional Petrarchan lover’s for his female beloved:

Of my one pearl so much more joy I gain
As he that to his sole desire is sworn,
Indifferent what women more were born,
Gains more because of her...

.....
Than whoso happiest in the lands of morn
Mingles his heart amid a wifely train. (1-4; 7-8)

Unlike both Webster's speaker and the devoted Petrarchan lover, typical Victorian mothers with large broods are presented as promiscuous, inconstant, and distracted lovers. Webster repeatedly makes the case against the idea that multi-generative mothers are better child-lovers in the final group of sonnets, XXIV through XXVII, noting in Sonnet XXIV, for example, that a mother who loses only one child will not be "bowed" with a "whole despair," for she will have others to distract her (7). If push comes to shove, such a mother could afford to lose a child, whereas for the speaker, her daughter's single life is irreplaceable. In these sonnets, Webster reaches back to Petrarch's *rime sparse* and even further, to a Western rhetoric of erotic exclusivity that begins with Catullus, to insist that *this* (maternal) love is true, not like those other loves you've heard about, and these lovers will have it in despite of the world.(11)

Oh! Child and mother, darling! Mother and child!
And who but we? We, darling, paired alone?
Thou hast all thy mother; thou art all my own.
That passion of maternity which sweeps
Tideless neath where the heaven of thee hath smiled
Has but one channel, therefore infinite deeps. (XXVI, 9-14)

<15>Rather than being set in narrow streams that might be diverted into still more shallow pools, this maternal "passion" rests in a single channel of "infinite" depth that reflects the daughter's heavenly radiance above, undisturbed by any other influence, lunar or otherwise. After making an explicit comparison with a male Petrarchan lover in the octet, in the sestet the speaker goes on to invoke a Shelleyan Romantic landscape of poetic creativity (in poems such as "Mont Blanc" and "Hymn before Sunrise"), simplifying lover and beloved into the spiritual palindrome of child and mother, mother and child. Indeed, while the daughter's father makes two shadowy cameo appearances in *Mother and Daughter*,(12) the dyad of mother and daughter dominates in the sequence. Unlike the standard Petrarchan lover who seeks to entice his ever-elusive Laura figure, in at least one sense Webster's mother once had her love object under her full control: the ideal of unification described in Sonnet XXVI of "Child and mother... / Mother and child" is partly based on the relatively recent experience of containing the child within her body.(13) But this sense of confidence – even mastery – is only retrospective, and in the context of the sequence as a whole, fleeting.

<16>On the whole, Webster's use of Petrarchism in *Mother and Daughter* is, in my view, both opportunistic and adaptive, and in claiming this I am in disagreement with Marianne Van Remoortel's recent reading of the sonnet sequence. Van Remoortel has argued that there is a divide between the first half of the sequence, wherein "the mother simply fights the stifling

rhetoric of Petrarchan-Elizabethan love with its own weapons...by describing their relationship with traditional sonnet imagery” (479), and the second half, wherein the mother “gradually abandons the belief that the love between her and her daughter needs a language as convoluted and hackneyed as the language of Petrarchism” (482), eventually substituting for Petrarchism an artistically regrettable turn to a pre-linguistic silence. I contend that, rather than revealing Petrarchan discourse to be “convoluted and hackneyed,” Webster focuses her efforts on remaking it throughout the bulk of the sequence, and that her use of Petrarchan motifs is consistent and fresh throughout. Petrarchism in Webster’s hands is not a set of tired tropes but an archive of language and a set of characterological and narrative patterns she uses to reframe literary motherhood. What instead emerges as “convoluted and hackneyed” is the sentimental poetic discourses of motherhood that precede *Mother and Daughter*, and which it pointedly resists. Like other revisions of Petrarchism by both female and male writers, *Mother and Daughter* also amounts to a statement of artistic ambition by virtue of its sheer size, which provides the necessary space for elaborating themes and dramatizing temporal change. Within this relatively capacious framework, Webster describes daily pleasures, lasting hopes, and her speaker’s increasing fear of losing her daughter and her love. Using the medium of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence also demonstrates that maternal love is a topos worthy of such elaboration, taking it well beyond the confines of the shorter lyric that was used earlier by Barbauld, Hemans, and others.

4. Aestheticizing the Living Child

<17>Even as Webster remakes Petrarchan language and themes throughout *Mother and Daughter* to produce a new literary medium for mother-love, she also applies a second, much more recent discourse of aestheticism to describe the precise pleasures given by the daughter. Webster’s use of aesthetic language and themes is largely restricted to the first eight sonnets of the sequence, where the speaker lacks the fears about the future that will dominate in the later sonnets; the daughter is still quite young, and the speaker is less concerned with the daughter’s reciprocal *love* than with her *beauty*. The daughter appears in these opening sonnets through a rhetoric of framed pictorial beauty, or what Kathy Psomiades has called “the erotic plot that turns female beauty into art” (157). In her recent book on Augusta Webster, Patricia Rigg has noted an increasing aestheticist trend in Webster’s later work, and she has described its appearance in *Mother and Daughter*.⁽¹⁴⁾ Building on Rigg’s observations, in this final section I will explain how a discourse of aestheticism provides a second means, along with Petrarchism, for Webster to distance herself from the sentimental rhetoric that dominated the preceding century of mother-daughter poetry. As I will also show, Webster’s aestheticizing discourse is also in tension with the speaker’s more realistic concerns about over-monitoring and even criticizing her daughter.

<18>In the opening sonnets of *Mother and Daughter*, Webster’s speaker thematizes her own role as child-observer and defends it as both a parental duty and a personal pleasure: as she writes in Sonnet VII, “I watch one bud that on my bosom blows, / I watch one treasured pearl for me and him” (13-14). She puns frequently on the transmission of her parental gaze into poetic form, remarking in Sonnet II that she “note[s]” her daughter “and grow[s] the happier” (6), in Sonnet III that she “read[s]” her heart” (3), and in Sonnet VII that she “scan[s]” her “with a narrow near regard” (4). Later, in Sonnet XIII, the daughter herself remarks on the confluence between the

mother's gaze and her incantatory song: "But something in thy tones brings music near, / As though thy song could search me and divine" (7-8). While the speaker does offer some lovely aesthetic encomia in describing the daughter's physical appearance (as with "Oh lily face upon the whiteness blent!" (V 9)), for the most part these sonnets swerve away from the child per se and towards an exploration of how the mother gains pleasure from looking at her. In Sonnet II, one of the finest in the sequence, the speaker takes pains to observe not only why she gazes at her daughter but also how outsiders often misunderstand the pleasure that results:

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

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

The opening line begins with a postulate – "That she is beautiful is not delight" – but as the speaker elaborates her argument, she explains that this does not rule out a connection between the daughter's beauty and the mother's delight; rather, the mother only excludes the indirect pleasure that other mothers may derive from seeing strangers "appreciate" their daughters' beauty. Instead of gaining a prideful satisfaction at strangers' admiration, she will love the daughter's beauty "stranger-wise" herself, shifting away from maternal vanity and towards a mode of distant, itemized, "painter"ly appreciation of the daughter's charms. This typically masculine rhetoric of pictorial framing and aesthetic control can be linked historically with Petrarchism, but a more recent, aestheticist discourse tends to dominate here. As in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny," the female art object is apostrophized through her stillness – her "silent brow" is essential for the ekphrastic unpacking of the sonnet. The mother's pleasure derives from an objectification that requires defamiliarizing her own gaze from herself. For a mother to love "stranger-wise" is to love as a non-mother; in other words, it is a self-distancing process that involves momentarily denying the traditional emotional connections valorized by so many of Webster's predecessors.(15)

<19>While the aesthetic pleasure that Webster's speaker describes is not obviously physical, it is, like the Petrarchan love-language I have discussed above, demonstrably erotic. In *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus makes a helpful distinction between the non-genitally erotic and the sexual in Victorian culture:

The erotic and the sexual can and do intersect, but only the sexual refers to acts that involve genital arousal...These restrictive, literal definitions of the sexual enable a corresponding latitude in defining the erotic in a way that does justice to the complexity and ingenuity of desire. (113)

In describing the eroticism between mothers and daughters in Victorian culture, Marcus locates a pervasive quality of aggression that is evident in, among other things, women's magazines and popular stories about dolls.(16) Indeed, there is a stunning frankness, visible not only in this sonnet but in several others, about the pleasure of exerting control over the child not just visually but emotionally, but attempts to do so have their drawbacks, too. In Sonnets VII and VIII, the speaker describes the practical and ethical limitations of the mother's desire for maximal emotional intimacy with her daughter, an intimacy that for the most part is valorized elsewhere in the sequence. In the octave, the mother tells us that her husband has warned her that "I at times am hard, / Chiding a moment's fault as too grave ill, / And let some little blot my vision fill..." (1-3). Having too "near" (4) a vantage point on the child for too long can lead to over-analysis and needless criticism. These sonnets never fully surrender the dream of a fusion of mother and daughter, but Webster warns us here that they may result from the imposition of the mother's excessive discipline *on* the daughter.(17)

<20>Yet even as Webster's speaker inscribes an aestheticist impulse to objectify her daughter (in Sonnets II), and even as she seeks to exert excessive discipline on the daughter (in Sonnets VII and VIII), she also records the daughter's resistance to any attempt at imaginative and behavioral control. As I have noted above, the daughter exhibits a surprising ability to talk back to her mother, to "reason her case," which adds a tonic dose of realism to the sequence, but this also provides a more pervasive aesthetic pleasure for the mother (VIII, 2). This resistance, and the mother's pleasure in it, is evident earlier, in in Sonnet VI, where the daughter "vexes" the mother with her poor behavior but charms her by quickly returning to seek forgiveness (1). Earlier, in Sonnet IV, the daughter's changeable nature is fully positive, for her "quiet Juno gaze" can break "at a trifle into mirth and glow."(18) Transported by the daughter's elusive, Heraclitean nature, she compares her to the image of "light upon swift waves [that] floats to and fro" (1, 2, 6). Any sort of maternal attempt at control will be temporary, at best, and the daughter's emotional lability, her refusal to be fixed in the mother's mind and even in her affections, becomes a principle of pleasure. As a result, in contradistinction to Sharon Marcus's depiction of maternal eroticism, *aggression* is not the dominant feature of this phenomenon in *Mother and Daughter* but rather receptivity, self-correction, and a familiarly Petrarchan pattern of amatory success and failure.

<21>In *Mother and Daughter*, a child's shifting emotional landscape appears not just as a fixed portrait but as a moving work of art for the writing mother, one that requires the kind of extended appreciation and description that a sonnet sequence can provide. Webster stages her own status as writing mother as a position from which to observe and re-evaluate a child in aesthetic terms, but she combines with this observation an extensive exploration of the subjective experience of motherhood itself. This appears not through any comprehensive philosophical statement, but through an accretion of rhetorical positions –Petrarchan and aestheticist, anti-sentimental and yet deeply amatory. Webster uses the iterative possibilities inherent in the sonnet sequence form to

repeatedly re-stage motherhood, to make it “strange” to itself and unnatural, and by so doing, to test out new ways in which maternal experience can be imagined.

Endnotes

(1) See Brown 1995b for an early turn to Webster’s work beyond the dramatic monologue (in this case, her closet dramas). For more recent work outside the dramatic monologue, see especially Rigg 2004, 2009, and 2010. On *Mother and Daughter*, see Van Remoortel, Boos, and Houston. In her recent book-length biographical study of Webster (Rigg 2009), Rigg has effectively mapped the sequence and described it as a work of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism.(^)

(2) See McCarthy and Craft, p. 147-48.(^)

(3) See Lootens 2000 and 2008.(^)

(4) An earlier, less familiar strain of female-authored poetry about dead children appears in the stark autobiographical works of mid-seventeenth-century author Mary Carey, including such poems as “Written by me att the same tyme [as her husband’s elegy]; on the death of my 4th, & only Child, Robert Payler” (Greer 159) and “Upon ye Sight of my abortive Birth ye 31th of December, 1657” (Greer 157). On Carey’s poetry of grief and consolation, see Prior, p. 189 and Hammons.(^)

(5) On “The Suliote Mother,” see Kipp, p. 90. McDonagh notes that by the mid-nineteenth century, “the idea of a noble or salvific infanticide... [had become] a sign of the savagery into which modern society has fallen” (200). This notion of a “salvific infanticide” both reached a kind of crescendo and was also subjected to critique in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim Point” (1848). In Barrett-Browning’s hands, the mother-child poem becomes both an apotheosis of sentimental writing and a warning against the political complacency that sympathy is in danger of reinforcing. See the discussion of the poem as a work of political protest in McDonagh, p. 227; Stone; Brown 1995a; and Slinn, p. 56-89.(^)

(6) In Webster’s early lyric poems about mothers and motherhood, dead children and grieving mothers do appear, and a broad appeal to the reader’s sympathy for the mother’s loss is frequently invoked, but even in these relatively conventional works of maternal sentiment Webster resists any explicit connection to national politics. In shorter Webster lyrics such as “Our Lily” (1867) and especially in “Gone Seaward” (1881), the emphasis is on the mother’s emotional landscape of grief. In the latter poem, a child provokes a broad elegiac resolution: “A restless child that leaped and laughed and grew; / And sudden there’s but silence and a void. / Great river tide, give back the thing destroyed, / And, Greater River, bear him whence he

came” (164). See also poems such as “A Mother’s Cry” and “Deserted,” which describe estrangement between mothers and daughters.(^)

(7) Webster critiques sentimental-moral literature for children in “Children’s Toys and Games,” where she concludes that children “always skip the moral” (*A Housewife’s Opinions* 126). On love and marriage, see “Yoke Fellows,” which begins with a fanciful hypothetical account of two young couples who plan a double-wedding, but upon finding out that they have been married to the wrong partners, decide to leave well enough alone. “[E]ach young man,” Webster writes, “could do equally well with either young woman, each young woman could do equally well with either young man, for “[t]here really is no reason why, in most of the marriages that take place between respectable persons of fairly decent tempers, another bridegroom or another bride would not have answered just as well” (198-99; 199). On Victorian mourning practices, see “The Livery of Woe,” where Webster describes the semiotics of mourning clothes as a form of pure social display. They point towards the social status of the mourner rather than to her mental state (163). Webster concludes this essay by stating that “[s]orrow for the dead must be sorrow by the yard; regrets have their measure in the width of a hatband,” for such a display “has no spontaneous symbolism, no meaning of its own at all” (162).(^)

(8) *Portraits and Other Poems*, p. 343. All further references to *Mother and Daughter* are to this edition.(^)

(9) Mary B. Moore comments on the appeal of this position for women writers: “The very complexities of Petrarch’s subject position – vacillating between experiences of agency and loss of potency, unity and fragmentation, knowledge and error – may also have enhanced the mode’s appeal or accessibility to early modern women because they must have experienced their own subjectivity as always complicated by their relative lack of legal and political power” (11).(^)

(10) Webster also uses variants of the word “bud” to refer to the daughter in Sonnet IV, line 3, Sonnet VII, line 13, and Sonnet XIV, lines 5-6.(^)

(11) In Poem 5, Catullus begins, “Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus, / rumoresque senum severiorum / omnes unius aestimemus assis” [“Come, Lesbia, let’s live and love, / and we won’t care what old men and moralists say”] (10-11). A similar, much earlier scenario in classical literature is in Sappho’s “Anaktoria,” which describes *eros* as superior to martial virtues. Webster, who was an accomplished translator of Ancient Greek, would have been well aware of these precedents, though neither is referenced directly in Sonnet XXVI.(^)

(12) See Sonnets V and VII.(^)

(13) Sonnet XXVII puns on the possibility of a reunion, with the lines, “Nor felt a void left in my motherhood / She filled not always to the utterest” (3-4). “Utterest” slips to “uterus,” and suggests a biological as well as verbal connection.(^)

(14)Early in her book *Julia Augusta Webster: Victorian Aestheticism and the Woman Writer* (2009), Rigg mentions “the aestheticization of the mother-daughter bond in her sonnet sequence” (21); her full discussion of *Mother and Daughter* is on p. 256-65.(^)

(15)A useful point of comparison for this phenomenon of a mother gazing on her child in earlier Victorian mother-child poetry is Barrett Browning’s “The Mourning Mother (of the Dead Blind)” (1844), where the observing mother is herself observed by the third-person speaker. Here, the “mother-passion” is more spiritual than aesthetic or visual, and the child is characteristically dead.

But, since to him when living,
Thou was both sun and moon,
Look o’er his grave, surviving,
From a higher sphere alone:
Sustain that exaltation,
Expand that tender light,
And hold in mother-passion,
Thy Blessèd in thy sight. (Barrett Browning 117)(^)

(16)See Marcus, chapters 3 and 4. In a recent essay on *Mother and Daughter*, Laura Linker reads Webster’s daughter as “both a child and a lover”(52) and as the “homoerotic love object” (59) of the sequence.(^)

(17)In Sonnet VIII, the opposite problem emerges: instead of leading her to judge the child too harshly, perhaps the mother’s love will prevent her from being able to enforce proper discipline. Here, the daughter tells her mother that she realizes that her love for her is so all-encompassing that she won’t “mind” her “scolding” (3), for “[h]owever bad I were you’d love the same” (4).(^)

(18)For another example of a late-Victorian woman writer using aestheticist language to describe a child’s changeable nature, see my chapter on Alice Meynell (Behlman).(^)

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