

EXTENDING THE LINE: EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

AMERICAN WOMEN'S SONNETS

by

ELEANOR GRACE WAKEFIELD

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Student: Eleanor Grace Wakefield

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by:

Paul Peppis	Chairperson
John Gage	Core Member
Henry Wonham	Core Member
Veronica Alfano	Core Member
Helen Southworth	Institutional Representative

and

Scott L. Pratt	Dean of the Graduate School
----------------	-----------------------------

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Eleanor Grace Wakefield

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Department of English

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Title: *Extending the Line: Early Twentieth Century American Women's Sonnets*

This dissertation rereads sonnets by three crucial but misunderstood early twentieth-century women poets at the intersection of the study of American literary history and scholarship of the sonnet as a genre, exposing and correcting a problematic loss of nuance in both narratives. Genre scholarship of the sonnet rarely extends into the twentieth century, while early twentieth-century studies tend to focus on nontraditional poem types. But in fact, as I show, formal poetry, the sonnet in particular, engaged deeply with the contemporary social issues of the period, and proved especially useful for women writers to consider the ways their identities as women and poets functioned in a world that was changing rapidly. Using the sonnet's dialectical form, which creates tension with an internal turn, and which engages inherently with its own history, these women writers demonstrated the enduring power of the sonnet as well as their own positions as women and poets. Tying together genre and period scholarship, my dissertation corrects misreadings of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sarah Teasdale, and Helene Johnson; of the period we often refer to as "modernism"; and of the sonnet form.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Eleanor Grace Wakefield

### GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene  
Gonzaga University, Spokane

### DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, English, 2017, University of Oregon  
Master of Arts, English, 2011, University of Oregon  
Bachelor of Arts, English and Philosophy, 2007, Gonzaga University

### AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Poetry and Poetics  
Twentieth Century Poetry  
Modernisms  
African American Literature  
American Literature

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Employee, University of Oregon, 2010-present

Adjunct Instructor of Composition, Tacoma Community College, 2008, 2011,  
2012

Adjunct Instructor of Composition, Muckleshoot Tribal College, 2009

Research Assistant, Mary Moody Emerson Almanacks, 2011-2013

Writing and English Tutor, U. Washington, Tacoma, 2009

AP Literature Exam Reader, College Board, 2016-present

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Fulbright Teaching Assistantship, Fulbright Commission, 2007-2008

Horn Travel Award, University of Oregon Department of English, 2015

PUBLICATIONS:

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

If literary history cyclically represses and recovers works of the past to create a narrative to which readers can refer in shorthand, as Cary Nelson argues, we write now in a period eager to recover and include. In the 1990s scholars such as Nelson, Suzanne Clark, and Houston Baker brought renewed critical attention to the early twentieth century, whose middle-brow, women's, and black writing had all been repressed in the middle of the century for various reasons, and persuasively demonstrated that these repressed works were not only worth reading, but that new readings treating these formerly repressed works as serious, literary, and important helped us to better understand the modernist period, poetry in general, and our own ways of reading mediated through received narratives of literary history. This process involved interrogating received values, questioning not only the story received in literature classes and books, but the terms used to tell that story; Clark's canon-expanding 1991 book *Sentimental Modernism* reassesses "women writers whose [works] have shaped modernist and postmodernist history and whose ongoing attachment to and/or debt to the strong sentimental past and to sensibility itself reveals a contradiction within modernism, challenging our understanding of it, and indeed our own work" (5). Other critics advanced the same notion, demonstrating that far from a linear change from formal to vers libre poetry, the early twentieth century represented a wider range of poem types, authors, and ideas than had been commonly taught in literature courses or featured in anthologies during the middle of century.<sup>1</sup> Including additional authors

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<sup>1</sup> Like Clark's work, Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) and Rita Felski's *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) have changed the way scholars of the period conceive of women writers.

through canon expansion, which has often meant broadening the terms “modernist” and “modernism,” reintroduces important works to critical focus (Mao and Walkowitz). Now that Clark’s method has become common, we more often use the plural, referring to the cultural and literary movement that encompasses the early-twentieth century as a collection of “modernisms,” to indicate scholarship’s openness to taking seriously the multiplicity of ideas and styles that proliferated. In the past twenty-five years, international modernisms, women’s writing, the Harlem Renaissance, ethnic modernisms, and other categories of authorship along with genres including comic books, pulp novels, advertising copy, and more have been gathered under the umbrella of modernism; this expansive view of what voices and materials constitute the movement(s) has resulted in “modernism” referring to both a time period—the early twentieth century, broadly—and aesthetic tendencies.

However, recuperation efforts of the early-twentieth century have failed so far to account for the enduringly popular sonnet, a genre which I show remains vitally relevant in the period, and serious readings of which contribute to the recovery of forgotten writers, repressed continuities between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the complication of—and better understanding of—literary history. This dissertation weaves together three strands of literary and cultural study to anchor and animate close readings of neglected sonnets: the long history of the sonnet; the short period of modernism or the early twentieth century; and women’s participation in society and art, including black women’s writing. These three strands have been discussed in various combinations previously,<sup>2</sup> to the great benefit of literary and cultural studies. But analyzing the

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of work on women in and into the early twentieth century: Clark, Felski, Scott, Ammons, Nair, Walker, and others; sonnets in the early twentieth century: Maxson, Howarth, Burt and Mikics,



intersection of all three allows me to contextualize and illuminate understudied poems by women writers who were, at the time, popular and impactful.

The early-twentieth century in poetry has been undergoing a reimagining for the past half century, now marked by studies of modernisms, popular modernisms, magazines and their networks of contributors, ephemera, pulp modernisms, and more.<sup>3</sup> Women writers have in many instances been recovered, added to the canon, along with writers of color, writers working on popular texts, and more. As part of the project of expansion, scholars of multiple modernisms have acknowledged that anthologies from the mid-century gave readers and the next generations of students a generalized, overly masculine view of the period: American poetry, like English poetry, was marked by alienation, formal radicalism, political and social upheaval, and the cold, hard thing. Poetry was not meant to comfort but to reinforce the cultural stresses the authors identified—the period saw poetry as a mirror held up to a society that had broken. This description of poetry and the Western world is not wrong, only too simple. For instance, a reaction against suffrage, women’s societies, the relative parity of women in education, and women’s literary production in the Progressive Era in part prompted this masculine conception of literature in 1920s, and of course women continued producing literary work even in the age of Pound and Faulkner, much of it overlooked in the cultural imaginary version of the period, and as a result “modernism” as a placeholder for the period.

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Anthony Robinson, and others; women sonnet writers: Burt and Mikics, Natasha Distiller, Amy Billone, Diana E. Henderson, Daniel Robinson, and others.

<sup>3</sup> Clark, Baker, Mao and Walkowitz, Suzanne Churchill, Nelson, and others.

In addition to hiding the sexism that prompted this mid-century narrative of literary history, this version of the story erases the fin de siècle period, when, as I noted, women published many of the most important American novels of their time and when the authors of the next decades were educated. Thus, many readers take too literally Woolf's claim that "On or about December 1910, human character changed."<sup>4</sup> Changes were certainly happening, but what came before 1910 contributed directly to what was possible in the 1910s-1930s, in culture and literature. Because particular sonnets reinhabit and refer to the form of previous sonnets (more on which later), they especially benefit from historical contextualization, in this case vis-a-vis previous sonnets and the various cultural conflicts before and during the 1910s-1930s that create tension in the poems I read in the following pages. Ignoring the continuities between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in American and English poetics has allowed many prior historical studies of poetic forms to lapse at the turn of the century. The long study of the sonnet as a genre usually stops in the nineteenth century, a view that many of the Modernists encouraged: Howarth jokes in his essay on the modernist sonnet in the genre's *Cambridge Companion*, "If the modernists had got their way, this book would have ended right here," without anything about sonnets during the modern period (225). Finally, the simplified counting of important literature in the early-twentieth century overlooks many poets whose work was popular, important, and in some cases influential; more than that, it often requires ignoring the poetry itself in favor of period manifestoes and theories about how literature ought to be. Since the 1980s nuance has been added to that simple story in terms of types of work, variety of writers, and means

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<sup>4</sup> "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Hogarth Press, 1924.

of publication, but much remains to be recovered. The studies of networks of poets and poetry magazines have revealed connections between poets even geographically far apart, often anchored by *Poetry* magazine editor and writer Harriet Monroe, and relationships of poetic discussion and editing that enriched or at least changed many poets' works. Thus, the study of poets writing "traditional" poetry, those Monroe calls "rhymesters," in the early-twentieth century is essential to understanding the evolution of poetry and poetics over time, to understanding the richness and diversity of the early-twentieth century in poetry, and to correcting the overly rigid periodization that has characterized scholarship and academic study for the past seven decades.

I begin this project with a story that this year marks the centennial of: the creation and awarding of the first Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, its adjudication, and the poetry-reading public's response. The history of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry involves both personal and poetic relationships: people talking to each other about how they wanted poetry to endure and for whom. Unsurprisingly, it involves factions; though the absolute number of people fighting over the future of poetry was not large, their opinions were. I recount the establishment of the award to recast the time period, filling in missing pieces of readership and publishing issues most contemporary readers are unlikely to know, allowing me to present the rest of this project with this history in mind. It also introduces the poet who is the subject of my second chapter, Sara Teasdale. The cultural and literary context into which a young Teasdale entered shaped her work and her poetic concerns, namely finding a role model for her artistic ambitions as a woman, but it also sets the stage for the struggles, literary and cultural, that animate

Edna St. Vincent Millay's poems, the subject of my third chapter, and Helene Johnson's poems and ultimate retreat from literary life, the topic of my fourth chapter.

The establishment of the Pulitzer Prize in poetry organizes important literary-historical and cultural context, after which I discuss the larger history of early-twentieth century American poetry and poetic culture, and the cultural issues with which these women writers had to work. The description of each chapter follows these sections of history and context. The role and function of the sonnet both historically and specifically for the writers in this project is discussed in the chapters themselves, where the discussion of the specific deployment of the form can be connected to the poems in question.

#### THE PULITZER PRIZE IN 1918

*Love Songs*, by Sara Teasdale, published last year by the Macmillan Company, has been starred by a five hundred dollar prize, bestowed officially, from an anonymous donor, by Columbia University, at the same time that this institution awarded the Pulitzer prizes of a thousand dollars each for the best play, the best novel, the best editorial, and the best book of science, of the year 1917. Miss Teasdale's—or rather Mrs. Filsinger's—prize is for the best book of poetry published last year in this country by a citizen of the United States. (Monroe “Sara Teasdale's Prize” 264)

So begins *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe's consideration of the state of poetry the year prior, in the magazine's August 1918 issue. Monroe was uniquely equipped to discuss

the wide-ranging field of poetry in the US, since in her capacity as editor of the century's first magazine devoted specifically to verse she was a gatekeeper, deciding which poems the American reading public would encounter. The award that sparked her consideration, which we would now call simply the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, was then brand new; Sara Teasdale, a 32-year-old lyric poet from St. Louis, Missouri, was its first recipient. The other Pulitzer Prizes were first awarded in 1917, but not until the following year were supporters of poetry in America able to establish their own, similar prize, to be given to 1917's best book of poetry. The \$500 award was managed jointly by Columbia University and the Poetry Society of America and granted at the Pulitzer Prize ceremony; it was to be awarded to the "best book of poetry, the work of a citizen of the United States and published in 1917" (*New York Times* June 2, 1918).

The award was one of several steps poetry had made toward a revival, necessary after many fallow years of poetic production and enthusiasm in the United States. The situation of American poetry in the first decade of the century was worrisome for the seemingly few people who were committed to its continuance, marked by back-page-only publication in the popular magazines, few books of verse, and little to no possibility of a poet making a living at the art.<sup>5</sup> In response, various individuals and groups tried in their own ways to establish a committed poetry-reading audience and to support the work of poets. In the century's second decade, a turnaround began with the work of two individuals, who set the stage for a larger poetic renaissance: William Stanley

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<sup>5</sup> Exact numbers are hard to find, but in multiple timelines of American literature I looked at, the number of "important" books of poetry from this decade are few: *April Twilights* by Willa Cather (1903); *The Trees of Laughing Bells* by Vachel Lindsay (1905); *A Lume Spento* (1908, published in Venice), *Personae* and *Exultations* (both 1909) by Ezra Pound. If there was not a decline in number of books, at least there is evidence for a dearth of poetry that even poets soon after would call "important," or a failure of short-term preservation of what did exist.

Braithwaite, anthologist and editor, and Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry* magazine, used collections with monetary prizes and a new magazine devoted specifically to poetry respectively to broaden access to verse. At the same time, Jessie B. Rittenhouse and Edward J. Wheeler succeeded in seeing their vision for a Poetry Society established—a group for all kinds of readers of poetry, not only for genteel members of the leisure class. This was important for widening the audience for poetry at the same time that it provided support for non-genteel poets. The group, founded in 1910, worked to promote poetry in various ways, including monetary awards for poets, to make it possible for more writers to pursue the craft. A major success in this effort was the establishment of the Pulitzer, then called, somewhat clumsily, the Columbia University-Poetry Society of America Prize.<sup>6</sup> It used money left in the will of the publisher Joseph Pulitzer, like the other Pulitzer Prizes, but because Pulitzer’s will did not call for a poetry prize specifically, for the first years of the poetry prize’s existence, it was operated by Columbia University and judged by the Poetry Society of America (Fischer 3). Thereafter, the prize system was reorganized such that the poetry award, like all the others, was simply called the “Pulitzer Prize.” The first three years of Pulitzer Prize awards in poetry include the note that they were “made possible by a special grant from The Poetry Society” (pulitzer.org), but they include these early awards in their list of official Pulitzer Prizes in Poetry.

As Monroe had announced, the prize’s first recipient was Sara Teasdale, whose *Love Songs* presented new and old poems from her then decade-long career, which had

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the establishment of literary prizes and their role in fostering the cultural prestige of literature, see James F. English’s *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2008).

by then included four books of her poetry and one edited collection, of poetry by women. Teasdale is little remembered today, but it would be difficult to overstate the popularity of *Love Songs* at the time: in her biography of Teasdale Margaret Haley Carpenter concludes that “[s]eldom has any book of poetry published in this country been accorded the honor and popularity this one received” (238). William Lyon Phelps, in “The Advance of Poetry in the Twentieth Century,” wrote, “Sara Teasdale has won her way to the front rank of living American poets. . . . Her work shows a combination of strength and grace that many a master might envy”; Padriac Colum in *The New Republic* declared, “This singer does not know how to be affected. The sincerity of her poems, their clearness and their intellectual level are related to a fine courage that is always present. It is delightful to get a book of poems that have come out of the heart” (both quoted in Rittenhouse 12). Louis Untermeyer’s review goes farther, effectively calling her one of the best women poets in English, and critiquing the habit some writers had developed of setting Teasdale’s work to music: “No woman in America (and only one in England) has voiced more plangently the delicate halflights and luminous backgrounds of passion. Sara Teasdale’s words will always suffer by being set to music. They are already music set to words” (quoted in Carpenter 238). Fueled by praise like this and the announcement of two major awards for the collection, more than five editions of *Love Songs* were published in 1918, and many more editions were published in the following years (Rittenhouse 6).

Contemporary readers of the early twentieth century, hearing about the popularity of this volume and its historic status as the recipient of the first-ever Pulitzer Prize in poetry might be surprised to find rhyming lyric poems in the volume. Surely in

this decade that had begun with Imagism and *Blast!* magazine what was popular and lauded was formal innovation, the defying of convention, the wholly new. As Teasdale's success suggests, this inherited story about early-twentieth century poetry is incomplete; while Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, H.D., Amy Lowell, e. e. cummings, and others like them were breaking the pentameter, they worked with and were published alongside Teasdale and other formalist poets like her. Indeed, the full picture of early-twentieth century poetry—writing, teaching, publishing, receiving awards, being discussed—would include a great deal more rhyming, fixed-form verse than most readers today would anticipate. Naturally in the intervening decades we have had to rely on critics and anthologists and scholars to canonize the best of the period's poetry, but the exclusion of formal verse from that subset of what existed at the time has been an oversight. At the time, free verse was not considered inherently “better” than formal verse, and I reject that assumption now, too. At the time, the major vehicle for poetry, *Poetry* magazine, equally considered old and new kinds of poems, which I show here to contextualize my recovery of these neglected poems.<sup>7</sup>

Neither *Poetry* magazine as a collection of critical voices nor Harriet Monroe in particular were uncritical in their assessments of poetry, though; the magazine included, critiqued, and discussed various types of poetry and the relative merits of current tendencies in poetry with rigor, Teasdale's prize-winning volume included. Monroe liked *Love Songs*, but she was committed to the professionalization of her art, and her editorial about the problems in the selection process for *Love Songs* goes on to argue that the judges of such an award ought to have been successful poets themselves:

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<sup>7</sup> The poems Teasdale won the Pulitzer for were primarily rhymed lyrics, not sonnets, but her prize for formal verse helps to establish the situation of poetry at the time.



Without disparaging the award, we must say a word about the committee, for questions of principle are involved. For thirty years, more or less, American painters, sculptors and architects have been fighting for the principle of professional juries in all competitions. A society which pretends to stand for the great art of poetry in this country should invariably adopt this rule; its prizes should represent the finished judgment of the most distinguished poets in its membership first. (264)

The award committee, which in later years would include poets, Teasdale among them, consisted in 1918 of members of the Poetry Society who were not themselves primarily poets, such as Jessie Rittenhouse. (Monroe would critique their qualifications one by one later in the editorial.)

Pursuant to her principled objection to the prize's adjudication, Monroe helpfully offered her own assessment: "As for the award itself, the only way of forming an opinion is to examine the publishers' lists for 1917. These disclose the following as the more important books of verse . . .—the possible competitors of Miss Teasdale's *Love Songs*" (265). The list includes H. D.'s *Sea Garden* as well as books by Edwin Arlington Robinson, Louis Untermeyer, Ezra Pound, Vachel Lindsay, and several poets less remembered. Monroe discusses the relative merits of her list, which totals twelve books besides Teasdale's, weighing issues both technical—"aesthetic citizenship" versus legal American citizenship as a criteria, that is who counted as American enough to qualify for the prize—and aesthetic. Notably, she divides the "finalist" books into two categories with no evaluative judgment between them: "We are thus left with these two radicals—Mr. Pound and H. D.—and with Mr. Lindsay and Mr. [Orrick] Johns among

the rhymesters, as Sara Teasdale's only serious competitors during the year 1917" (267). That is, while Monroe acknowledges that the "rhymesters" and the "radicals" or "vers-librists" represent separate categories of poetry (and categories worth interrogating, as she dismisses two books off the long list by noting that they "might be challenged as poetic prose rather than free verse"), she does not dismiss either category as worthy of prize consideration.

In 1918, a decade into poetry's resurgence in general and the avant-garde's domination of anthology space, rhymed, formal verse was in fact granted equal status within the contemporary poetic community. This unexpected fact, and Teasdale's prominent role in the decidedly un-prominent side of the story of American poetry in the early twentieth century, motivates this study and anticipates its first chapter. Formal verse, the poetry of the "rhymesters" Monroe listed, occupies a limited space in discussions of the entire century, but especially in the first four decades, the long form of the period popularly referred to as "Modernism" (and the complications of using this term as a time marker do not escape me). As Monroe's 1918 editorial, along with the archives of *Poetry* magazine, the sales of and critical praise for books of rhymed verse, and awards to "rhymesters" of all sorts, suggests, during this period many poets found inherited forms useful for creating complicated, rich, lovely verse that the public bought and praised. A full understanding of twentieth-century American verse must account for its stream of formalism, which was in the early part of the century popularly accepted as a critical and beloved part of the landscape. The formal verse of the time, moreover, adapted and evolved to engage critically with contemporary issues, demonstrating its vibrancy as a current way of writing, not merely a vestige of the poetic past.

Teasdale begins my investigation of the ways early twentieth-century American poets carried formal verse forward because of the puzzling contradiction indicated above: her near-universal popularity then and total unfamiliarity now. Moreover, I look at Teasdale as the first of three examples of “rhymester” female poets engaging with their contemporary world through the most prescribed of forms: the sonnet. Like the other poets this dissertation analyzes, Teasdale used the sonnet to test her conflicted feelings about her role in contemporary society; all three writers take advantage of the sonnet’s two-part structure and intricately woven pattern of rhyme and reference to set in tension ideas that seem opposed. What tensions these poets choose to string up this way, and what they do with that net once established, vary, but each of them demonstrates the continued power of the sonnet, not in spite of its historicity or its inherent self-reference, but because of those features.

#### POETRY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A full appreciation of the importance of Teasdale’s prize requires additional context about the problems the award sought to remedy. As noted, by the 1918 awards ceremony, *Poetry* and the Poetry Society had made advances in expanding the scope of poetry in audience and authorship; both were committed to a poetry reading audience and community of poets that was not limited to those wealthy enough to participate in the previous century’s genteel pursuit of the arts. The historical model of a genteel poet, who was able to sustain himself by writing (or attracting a patron to do so), was falling out of favor. But no reliable model for poets to earn a living by writing poetry had yet been established. The conflict between competing views of who ought to write poetry

was mirrored by a disagreement among the people attempting to found the Poetry Society of America about who ought to be in such a group: one wealthy couple, the Rices, who had helped to call the earliest meetings of what would become the Poetry Society, “saw poetry as a pleasing accouterment [sic] of a genteel existence, enjoyed privately among one’s social peers,” while Rittenhouse and Wheeler “had begun to envision a role for poetry within a national public culture” (Newcomb 13). As previously noted, this latter version partly succeeded, but not without friction.<sup>8</sup>

The new, more democratic model of American poetry was unable to completely supplant the genteel tradition, and poets were not usually able, then as now, to be poets only or poets without family money;<sup>9</sup> but the Poetry Society, Braithwaite’s anthologies, and *Poetry* were ushering in a massive cultural change nonetheless. The new prize money and increased opportunities for publication were positive for poetic culture moving into the 1910s, though they came too late for Teasdale’s first forays into the field. “Genteel” poetic culture allowed Teasdale her first access to publication, and despite all her sales and success through the 1920s and 1930s, she likely could not have continued if not for the money she and her husband had outside of those earnings; even after poetry’s renaissance after 1912, writing poetry was not terribly lucrative. When Teasdale was beginning to write at the turn of the century, many would-be poets like her were discouraged from their art by a lack of exposure to new poetry and by the

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<sup>8</sup> Some critics categorize the Poetry Society specifically as old fashioned, as it favored “pedestrian East Coast versifiers, few of whom would play even marginal roles in the New Verse except as foils against which avant-gardists might define themselves” (Newcomb 14) but this judgment is rooted in the same anthology-taught assumptions about verse that make Teasdale’s poems surprising to us today.

<sup>9</sup> I say “democratic” with Whitman in mind. Earle calls the “independence” of twentieth century poetry a result of “the liberating touch of Walt Whitman, sweet with robust optimism” (viii). Newcombe notes, however, that both advocates of maintaining the genteel model and proponents of making poetry more open claimed Whitman as their role model, though that was at least partly because of the dearth of other famous American poets to embrace (Chapter 1).

perception by publishers that poetry would not sell: “Aspiring poets of these years, knowing they could hope to see a volume of their work only by paying for it themselves, felt isolated and useless, actively discouraged from writing for anyone except their own closeted muses” (Newcombe 9). Teasdale’s parents funded the publication of her first book, *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems* (1907). She was fortunate to enter the field as it underwent this massive change, represented for her most notably by her award.

Reflecting on the changes in a 1923 comment for *Poetry*, Eunice Tietjens, writer and friend of Teasdale, reflected on how poetry had been before its revival in about 1912:

Probably never in history has there been a more dramatic or more thorough revivifying of any art, both as to production and as to appreciation, than that which has taken place in the art of poetry in America during the last ten years or so. From rags to riches, from the menial ‘tail-piece,’ now almost forgotten, to the leading place in the ‘regular’ magazines, from a minor to a major art form—such has been the progress of this Cinderella of the arts. (267)

At the time that a young Teasdale was working on her little magazine *The Potter’s Wheel* (1904-1907) and the poems that would become *Sonnets to Duse*, the project of becoming a poet seemed likely futile, or at best destined to be a private undertaking, mostly for those who could already afford the hobby in both time and publishing fees. While genteel women learned arts, including poetry, drawing, painting, and music, in their homes for their own domestic entertainment, the opportunities for public participation in poetry were few, both because the community of poetry was difficult to identify and connect with and because the young woman’s potential role in said

community was not defined. But of course, as Tietjens's reflection reveals, poetry was changing rapidly, and Teasdale herself would become part of that transformation.

Poetry's pre-*Poetry* fallow period merits a bit of qualifying, since all of American literature at the turn into the twentieth century has been overlooked by general tendencies in periodization. The simplest overview of American literature holds that the two major fertile periods were what Matthiessen called the "American Renaissance" in the middle of the nineteenth century and the Modernist period in the 1920s. While some worthwhile writers exist between those periods, the story goes, they have merited less study, fewer accolades, and have had less influence on the continuing narrative of American literature. In particular, the period between Realism (Dreiser, Norris, James, Crane) at the end of the nineteenth century and High Modernism (Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald) in the 1920s is often overlooked in the study of fiction (Ammons); in poetry the birth of Modernism is generally located earlier, with *Poetry* or World War I, but the common, simple conception still holds that this was a renaissance, either from nothingness or from literary work so outmoded as to be not worth discussing: "High modernism meant that the works of a few male writers stood for a whole period of literary history, with a definition of literature that would seal off the anarchic forces of the revolution of the word. It left women out of the literary canon" (Clark 35). This means that some work of the period suffers an erasure to fit that simple narrative, particularly work associated with women. Despite the tendency of periodization to suppress work that does not fit neatly into the categories, though, poetry publication around the turn of the century seems to be both limited and overlooked. Scholars of the novel, notably Ammons, have proved that its rich variety—and indeed

presence in the fin de siècle period, or what is sometimes called the Progressive Era— was merely overlooked, in part because the most successful writers of novels at the time were women. But few scholars of poetry have made similar recoveries of large amounts of poetry completely neglected between Whitman and Pound. Though it is the case that recovery and reconsideration of texts has altered the landscape of literary study, indeed that “[o]ur literary past is very much a work still in progress,” most scholars work under the shadow of the periods and assumptions of the previous generation(s) (Nelson “Modern” 68). The contemporary perceptions of what periods were great (and abundant with literature that might be great) derive in large part from the anthology period of the mid-twentieth century, when the New Critics put male Modernists into the books that shaped a generation of literature scholars, as well as the professionalization of American literary studies, which came about along with the growth of colleges and a professional professoriate, in the beginning of the twentieth century (Ammons “Introduction”). These decisions, made primarily by men who judged each other to be more worth reading than their female, black, and otherwise “middlebrow” peers were, mean that the view recent readers have of the past is far from representative of what was being written and read then.

Many changes in culture and gender in America helped to contribute to the proliferation of well-known female novelists as well as the increased possibilities for women in public life and the arts while simultaneously laying the groundwork for the critical repression of some of that work. While it has historically been true that the reading public skews female, with the “institution of American literature at the university level ... at the turn of the century” came a change of power to determine what

works mattered: this was now the job of university professors (Ammons 15). Though since the Civil War (white) women have entered the workforce in higher and higher numbers, and at the beginning of twentieth century as many women as men attended American universities, women did not see equality in literature any more than they saw it elsewhere. In fact, as Ammons cites, in 1909 a Modern Language Association meeting included an address fretting about whether too many women studying literature would make the field less appealing for men. But it was at least true that at the turn of the century middle-class women had unprecedented access to education, work, and civic engagement, creating fertile grounds for literary production. Though publication of poetry during the first decade of the twentieth century indeed seems to have been quite limited, in general and for women, fiction by women proliferated: among the most famous American women novelists of the time were Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Most of these women writers, like the poets I study here, struggled with the question of what it meant to be a woman and an artist, particularly in the face of rapid social change for women. So while female poets at the beginning of the twentieth century had a paucity of contemporary and homegrown models of poets and poetry to emulate or adapt, their literary engagement and work was a continuation of a rich tradition of popular, celebrated American women's writing.

#### WOMEN AND WOMEN'S WRITING AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

As suggested above, a ray of light in the dark years of poetry before 1912, during which Teasdale and Millay were becoming poets and Johnson was born and being



educated, was the relative literary parity of the women who were writing. That is, though there were no formal apparati for the sharing of poetry in America during that time and the magazines of the period featured little poetry, the work that did appear received equal consideration regardless of the author's sex—though this was in part because poets, Teasdale included, were paying vanity presses to publish their work. However, evidence of this relative equity comes in the contents of December 1912's *The Lyric Year*. This anthology of American poetry, assembled by editor Ferdinand Earle—the culmination of a contest with \$1000 in total prize money conceived as “an Annual Exhibition or Salon” of poetry “that would represent a fair cross-section of the nation's poetry at a given moment, while also providing tangible incentives for poets”—consisted of 100 poems by 100 poets, over 40 of whom were women (Earle; Newcombe 14).<sup>10</sup> Earle's editor's note calls attention to his inclusion of so many women in comparison to anthologies from previous centuries, while also noting that “current verse is more masculine” (vii-viii). He also characterizes the century's poetry reflected in his anthology as “democratic, scientific, humane.” The poems selected were, as the anthology's title suggests, primarily lyrics, mostly not sonnets, so whether women were regularly inhabiting and adapting the space of the sonnet itself is not revealed in this particular collection. But since *The Lyric Year* provided the primary access to the variety of the year's “best” poetry in 1912, and since other avenues for accessing new poetry were then so limited, it is safe to think that outside the famous nineteenth century poets she read and the work of her peers and their teachers, Teasdale, the oldest of the women I discuss, was not exposed to large numbers of contemporary female poets who could

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<sup>10</sup> The other two prize judges of *The Lyric Year* were Wheeler, of the Poetry Society, and Braithwaite. Earle chose as his top choice for best poem Edna St. Vincent Millay's “Renasceance.”

provide a model for her. The need for a model of the female artist animates Teasdale's earliest sonnets. This context helps to illustrate specifically Teasdale's struggle in the poems I read in chapter 2, but also lays the groundwork for the cultural and social situation in which Millay began writing and that Johnson would enter later.

Beginning before and extending after this lull in poetic publication in the US, American culture experienced a dramatic change in the roles and expectations for women, characterized retrospectively as a major period of feminist activity. Women's activists most famously worked at the turn of the century toward suffrage, resulting in the ratification of the nineteenth amendment to the US Constitution in 1920. But the cultural changes were broader and more complicated at the time. As is generally the case with cultural movements, there was no one answer to what women wanted as society evolved—ever faster, it seemed, in the wake of the industrial revolution and seismic shifts in scientific understandings of the world, as religion ebbed in the national consciousness, as people moved to cities at unprecedented rates, and more. The Civil War had given white, middle-class women opportunities to work outside the home, and many had continued to be socially active afterward, laying the groundwork for the feminist and anti-racist groups of the later nineteenth century and the movements toward suffrage and temperance. The nineteenth century model for white women had been the “true woman,” a moral paragon and example for her family and community, but of course women of color could not participate in that vision of womanhood. Thus, black women's groups and white women's groups diverged in their self-definition: white women sought to change societal expectations about work outside the home and sexual mores, but women of color more commonly had to work away from their children and

have often been stereotyped as sexually immoral. Indeed, the movement for white women to work outside their homes then (as now) relies on women of color or poorer white immigrant women to maintain domestic order. Teasdale and Millay are exemplars of women adapting to these changes, whereas in Johnson's career we see the differences wealth and race make in the possibility of artistic production, even at a time of unprecedented social movement for women.

Even within the same racial or class categories, "women" were a diverse group with varied objectives, but a new option for imagining womanhood emerged in the 1890s that would be foundational for women's engagement in society and with art: "The New Woman." The new woman was a cultural conception of new possibilities for existing as a woman, not necessarily rejecting assumptions and expectations imposed on women historically but expanding the range of options available: a woman could maintain her home and family while also serving on committees or marching for suffrage. However, the cultural pressure to be both feminine and ambitious for some women resulted in a "double bind"—a limiting situation where the two goals were perceived as mutually exclusive. Indeed, even today traits associated with ambition tend to be perceived as masculine, and, more practically, artistic and career ambition is made easier with a spouse at home tending to the family; these problems were worse a century ago. So for Teasdale, Millay, and Johnson, how being an artist, much less a poet, comported with being a woman even under the emergent model of new womanhood was not yet clearly established. In their poems, we see them take up this issue in various ways, and we see the effects of these cultural considerations in their career decisions as well.

The term the “New Woman” first appeared in writer Sarah Grand’s “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” in 1894 (*North American Review*): “Both the cow-woman [domestic cattle] and the scum-woman [women who use men] are well within the range of comprehension of the Bawling Brotherhood,” her term in this essay for men who complain about women wanting to change their situations, “but the new woman is a little above him, and ... at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy” (271). Though the other types of woman—“cow-woman” and “scum-woman” are clearly indicated as titles, in this case “new woman” is just a way of differentiating, and it is worth noting women are described in relation to men in all three cases and specifically described as they would appear to men. These “new women” stood apart from men, judging their ability to manage society; they were freshly enlightened about the ills of society, many as an extension of men. Grand’s essay engages in the same false humility for male readers that so much of women’s literature has done for centuries: she acknowledges that women are partly at fault for society’s current condition because they “have allowed [men] to arrange the whole social system and manage or mismanage it all these ages without ever seriously examining his work with a view to considering whether his abilities and his motives were sufficiently good to qualify him for the task” (271). While the essay takes men to task for suppressing women, it, in the voice of a woman, pretends to accept at least half of the blame for not speaking up sooner. Rhetorically, she seeks to engage men in the process of carving out new space and possibilities for (certain) women. Not all activists would have agreed with Grand’s rhetorical method, but her terminology made possible a more organized reaction against

the “True Woman” of the previous century. The major definition of “new woman” supplied by Grand correlates to a new kind of man; by reassessing societal relationships, women can be and do more. Grand suggests, “[t]he man of the future will be better, while the woman will be stronger and wiser” (272). That is, both sexes will reevaluate their relationships to make the best for both. Though Grand’s essay is tonally also either mean or playful toward men, this initial definition still puts a name to an important shift. She identified a noticeable change in society, which was permitting women to do more, often not under the careful guidance of their fathers and husbands but on their own.

This movement was far from universal, of course, and the reaction against it in part contributed to the hyperbolically masculine characterization of the literary scene in the 1920s; indeed, both men and women argued against the new woman and against women’s expanded roles more broadly. Famously, many women were opposed to suffrage (and many white women were opposed to including women of color in their cause), for various reasons, many of which recalled the true woman—a model of femininity at which many women had excelled and thrived. Morality and Christian sentiment had been powerful rhetorical tools in America since its inception, and women’s use of home and family as arguments to society at large have tended to be used to persuasive effect, notably including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other anti-slavery texts that appealed to Christian family values using the characteristics of Christian sentiment common in the sentimental novel of the early- and mid-nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Anti-suffrage activists argued that giving women the vote meant “diverting the attention of woman from her natural duties [which would be] a direct loss to the State” (*The Case*

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<sup>11</sup> In this way, some conservative white women might have found themselves aligned with activist black women in embracing the true woman ideal.

*against Woman Suffrage* 5, emphasis in original). Women's lower social status (or lower public status and lack of authority in many domains of household and family management) was often justified, by writers of both sexes, using rhetoric claiming that women were "better" and "higher" than men in morals and virtue: "We did believe, of course, in our hearts that women in public life would purify politics and would make for a higher moral and political standard" (Mrs. R. C. Campbell quoted in *The Case against Woman Suffrage* 13). Due to women's elevated morality and public life's (i.e., men's) crudeness, women's participation in public life would be stressful, stultifying, and degrading.

These arguments against suffrage align with one of the biggest problems of the new woman that Teasdale, Millay, and Johnson wrestle with in their poems: women have assigned duties as it is, and no element of expanding their rights and opportunities involves reassigning their existing responsibilities. Wealthy women might be able to afford domestic help, but working class women, who were granted rights and duties—and suffrage was explicitly framed as a duty—outside the home in the public sphere, remained responsible for cleaning, cooking, childrearing, and so on. Women, historically, have kept the domestic space operational, which division of labor has allowed men to go out into public life:

[H]istorically men and women have played very different parts in each others' lives. Where woman has been a luxury for man, and has served as the painter's model and the poet's muse, but also as comforter, nurse, cook, bearer of his seed, secretarial assistant, and copyist of manuscripts, man has played a quite different role for the female artist. (Rich 13)

For Teasdale in particular a man provided the financial stability she needed to be an artist, but for women writers in general their obligations to the men in their domestic lives—or children, as in the case of Johnson—conflicted with artistic ambition.

Class, indeed, divided women as much as differences of opinion vis a vis participation in political life. As noted, the calculus in all arenas differed for wealthy women, whose household obligations were lessened by the ability to hire other women to perform their domestic tasks. Thus, many of the most vocal women on all sides of debates of the day were wealthy, because they had the time and space to participate in these discussions in person and in writing. Though women share many elements of a forced narrative, or Clark’s “unwarranted discourse,” wealth, race, religion, ability, and other factors differentiated their mobility within it. Indeed, many women of means opposed suffrage for class reasons: “to give women the suffrage would only increase the ignorant vote and bring refined women into contact with an element that should not be brought into their lives” (*New York Times* 1894).<sup>12</sup> This argument closely mirrors the one about who ought to be able to access poetry, as members of the would-be Poetry Society attempted to define and revive their genre for a new century. Despite decades of American literary life dominated by the masculine cry for “democracy” and freedom (of verse form, of life), actually emulating Whitman did not feature as a stated goal for the groups of poetry writers, editors, and enthusiasts trying to build an institution to support and encourage American poetry. That is, many members of the literary circles attempting to revivify poetry thought keeping the existing barriers in place, such as the

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<sup>12</sup> For more on women against women’s suffrage, see Susan Goodier’s *No Votes for Women: The New York State Anti-Suffrage Movement* (2013) and Susan E. Marshall’s *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign against Woman Suffrage* (1997).

tendency for books to be published by vanity presses paid for by the poets, was a benefit, excluding “ignorant” participants and keeping “refined” readers and writers separate, to borrow the language of the anti-suffrage argument. The fear of engagement with the wide variety of the American populace, women, people of color, and the working poor included, underpinned many social debates particularly as transportation and communication had increased so dramatically in the past century,<sup>13</sup> making more people figuratively closer to each other, and as people increasingly flocked to urban centers, making them literally closer.

Retrospectively, the invention of the new woman as a cultural concept did not fundamentally change the roles of women in society; rather, it made possible limited social mobility for certain kinds of women. The new woman “stood for the middle- to upper-middle-class woman’s evolutionary progress toward modernity and, in particular, her movement from the home to the public sphere” (Todd 2). And of course, that presupposes white women. This movement did not appear out of thin air; instead, the leisure class of politically- and socially-engaged women from the mid-to-late 1800s introduced their daughters into institutions and habits that made way for a larger cultural recognition of their new roles. Initially these shifts related to educational opportunities and community leadership positions: “Thanks to the establishment of women’s colleges, these young women received a higher education in the 1870s and 1880s and pursued careers as teachers, social reformers, health experts, writers, artists, and physicians in the years up to the First World War” (Todd 2). Many of these roles were still nurturing

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<sup>13</sup> The railroad and telegraph brought the most radical changes to the previous century, while the turn into the twentieth century brought the automobile, radio, telephone, airplane, and more, all of which dramatically altered human perceptions of distance.



roles, but they might include work for the community more broadly than one's own family: "These women, like their mothers, adhered to the values of community service rooted in small-town America and concentrated their efforts on social justice, world peace, and remedying the ills of industrializing cities." Such women saw community engagement not as a continuation of progress but as a reaction against the problems of the changing world. And indeed, some women were able to blend conceptions of the true woman with activism and engagement: "In such activities and in their campaigns for suffrage many first-generation new women retained ideals of female virtue and nurturance from earlier decades, making a place for themselves in the political arena as the nation's caretakers, its guardians of spiritual resources" (ibid). The new woman, however she was framed, was thus not free from gender expectations; she simply expanded what was possible for and expected of women. Women and men were generally still considered fundamentally, inherently distinct, with distinct roles even in public sector work and activism. Woman's association with the domestic space has relegated much of her literary and artistic work to that sphere as well: her work is always partial, limited in scope, suitable for other women but not men, who are an impartial, universal audience.

The white new woman underlies the conflicts at the heart of Teasdale's and Millay's sonnets: for Teasdale in *Sonnets to Duse*, admiring a new woman while also being in some ways conservative, resisting the oncoming social tendencies, meant that in her earliest published sonnets her sense of self as an artist was nascent and depended heavily on a muse or role model who could help her develop a voice; for Millay in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, the freedoms of modernity did not seem to extend into

marriage, and her speaker struggles to be both an individual self and a wife within the space of the sonnet. This manifests differently for Johnson, for personal and cultural reasons. As women are subject to the “unwarranted discourse,” black people are subject to a similar set of cultural expectations imposed upon them to which they respond in various ways.<sup>14</sup> Johnson’s relationship to faith connects to the struggles of black women a generation before her to be considered morally upright; while their white peers wanted more sexual freedom, black women often sought to prove that they were not sexually “free” or promiscuous. Thus, black families’ investment in producing children who are morally correct, often grounded in Christianity, can be seen in part as a response to a culture that refuses to judge black people on the same criteria as white people.<sup>15</sup> Johnson takes up issues of propriety playfully in some of her non-sonnet poems, but the structure of the sonnet allows her to grapple with the more painful issues of faith, blackness, and womanhood.

Later, the movement of the new woman would come to encompass greater sexual freedom, reproductive rights, suffrage, new fashions (the flapper is an evolution of the new woman), and more, but its prominence at the turn of the century was certainly aided by its presence in literature, most notably the novels of Henry James and the plays of Henrik Ibsen. These writers embraced new ways of writing women, contributing to the public visibility of the new woman, especially among the educated, literary class.

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<sup>14</sup> For more, see Frantz Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” (1952).

<sup>15</sup> Ammons notes well the ways racism manifested during the women’s movements of the turn into the twentieth century, differentiating the strategies of white and black women even as women’s equality and freedom were their shared goals; Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* while not religious in focus takes up the challenge for black people and parents in particular today.

But women writers also contributed to enriching the possible models of being a woman, not only by creating female characters who were self-confident, motivated, and bold outside the confines of traditional marriages, but also by engaging with issues of woman-as-artist. Even today stereotypes of femininity are at odds with the traits perceived necessary for success in most high-profile fields, business, art, and entrepreneurship among them. Culturally, we still tend to associate genius and leadership with masculine tendencies, a century after these three women were working. But at the turn into the twentieth century, the issue of woman-as-artist vexed ambitious women writers even more. Though wealthy women learned to paint and draw from tutors as one of many domestic traits that made them attractive wives, and some women even found work as teachers of art or as copyists, the opportunity to be a creative artist on one's own was limited (Ammons). Women were by and large not considered capable of artistic genius—they could emulate or teach but not create something innovative or interesting. Compounding this perceptual problem, the demands of marriage and motherhood limited the opportunities for even the most talented women; Ammons examines seventeen Progressive Era novelists in her study, noting that the most successful of them either did not marry, were married only briefly, or published primarily before their marriages. Further, most of these successful Progressive Era novelists were not mothers. This pattern is replicated in the careers of the women in my study: Teasdale's husband's wealth made much of her later career possible, but his absence and their subsequent divorce obviated much of the labor of marriage; Millay married late and did not have children; and the pressures of single motherhood after her divorce pushed Johnson out of publishing after a relatively short career. Ammons

focuses specifically on the female *Kunstlerroman* to show that Progressive Era women novelists were engaged directly in writing into the literary record new possibilities for the female artist and thereby establishing themselves as artists, not just domestic writers—the “artist” being the higher category than domestic writer, copyist, teacher, or dilettante. As my examinations of Teasdale, Millay, and Johnson will show, they, too, were deeply engaged in the issue of female writer as artist, and, as I will argue, the sonnet form itself inherently thematized the artist’s struggle.

The race and class differences among my chosen poets might raise the question of the value of reading them together. I do not argue that sex or gender essentially unite all women, but the cultural conception of womanhood does bear, to a greater or lesser degree, on all women who present as such. Though they vary in age, location, family history, opinions, goals, ideals, religion, race, class, and more, “What they share is gender; historical moment; somewhat more tenuously, language [...]; and even more tenuously, nationality” (Donovan 233). More to the point that these poets engage with, “Women are alike by being the subject of an unwarranted discourse” (Clark 12). That is to say, the cultural expectations put on women limit and affect everyone living under that system. The cultural expectation that an artist cannot be a woman affects even women who proudly claim to be artists. Sexist and racist realities of publishing, networking, and being taken seriously upon publication all affect most women writers, though these three succeeded in publishing excellent work. Studying women together also counters historical trends in studying men exclusively; Ammons cautions against studies of women writers becoming “ghettoized,” limiting women’s work to discussions of women writers as women specifically and not taking them seriously as universal or

impartial writers. But as she seeks to in her study, I also seek to address a dearth of work on these important women writers who all engage deeply with issues of gender and are affected by issues of gender. Reading several women whose responses to their cultural circumstances vary, also enriches the conception of women writers in general and their time period. Reading women writers seriously critiques the still-present cultural image of “woman” as a single category based on “the notion of an essentialist subject, the mistaken idea that women are all alike” (Clark 12). So I take up these women writers carefully, in the context of multiplicities of women’s concerns and priorities of their time periods and the ones that shaped them as they grew up and established themselves as poets, without attempting to make claims about all women writers, all women sonnet writers, or all women in the early twentieth century. Rather, my readings of these sonnets establish the varied possibilities of the sonnet to engage with irresolvable questions of personal and poetic identity, elements of which are shared across these distinct and distinctive sonnets. These women, born at roughly decade intervals from the 1880s to 1900s, and their poems, taken from the 1900s and 1920s at different stages of their careers, are meant to highlight the possibilities the sonnet form provides for engaging with those problems of the self, particularly in this period when the role of women writers was changing so rapidly.

## CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 analyzes Teasdale’s sonnet sequence to the celebrated actress Eleonora Duse. Teasdale’s sequence *Sonnets to Duse* (1907) owes a great deal to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sequence to George Sand (1844); both twist the gendered expectation of the

romantic sonnet celebrating a beautiful and famous woman, and, in extending their commentaries from single sonnets into sequences, they complicate their initial claims about identity, femininity, the role of the author, the function of the poem as a public document. Teasdale adapts the acceptable subjects for honorific verse to include popular culture, a new kind of celebrity just then coming to exist; the distinctly contemporary public figure of Eleonora Duse directly challenged accepted beliefs about femininity, identity, and performance, while Teasdale's series of meditations on her persona challenge the traditional blazon and romantic sequence and explore Duse as an object of public desire. While a "traditional" sonnet objectifies a woman's beauty, inventorying her assets, Teasdale's sequence allows a female speaker and writer to simultaneously participate in and critique this poetic history. My reading of Teasdale's version of a love sequence casts new light on the history of love sequences, the relationship between speaker and object, and the nature of public identity in the early twentieth century. Positioning this chapter on Teasdale's sequence next to the chapter on Millay's illuminates their similarities in invoking the past and differences in their use of form and treatment of the subject. These radically different ways of discussing love, and radically different loves, represent changes in relationships and gender conventions during the period, demonstrating how these two modern sonneteers used an enduring form to question the possibility of endurance for received notions of romantic love.

Engaging with nineteenth-century predecessors, Millay like Teasdale revises the sonnet sequence to address her contemporary cultural context. Because sonnet sequences are usually not included in full in later anthologies, their complete structure and original historical allusions are often overlooked as well as the particular poems that

constitute them; I work toward remedying this oversight by comparing Teasdale's and Millay's sequences to their direct predecessors, highlighting the line of inheritance as well as the unique and culturally specific conflicts Teasdale's and Millay's sequences take up. The sonnet sequence, unlike sequential quatrains or heroic couplets, generally does not move into narrative. Instead, interrelated mediative lyrics on a single subject or group of closely related subjects tend to comprise sonnet sequences, from Petrarch through the early twentieth century. The two-part form of both Petrarchan and Shakespearian sonnets allows a speaker to inhabit two views in the same mind, and the sonnet sequence provides further means for speakers to inhabit multiple positions; in the early twentieth century, modern sonnet writers reworked the sonnet sequence, questioning and commenting on received notions of gender, subjectivity, and reality much like the modernists did in other poetic forms. These chapters use Millay and Teasdale, both popular, famous poets of their time, and both of whom wrote sonnets individually and in sequence, to show the unique possibilities of the sonnet sequence for the fragmentary, questioning cultural context of early twentieth-century America. Both sonnet sequences I analyze adapt flexibly to contemporary questions while invoking sequences of the previous century to heighten their arguments; having a stronger power of reference than a single sonnet because of their lengthened form and relative rarity, the sonnet sequence is able to extend the historical/contemporary arguments made in single sonnets.

The focus of Chapter 3, Millay's 1923 sonnet sequence *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* adapts several formal elements of George Meredith's famous 1862 sequence *Modern Love*, including variations in line length borrowed from his elongated

sonnets (sixteen lines each) and perspective (her poems are in the third person from the perspective of the wife in a failing marriage; his vary but often take a similar subject position); in so doing, Millay reworks Meredith's vision of marriage and love to include the perspective of a wife who is not a mother. Millay's sequence does not make a single argument about marriage in general or the subject's specific marriage, but rather considers multiple visions—snapshots—of a scene of death and ending to offer no definitive conclusions about contemporary womanhood. Meredith more than Millay fills his sonnets with descriptions of the person the “speaker” (or view taken by the third-person narrator) feels disconnected from, whereas Millay's speaker only mentions her spouse in passing, making the female speaker neither object nor objectifier; both sequences thereby reverse expectation, substituting for unfulfilled, idealizing love the sad, un-ideal fulfillment of love that has become unhappy marriage. Millay writes around the dying husband, focusing attention on nearly everything but him and the couple's lost child. In the face of death, the speaker sees renewal and new life, but also loss and lost potential. The sonnet sequence extends the images of a single sonnet and allows Millay to comment on the role of time as both linear and cyclical; as life is, so too is poetic tradition linear and cyclical, as this sequence demonstrates. Using Meredith so deliberately as a thematic and formal model allows Millay to experiment within established tradition (extending her lines as Meredith extended his poems), granting her more freedom to break with the dominant tradition in form and perspective.

Chapter 4 studies neglected Harlem Renaissance poet Helene Johnson (1906-1995). Johnson never published a book of her own poetry; in fact, her poems, which vary in structure and topic, appeared in literary magazines for about ten years before she



stopped publishing (and responding to interview requests.) As a result of her short career, compounded by her lack of self-promotion, readers and editors scarcely remember her today. Johnson began her publishing career as the winner of a contest in the Harlem Renaissance magazine *Opportunity* in 1925, which resulted in the 1926 publication of six of her poems; interestingly, one of the judges of that contest deeming her a true talent, was Robert Frost himself (Mitchell 16). She was also published in *Fire!!*, the avant-garde magazine of the “younger negro artists” (1926). The following year her poem “Bottled,” for which she is now best known, appeared in *Vanity Fair*. She continued publishing in magazines until 1937 and continued writing until her death in 1995, but remained little known or studied. Throughout her career, she published only a few sonnets, and like Frost she returned to the form periodically but not consistently. Her work helps to illuminate the varied ways the early century sonneteers were deploying the genre, enhancing our readings of both authors and the form itself. By reading Johnson’s sonnets in the intersecting histories of early-twentieth-century American poetry, the continued vibrancy of the sonnet form, and the flourishing of black literary culture especially in little magazines, I unearth and clarify her contribution to all three of those stories.

My studies draw multiple lines from the sonnet’s history into a period better known for free verse in America, reconsidering now-overlooked authors in the context of genre studies. The previous dearth of such studies has allowed a century of misreadings of these poets and others who continued to use the sonnet form, a misunderstanding of the modernist period in literature as more disruptive from its immediate past than it really was, and the exclusion of great poems and poets from

textbooks, syllabi, and conference programs. In applying accepted views of sonnet studies to a period from which they have been excluded, my dissertation enriches both fields and lays the groundwork for further work on the early twentieth century sonnet, by these and other authors.

CHAPTER II  
SARA TEASDALE'S *SONNETS TO DUSE* AS A  
VISION OF THE NEW WOMAN

This chapter is the first of three analyses of how the sonnet form found purchase in the early twentieth century as a staging ground, or a stage, for personal identity conflicts specifically rooted in the same contemporary issues dealt with by other, less “traditional” poets: gender and sexuality, the role of art, the relationship between faith and science, race, class, and the self in all these changing contexts. I argue that the sonnet’s arguments often hinge on temporariness; their “resolutions” (often achieved in the sestet) are frequently illusory or conditional, and rereading reveals their weaknesses, thus heightening the effect of the original conflict or implicit duality—which is just as often a multiplicity of subject positions, not just two. The dual issues of time and space in the sonnet are not entirely new, but I link them to discuss the logical possibilities of the poem form in this time period and offer readings of neglected poems, making my contribution one to both formal scholarship and author scholarship.

In addition, this chapter offers a recovery of a lost poet, the then-famous lyricist Sara Teasdale. Celebrating Teasdale’s poetic accomplishment, as I did in the Introduction, contributes to demonstrating that these sonnet writers are worth recovering and studying as formalists: in the early-twentieth century, writers, editors, and the reading public were more diverse in their reading tastes than many readers now assume. The narrative of Modernism was established in the mid-twentieth century through editorial decisions in creating the popular anthologies of the preceding decades, and in turn trends in scholarship affected what was taught to the next generations of literary

scholars, leading to a loss of at least half—if not much more—of the poetry published, read, awarded, and discussed in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Today, scholars are critiquing this conventional narrative and complicating it: renewed interest in women’s writing, ethnic American writing, international literary production, along with the middlebrow, magazines, the pulp, and more all lay the foundation for my work, revealing the ways the authors I study were deeply embedded in literary and cultural life at the time. Teasdale’s early work reveals one approach emerging poetic talents took to engage with literary history in the context of rapid social change, using it to both test poetic skill and question the possibility of inhabiting the form—of the sonnet, of the new woman, of the artist—which demonstrates the continued usefulness of the sonnet form.

A decade before her award for *Love Songs*, Teasdale published *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems* (1907), her first collection, which puts into conversation her varied views on women in poetry (and the arts more generally) and women artists. Lacking current examples in poetry of how to be a “new woman” and how to inhabit a public, performing identity as the speaking subject, Teasdale turned to historical models, like Helen of Troy and Sappho (whom she imagined to suit her needs), as well as contemporary actresses, Duse primary among them. In a similar way, she looked to one of the previous century’s most famous poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and her sonnets wrestling with poetic and female identity: the George Sand sonnets. *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems* features, most notably, an eight-sonnet sequence to the Italian actress Eleonora Duse, as well as poems to Sappho, one a sonnet and one sonnet-like,

and a sonnet to Teasdale's teacher, Lillie Rose Ernst.<sup>16</sup> These sonnets are written by a young writer embarking on a career, establishing a new identity; but they take the form of the past. To the limited extent that Teasdale is studied, it is not for these poems in this early volume, so their analysis doubly rectifies a historical problem in the study of American verse, the effects of which are a singular story about a multivocal period and the loss of this significant poetry from the current consciousness.

*Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems* states clearly its project: to introduce a new poetic voice through poems about relationships to other artists, and the sonnet functions to emphasize the poet's relationship to the history of its art form. By couching her own identity in terms of other identities, Teasdale both claims similarity to these esteemed role models and feigns modesty through distancing her art from the quality of theirs. Understanding the ways Teasdale struggles with establishing her poetic identity through the sonnet form itself requires a consideration of the sonnet's history, specifically Paul Oppenheimer's history of the sonnet as the first personal poetic genre and Jennifer Ann Wagner's history of the sonnet as a "moment's monument," or a form that exists in space and time. In occupying private but shared space and recursive time that is simultaneously temporary, the sonnet is itself experienced in contradictions.

While some summaries of the form assert that it "resolves" its conflicts or "tensions" in its sestet, I argue that in these poems Teasdale does not find resolution, though she searches for it. Ultimately, in these poems, identity is not knowable, and the

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<sup>16</sup> I analyze mainly poems that are clearly sonnets, but occasionally I look at poems I call "sonnet-like"; by this I mean that understanding its form through the lens of the sonnet, analyzing it in relation to the sonnet, helps us to understand the poem specifically and the author's use of form in a useful way.

speaker's descriptions of Duse's self-veiling and performing also apply to the poet herself.

Poetic identity is contingent, bound to a historical moment, often tentative, and a performance for a specific audience, and Teasdale uses these poems both to reflect on and create a poetic identity that responds to these general concerns while also negotiating the role of the female artist in her historical situation. Teasdale biographer William Drake characterizes her use female figures as a kind of hero-worship:

The central figures in Sara's youthful literary imagination were all women—strikingly beautiful, but the victims of sexual tragedy because of their appeal to men—Helen, Sappho, Guenevere, Eleonora Duse. 'I think that I am far more likely to idealize women than men,' she wrote [her friend John Myers] O'Hara. 'I should like to know a woman who is all that I should love to be myself.' (24)

But instead of mere hero-worship, I show that these poems display through tensions that are not ultimately resolved the conflict present in the early-twentieth century about what a woman could be, both in life and as an artist, and especially as a new poet establishing herself. Though Teasdale would later dismiss these poems as "girlish" in their evidently straightforward admiration for the actress, more evidence Drake uses to dismiss them, in their praise they also yet reveal conflict, confusion, and the desire to know more than is ultimately knowable—about Duse and the speaker/poet herself. Teasdale's *Sonnets to Duse* and selected other sonnets use the sonnet form to argue three things: that gender is a performance; that poetry is a way of performing, generally and gender-specifically; and that perhaps the only possible resolution to the conflict, for people who are ill at

ease with the idea that identity might not exist, is analogy (being like what came before you). She looks to Duse as a muse (a generative source of inspiration), a role model (an exemplary artist to emulate), and a Petrarchan beloved (an archetype to fill a role in the poem) to weave together multiple threads of poetic history, from the Greek to the Italian to the Victorian, and ultimately to conclude that her poetic ability might not be commensurate to Duse's—or, perhaps, that there is no Duse for her poetry to capture, because her art, too, is artifice.

Though I focus on the sonnets, *Sonnets to Duse* contains a variety of poem types, including lyrics like the ones for which Teasdale would become most famous; many of these non-sonnets take up similar themes, to which I refer where relevant to my argument about the function of the sonnets. In addition to the sonnet, Teasdale experimented with other inherited forms, writing children's rhymes, lyrics with ballad influences, and a variation on the French form the triolet. These poems were not granted much attention even upon their publication in 1907, though they are rich in meaning and ripe for further study. My chapter goes against critical consensus in this focus, because then and throughout her career Teasdale was known as a lyricist, not a writer of sonnets. For instance, Arthur Symons, literary critic in England, reviewed the book for the *London Saturday Review*, with particular praise for the lyrics:

In this little American book there is poetry, a voice singing to itself and to a great woman, a woman's homage to Eleanora Duse. The sonnets to Madame Duse are hardly the best part of the book, for they speak and the lyrics sing; but they speak with a reverence which is filled with both tenderness and just admiration. ... The book is a small, delightful thing,

which one is not tempted to say much about, but to welcome. (Quoted in Rittenhouse 4)

Here, the sonnets are fine and with a fine subject, but are not what makes the work most compelling. Biographer Drake, too, thinks Teasdale came more into her own throughout her career, as she set aside imitating others (first directly, translating the Germans, then by taking up common subjects and forms as in “Guenevere” and the Duse sonnets), eventually coming into her own lyric voice. Notably, even this most famous of the “rhymesters” was better known for her least-formal rhyming verses.

I strive not to make these readings biographical, though some details about Teasdale do influence my interpretations of these poems, most notably her age and the stage of her career. I do not claim that she wrote after the model of Barrett Browning or Wroth, but these poets are direct or indirect role models nearly as much as Duse is, because the history of the sonnet and the nature of poetic education at Teasdale’s time would mean that these issues of female identity and poetics were known to the audience and author (and speaker) through these earlier poems. I treat the speaker as closely analogous to Teasdale, but instances of demonstrable distance between the two add another layer of performance and persona that contributes to the speaker’s anxiety about authentic identity and ways of being in the world. Personally, I suspect that Teasdale was herself anxious about how to enter into this form and career, and that anxiety contributes to any slippage between author and speaker in which I engage in this section, but most simply it is the case that this book and these sonnets take up a persona, carried throughout many different poems, of an emerging artist unsure of her identity and trying to establish it through poetry, facts true of Teasdale as well. Poetry is a way of writing a



self, temporarily constructing one version of self-consciousness; Oppenheimer notes that Yeats once said that in revising his poems he revised himself, which in this context speaks to the power of the poet and the troubling (for some) lack of a “real” object to which to refer in the sonnet (*Birth* 32). Teasdale is constructing a new version of herself, a female poet, just as she is writing a version of Duse that the woman Eleonora Duse would likely not recognize. The layers of construction in these poems attempt to build identities but ultimately suggest such an endeavor may be futile. They make enduring one attempt at reconciling the conflicted desires, values, and beliefs of their writer, an attempt facilitated by a form that suggests logical and historical relationships between its parts; thus the sonnet’s versions of the self are already contextualized through the history of the form, even if they are also of their time.

These poems appear to be about an actress the poet admired, but in fact they are about a new poet stepping into the public, declaring herself to be someone, even if that “someone” is not a unified whole but a series of uncertainties. By writing in the original “personal” poetic form, Teasdale’s voice is filtered through a history of individuals staging identity conflicts through a “silent” form of poetry. Unlike Duse, Teasdale does not speak aloud to a collective audience through her art. The sonnet originated along with silent reading, and rewards private reflection (on the parts of reader and author). Thus, Oppenheimer argues, the sonnet stages internal conflict and was the first poem form to be “personal” in this way.<sup>17</sup> The Duse sonnets are “about” Duse, but they are also about Sara Teasdale’s attempts to write her way into a legible identity, as Petrarch’s

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<sup>17</sup> Other poems can also provide the space to work through personal identity conflicts, but those were through creative uses of existing forms, whereas this form was created in a way that not only allows but enhances these themes. See Oppenheimer “Introduction” for more on silent reading specifically.

sonnets reveal more about Petrarch than his beloved; they allow Teasdale's speaker to work out conflicts she had about being a woman and poet, to reconcile silence and poetic speaking. In each of these ways—silence and voice, expectations of women historically and as Teasdale wrote, and the various ways those conflict—the sonnet's rich history and unique form deepen the palette available to Teasdale in these poems.

“TO L.R.E.”: THE SEARCH FOR A FEMALE ROLE MODEL

As Teasdale searched for a “guardian angel” in Duse, she also looked to other women, including her teacher. This poem to Lillie Rose Ernst raises some of the same issues as the Duse poems: the difficulty of knowing a role model or other person, the desire for a role model, and the usefulness of the sonnet to stand on its own while also harkening to the poetic past.

To L. R. E.

When first I saw you — felt you take my hand,

I could not speak for happiness to find

How more than all they said your heart was kind,

How strong you were, and quick to understand —

I dared not say: “I who am least of those

Who call you friend — I love you, and I crave

A little love that I may be more brave

Because one watches me who cares and knows.”

So, silent, long ago I used to look

High up along the shelves at one great book,

And longed to see its contents, childishwise,  
And now I know it for my Poet's own, —  
So sometime shall I know you and be known,  
And looking upward, I shall find your eyes.

*(Sonnets to Duse 25)*

The speaker's voice is silenced in awe of her role model's presence, which suggests her poetic abilities, too, are muted by the pressure of emulating her forebear. Additionally, the speaker's inability to fully see or understand what is concealed from her—in this case “one great book” (10)—leads her to reflect on her ability to know more generally. Here, and in the Duse sonnets, this unknowability leads to reflections on time and memory; some things, like exposure to Ernst's work, come in time. The yearning to be able to reach the “one great book,” too, suggests that her teacher gave the speaker access to the great works of the past. Her desire to emulate Ernst is a synecdoche for her intimidation in the face of the great poetry informing them both, to which the sonnet form refers as well. Even when she establishes her own poetic reputation in the poem's concluding pair of lines, the speaker imagines still “looking upward” for approval from her role models.

This stance is common for poets of all genders, but women in particular; often books of poetry by women begin with an apologetic poem or preferatory note humbling the author and thanking the reader for overlooking their poor verses. Among the earliest of American women poets, Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) offers a particularly humble example in the first line of her poem “The Author to Her Book,” calling her poems “ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain.” Teasdale does not adopt such a dramatically self-

abnegating stance, but she nonetheless puts her poetic speaker in a position of admiration and humility. The speaker casts herself as small, looking up at Ernst and her work, but also as a student needing to learn. This has the effect of indirectly apologizing for her attempts to be like someone as wonderful as Ernst (or Sappho, or Duse). Thus, this humble stance can be read as both “true”—the speaker admires Ernst and wants to be like her—but also as a traditional strategy that poets engage in as a convention, not necessarily to be interpreted as “actual” humility or apology (after all, these poets all submitted their work for publication). The adoption of an ostentatiously humble persona in poetry by women has historically been one of many ways that poetic performance of gender is most obvious.

This poem to Ernst is organized by expected sonnet conventions, with a sentence end where a volta would be expected, a concluding phrase of two lines, and a couplet, though the last of these comes out of expected order. The couplet in question, one not part of an enveloped quatrain (ABBA), is in lines 9-10: “So, silent, long ago I used to look / High up along the shelves at one great book[.]” Noting the inverted order of quatrain and couplet calls attention to the organization of the poem, but this pair of lines does not offer a pat “solution” or stand-alone message. Rather, it has the effect of making the end of the poem less emphatic, complicating the traditional reading of the sestet as a resolution. Additionally, though there is a period at the end of line 8, there is not a clear thematic turn between the two sentences at that point—though the second sentence, which comprises the sestet, eventually turns into the present tense, suggesting an eventual evolution of the poet’s position. The poem suggests that the speaker’s relationship to her role model, and by extension her ability to break the “silence” and

write, is not finished. Teasdale's adherence to what is expected along with variation and subtle misleading suggest the kinds of play in which Teasdale will engage with the form throughout this collection: she seeks both to copy those who offer her inspiration and to make her own mark.

Ernst was an obvious role model for Teasdale, along with her friends "The Potters." Ernst was an "adviser" to their literary group, who produced the magazine *The Potter's Wheel*, and was also a public figure locally, working for public education (Schoen 19). The Potters helped shape Teasdale's work during this period both through their salon-like meetings and through their shared interests, which included actresses including Duse. Beginning in 1904, Teasdale and friends Caroline Risque, a painter and sculptor; Williamina Parrish, the magazine's editor as well as a photographer, painter, and poet; her sister Grace Parrish, also a photographer; and other friends and acquaintances of theirs, met as a sort of artistic salon under the mentorship of Ernst. They created their first magazine issue in November of 1904. "Little Magazine" might overstate the publication of the volume, though, as each edition comprised only one issue: "This unique publication was limited to one copy each month and was entirely in manuscript with original illustrations in photograph, black and white, and in color" (Rittenhouse 4). Issues included photos, illustrations, drama, prose, poetry, and more; various contributors over the three years of magazine's existence added their disparate talents to the group that nurtured the poet's practice and sensibility.

Their location, in St. Louis, was fortuitous not only for bringing them together under Ernst's mentorship; the city was then rich with literary and artistic exchange. Its local paper, *The St. Louis Mirror*, edited since the 1890s by William Reedy, had

emerged as a powerful literary force, and Reedy's tastes seem to have shaped those of his public. Reedy was somewhat ahead of his times, rejecting Romanticism and publishing work and criticism that pushed convention in the period before Modernism would emerge as the definitive new mode in the 1910s. *The Mirror* published some of Teasdale's earliest work, including her 1907 blank-verse poem "Guenevere," written during a period of personal and cultural infatuation with Arthurian Legend. The poem of praise for a woman who was beloved for beauty and adventure was a precursor to the sonnets that anchor her first book.

Ernst seems to have been a role model for Teasdale in a straightforward way; she provided Teasdale with a personal relationship with a woman whose interests in education, literature, and the arts directly nurtured Teasdale's own. The sonnet to Ernst reveals the speaker's anxiety about trying to emulate her teacher, not about the parts of Ernst she might not have access to or want to copy. The inaccessibility of Ernst in this poem could be a conflict with the book's larger project, which included some poems aimed at children, and Teasdale's larger career, which included collections for children, in wanting to be like her role model while also not alienating new readers. But if that is a critique, it is a mild one. This poem's themes of silence and hand-holding are both revealing for the rest of the book; silence in this poem clearly refers to the lack of poetic production; the speaker is struggling with feeling able to speak as a poet, which requires the love of her role model "that I may be more brave" (7). In the poems to Duse and Sappho, silence takes on other characteristics, but this meaning remains important as well. The repeated desire to hold hands, in this poem expressed in a memory of Ernst "tak[ing] my hand," with the female artists she admires seems to suggest a figurative

passing of a baton, a thread of influence, but also a leading, as a parent would lead a child by the hand toward their destination. As Ernst was a teacher and mentor for Teasdale and her friends, this makes reasonable sense. But again, as in the poems to Sappho and Duse, the longing to have this kind of relationship is also figured in somewhat more erotic terms, so that the hand holding suggests multiple implied relationships between subject and speaker. The Ernst poem's relatively straightforward desire for a role model helps to establish some of the ideas and desires present in the other sonnets in this volume.

On the other hand, the other role models taken up by Teasdale serve more complicated purposes. The major component of the book, the eight sonnets to Duse, confronts the contemporary situation of women, about which the speaker feels some ambivalence for herself and her ostensible subject.

#### SONNETS TO DUSE AND PERFORMING THE SELF

In *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems*, the emergent author investigates her identity in several poems. But in nearly every case the "subject" of the poem is not the speaker, such that what the reader learns about the speaker is by way of interpreting her stated feelings about her idols. The Duse sonnets number eight, with an added poem that is three couplets long. Formally, this might mimic the caudate or "tailed sonnet," a kind of sonnet adaptation little used in English (the content of the last poem is similar in both topic and imagery to the eighth sonnet, so running them together could make some sense). This sequence, taken along with the "To Sappho" poems and "To L. R. E.," show the emergent poet's attempts to establish herself in the likeness of women artists

she admires, not only Duse, Sappho, and teacher Lillie Rose Ernst, but also Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Mary Wroth, in her adaptation of their forms. The theme of identity, veiling and revealing the self (with hair specifically in some cases), alludes clearly to Barrett Browning's George Sand sonnets, a pair of poems written in 1844 to the French novelist. The themes of mirroring, of wanting to be like the adored subject of the poems, reflects too a theme of Wroth's first-ever sonnet sequence by a woman as a way for women to inhabit a masculine form, and picks up issues in the George Sand poems of wanting to be both like and distinct from the role model.

Teasdale's speaker states most clearly her relationship to the main poetic subject, Eleonora Duse, in the concluding lines of "To a Picture of Eleonora Duse as 'Francesca da Rimini' (6)":

If ever I have pictured in a dream  
My guardian angel, she is like to this,  
Her eyes know joy, yet sorrow lingers there,  
And on her lips the shadow of a kiss.

(lines 11-14)

This poem describes a photograph of an actress, so its layers of performance and presentation call authenticity, even "identity"—a concept even more abstract—, into question. These concluding four lines follow ten others full of metaphorical descriptions of Duse, not "pictures" of her, but analogies interpreting how she appears in a photograph. Thus, the line "If ever I have pictured ... my guardian angel, she is like to this," is not as straightforward in context as it reads on its own. She is "like to" or similar to these analogous images of flowers, and those images might have come "in a



dream,” “if” indeed they have been pictured at all. The poem states that the woman photographed is a guardian angel, even while denying the possibility that she would dare to say so. The ekphrastic and blazon elements of this and other sonnets in this sequence are also raised here; those will be discussed later in this chapter.

But the speaker’s reluctance to state too boldly her desires in the sonnet, conventionally the poem of amorous love by men for remote, objectified women, is part of a long tradition of women writers having to carefully navigate conflicted expectations of women with expectations of the sonnet form.

Beginning with Wroth, women writers have written despite gendered expectations in various ways, and the sonnet has adapted to accommodate those new ideas and identities. It is true both that the sonnet has a history that is present in each new instantiation of the form and that the form adapts to new ways of investigating conflict extremely well; this seemingly paradoxical relationship to its own past explains the durability of the sonnet and adds depth to these poems of poetic persona.



*Figure 1* Eleonora Duse, photograph from Teasdale's *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems*.

Eleonora Duse (DOO-zay, 1858-1924) was one of the world’s most famous actresses from the 1890s until her death. She was raised by actors, and had traveled with

theater groups since childhood, emerging as an actor in her own right as a teen.<sup>18</sup> Her personal life was famously complicated:

Duse had plenty of pain to endure in her formative years, losing her much-loved mother when she was 14 and falling prey to the first of a series of unsatisfactory men when she was 20. Martino Cafiero, a Neapolitan newspaper editor, was the father of her son but refused to acknowledge him and remained unmoved when the boy died in infancy.

(Nightengale)

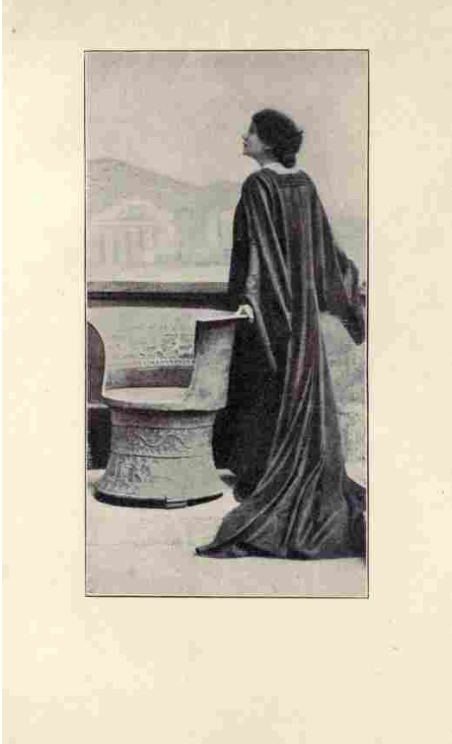
Cafiero was also openly cruel: “he returned a photo of mother and baby inscribed with a word implying Duse was a whore” (ibid). As she established her adult career, she performed in both classic plays and new pieces by writers including Dumas and Ibsen. She created her own acting company in the 1880s, which toured the US and Europe. Her first husband, Tebaldo Checchi, was an actor in the same traveling acting company; they separated during an international tour in South America in 1885, because Duse and another actor, Flavio Andò, were having an affair. This situation fittingly matched the plot of the play they were performing, *Cavalleria rusticana*, in which Checchi played the husband and Andò the lover to Duse’s character Santuzza (De Francisci 99). Thereafter, touring and performing was an important part of Duse’s career in part because she needed to support her daughter, who lived at boarding schools during her mother’s tours, and to prevent Checchi from taking the child from her back to South America, where he had stayed after their divorce (99). She later took up with the playwright d’Annunzio, in

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<sup>18</sup> The three photos reproduced in this chapter appear in Teasdale’s book, the first opposite the title page, the second facing “To a Picture of Eleonora Duse in the Dead City [4],” and the last opposite “To a Picture of Eleonora Duse as ‘Francesca da Ramini’” [6].

whose plays she performed. She was known to have also been terribly mistreated by some of her lovers, d'Annunzio among them (though he was known to be terrible to all his lovers). Between these romances, she was known to have other relationships, which were rumored to include possible affairs with other women. But she was notoriously silent about her personal life, never speaking to writers. She did not court the press, but her performances ensured her fame nonetheless.

The kinds of praise Duse received pointed to the ways she distinguished herself from other great actresses of her time; she was considered more “natural” and by some critics a markedly better interpreter of the text of plays than some of her “rivals,” including the better-remembered Sarah Bernhardt. The contemporary reviews of Duse available in English might well be the ones Teasdale herself read; Teasdale’s praise often sounds very similar to those contemporary written evaluations I cite in this section. These reviews agreed that Duse was uniquely able to express the ideal feeling for her character; she was not only an excellent analyst of text and her character’s role in the larger play, but she then managed to convey that vision frictionlessly. That is, a viewer did not feel he was watching Eleonora Duse, but rather the character she was performing; her performance might be so excellent as to distract from the rest of the play, but her persona was not a distraction from her character. This element is shown most clearly in a comparative essay by George Bernard Shaw, who explains after seeing both actresses perform in the same role one week, that when watching Bernhardt, the viewer is always aware that “the woman is always the same. She does not enter into the leading character; she substitutes herself for it” (“Duse and Bernhardt” 128).



*Figure 2* Eleonora Duse, from Teasdale's book.

As to Duse's depth of reading and analysis, her ability to convey subtle themes from the text to the audience using her face and body as a vehicle, often without the benefit of a shared language, Shaw asserts she is beyond compare: "[Bernhardt] did not trouble us with any fuss about the main theme of Sudermann's play, the revolt of the modern woman against that ideal of home which exacts the sacrifice of her whole life to its care, not by her grace..., but as a right which it has to the services of the females as abject slaves. In fact,

there is no reason to suspect Madame Bernhardt

of having discovered any such theme in the play; though Duse, with one look at Schwartze, the father, nailed it to the stage as the subject of the impending dramatic struggle before she had been five minutes on the scene" (130). According to Shaw, in her performance, Duse furthers the viewer's experience of the whole play—when the viewer is not distracted by her effortless performance, that is: "Duse, with her genius, is so fascinating that it is positively difficult to attend to the play instead of attending wholly to her" (Shaw "Two Plays" 123-124). Most important, Shaw stresses the final element that would have made Duse interesting to Teasdale: her interest in performing in plays that dealt with women's roles in society. Her performance in the Sudermann allowed her to highlight the unequal treatment of women, but later in her career she went further, pursuing roles in plays by Henrik Ibsen, whose female characters provided her

with more of these tensions. Duse was not alone in this interest, which might explain the interest Teasdale and her friends, the Potters, had in actresses more generally:

Moreover, what was especially interesting about turn-of-the-century London was the emergence of the intellectual actress keen to interpret the role of what was known as the New Woman. The 1890s, in fact, saw a major surge in the number of actresses committed to supporting the campaign for female suffrage. (De Francisci 99)

Ibsen specifically allowed actresses to interrogate assumptions about womanliness, which involved, for some characters, a repudiation of feminine roles including family: “The sum of the matter is that unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself” (Shaw “The Womanly Woman” 43). This kind of conflict, between personal will on one side and marriage and family on the other appears in many of Teasdale’s early poems, suggesting this was a specific kind of affinity she had for Duse.



Figure 3 Eleonora Duse, from Teasdale’s book.

Teasdale would have encountered Duse only through written texts about her performances and life. Duse’s personal life would probably have intrigued the conservative young woman, whose youth had been extremely sheltered—Teasdale had transferred schools at one point because the commute into St. Louis on public transit had been too stressful for her, for instance. During this period, the roles available to women were limited, and Duse perhaps offered a

model they found exciting, if not imitable. While dabbling in the arts, especially for genteel women with leisure time, was not only accepted but considered appropriate for women at the end of the nineteenth century, ultimately “marriage, home, and family were the accepted goals for young women” (Schoen 10). Interest in Duse’s personal life thus blended with awe for her professional accomplishment, because her art seemed to come at the expense of her family, as in the case of Ibsen’s heroines.

In this sequence, a young Teasdale expresses her particular admiration for two elements of Eleonora Duse: first, her skill, and second her generative influence. In the former instance, Teasdale’s speaker wants to be Duse—linking admired and admirer together in the sonnet—but she also holds up Duse as an example of the female artist for herself and others. These ideas seem similar, but essentially I mean conflation and emulation; the former is a darker admiration, whereas the latter is more expected. While the poems go on at length about Duse’s beauty, this aspect of her turns out to be less significant than it might initially appear; her beauty was a means to convey her meaning. While biographical evidence suggests Teasdale was unhappy about her own supposed lack of beauty, and it is thus possible that she was jealous of Duse’s appearance, it is also the case that Duse’s artistic material was her face. In a sense, Teasdale’s speaker’s admiration of Duse’s beauty is another way of admiring the material of her art. Her physical appearance needed to be beautiful in a way perhaps analogous to the sounds of language Teasdale uses; conveying the proper effect is the most obvious goal, but doing that in a striking, visually or aurally pleasing way was also important. A good actress is an excellent interpreter of a text, but she must also convey her interpretation through her movements, voice, delivery, and expression. By all accounts, Duse was among the very

best at this; even when acting in Italian to an audience of English speakers, she was said to deliver performances that transcended the language.

Duse was a role model precisely because she performed an established art in a new way; the nascent poet, publishing her first book with the help of her friends and parents, sought to make a claim about how she meant to work. The ways she figures Duse, though they are not completely reconciled, act as a kind of “manifesto,” an introduction to this book and the rest of her career. Though Teasdale’s career would be sustained by her lyrics, she uses these sonnets to tell readers they can expect her to engage carefully and critically with forms, to write from a woman’s perspective even as she tries to figure out the available options for being a woman, and to embrace tension in her works.

Duse functions in Teasdale’s poems as an extended metaphor for the writer’s attempt to establish an identity, complicated by their different arts and the fact that an actor’s identity is feigned; Duse serves many purposes here—muse, role model, Petrarchan beloved—but she also introduces the issues of constructing artistic identity through existing art, and the possibility that a poet performs a fictional identity as much as the actress does. Themes of these poems include veils, hair, and clouds: all things that obscure a true vision. In one poem, Teasdale casts herself as a mirror, which on the one hand reflects reality but on the other hand might imagine it in an idealized way. Her poetry, like Wroth’s before it, is thus cast as a tool to hold up someone else’s work. The poems are not primarily erotic, but there are elements of sexual longing in them; the role of this kind of love is complicated. Erotic love in these poems is inspired by Duse’s face not only as a picture—though literally Teasdale is writing to a picture—but also as an

object of art; unlike in a typical blazon, what is being enumerated is the ability of Duse's features to convey meaning. Thus, the love, sexualized in many instances, is as much toward art as toward feminine beauty.

Teasdale begins her sequence to Duse with a prayer-like poem, a plea to see in person a beauty who is currently visible only through layers of performance; the sonnet argues that suffering has enhanced Duse's beauty, for herself and/or for her character, and also suggests multiple meanings of silence:

To Eleonora Duse [1]

Oh beauty that is filled so full of tears,

Where every passing anguish left its trace,

I pray you grant to me this depth of grace:

That I may see before it disappears,

Blown through the gateway of our hopes and fears

To death's insatiable last embrace,

The glory and the sadness of your face,

Its longing unappeased through all the years.

No bitterness beneath your sorrow clings;

Within the wild dark falling of your hair

There lies a strength that ever soars and sings;

Your mouth's mute weariness is not despair.

Perhaps among us craven earth-born things

God loves its silence better than a prayer.



This sonnet begins with eight lines comprised of just one sentence about the speaker's longing to see Duse's face, the beauty of which is emphasized by the pain she has endured. The following four lines are one sentence made of three clauses, which are all about the relationship between strength and pain in Duse's face and performance—whether the strength is performed or internal is unclear. The poem ends with two lines, not a couplet, that make a suggestion about the stakes of all this, wondering if God loves Duse's mouth's silence more than prayers.

The power of beauty is the major theme of this sonnet, but the speaker's apostrophe to it raises questions about what beauty means. Beauty here is not simply a positive trait, nor was it for critics discussing the actress (that is, in the texts Teasdale could have read). Duse's actual appearance figures in a complicated way, first because Teasdale only had access to photographs and descriptions of the woman, not any in-person interaction through which she could have learned about anything beneath the surface, and second that Duse's face was her way of conveying meaning, and conveying character and emotion effectively is a kind of beauty. This is analogous to a poet's hope that her words are beautiful because they convey or elicit emotions so effectively. Duse was described as uniquely able to channel her characters, her face a thinner veil than most between her internal feeling (real or acted) and what outsiders might see. The "veiling" of authentic self with layers of performative character is a recurrent theme, and Duse's ability to suggest authenticity while acting is a key conflict in these poems.

The actress's actual appearance might be secondary to what Teasdale felt while viewing the photos, but as an actress of course Duse was described with frequency, and those descriptions help contextualize these poems. Teasdale describes Duse as a beauty

beyond compare, but reviewers took more moderate stances on her looks. One review from 1896 describes then-38-year-old Duse thus:

A lean figure, peculiarly attractive, though scarcely to be called beautiful; a melancholy face with a strangely sweet expression, no longer young, yet possessed of a pale, wistful charm; la femme de trente ans, who has lived and suffered, and who knows that life is full of suffering; a woman without any aggressive self-confidence, yet queenly, gentle, and subdued in manner, with a pathetic voice,—such is Eleonora Duse as she appeared in the parts which she created for herself out of modern pieces. (Hansson 97)

Shaw took an even dimmer view in an essay comparing her to other actresses of the time: “Duse has been helped to her supremacy by the fortunate sternness of Nature in giving her nothing but her genius. But in Duse you necessarily get the great school in its perfect integrity, because Duse without her genius would be a plain little woman of no use to any manager, whereas Miss Terry or Miss Achurch [even were they without talent] ... would always find a certain degree of favor as pretty leading ladies” (“Two Plays” 123). However, Duse’s ability to show the emotion necessary for a role, subtly and naturally, was said to be beyond compare. To best allow her face to convey her character, Duse eschewed makeup almost entirely on stage; according to Shaw she could flush on cue, so a lack of makeup would help highlight that particular talent as well as conveying a lack of artifice more generally. As to specific technique, Shaw explains, “with the greatest artists there soon commences an integration of the points [the moments in the play wherein a specific interpretation will be conveyed by the actor] into

a continuous whole, at which stage the actress appears to make no points at all, and to proceed in the most unstudied and ‘natural’ way. This rare consummation Duse has reached” (124). Duse’s style, then, is not an actual lack of artifice, but the best ability to conceal her labor. For Shaw, her beauty being (to him) negligible and thus not a distraction, and her art being so fully conceived that it appears not to be acting at all, Duse’s acting achieves the highest possible level. The “secret” of this acting is “years of work, bodily and mental, behind every instant of it—work, mind, not mere practice and habit, which is quite a different thing. It is the rarity of the gigantic energy needed to sustain this work which makes Duse so exceptional; for the work is in her case highly intellectual work, and so requires energy of a quality altogether superior to the mere head of steam needed to produce Bernhardtian explosions” (124-25). Shaw goes on to say that by contrast Sarah Bernhardt presents on stage her own personal charm, whereas the audience has never received Duse’s personal charm—instead, they have seen the charm of each character Duse plays. So Duse’s appearance, then, was important for conveying her interpretations of the characters, despite anyone’s personal views on her beauty off the stage. Furthermore, and importantly for these poems, Duse’s greatest achievement is making artifice, performance, seem natural.

In this sonnet, “Beauty” and Duse’s expressive face are conflated in an apostrophe “to” the actress. The merging of “oh beauty” and her specific instantiation of beauty suggests that Duse participates in some higher, idealized form of the concept. On the other hand, “Oh beauty” could address Duse more directly, using “beauty” as an endearment or descriptor in the sense of “oh beautiful one.” Like for Teasdale the beauty of nature is enhanced by its ephemerality or temporariness, here Duse’s beauty is

enhanced by the possibility that it will cease to be, that it is moving inexorably toward “death’s insatiable last embrace” (6).

Teasdale’s conception of death is multifaceted and often unexpected here and throughout her career. In later poems, Teasdale would return to the beauty of the temporary, but also a conception of death not as an end but as a transition, also a theme in this first sonnet. Death is a figure who could take Duse away from Teasdale, away from society more generally, but death also offers an “embrace,” usually considered comforting or loving. Another contradiction in this vision of death is its status as both a transitional moment—“the gateway” through which she “disappears,” but also the place she will arrive in that “insatiable last embrace.” These seemingly confused notions of what death is or does, rather than revealing errors in logic or figures of speech, actually put death in a similar position to Duse, as a personified figure whose identity is indeterminate. Death is always out of our sight, but culturally there is a rich imaginative history about what or who death might be; using both the unknown “real” death and the imagined personification of death in the same poem mimics how Duse appears in the poems, as her characters, whose suffering is known, and as a person herself, who remains unknown. Though literally death is something the speaker worries about, because it will take Duse away from her before she can see her in person, it also functions as another way of questioning identity.

Personifying death in this poem also reinforces the slight blasphemy inherent in praying to a concept (beauty) that is not God. God is referred to in the poem, but as an aside, to elevate Duse. Other poems do the same thing, pointing to “gods” instead of the Christian God, and using apostrophe to other concepts in prayerful ways without

attributing beauty or meaning to God's design. The end of the poem, "Perhaps among us craven earth-born things / God loves its silence better than a prayer" (13-14), suggests that the greatest tribute to God might be Duse's evident lack of performance—her "silence" as a figure for not producing an artistic product, as in "To L. R. E."—but also the fact of her face, which through photography and reviews remains literally silent to the speaker. The phrasing of that final sentence, too, syntactically allows the possibility that God is "among" the "craven earth-born things," while maintaining plausible deniability with the opening "Perhaps." This slightly blasphemous approach recurs elsewhere in this sequence and book, and indeed Teasdale did not seem especially faithful throughout her life, nor particularly conflicted about it. These gestures read not as a personal conflict but as a play between speaker and audience, tempering what might be read as radical by phrasing it gently.

Throughout the sequence, the speaker's interpretation of the pictures of Duse and of Duse's appearance in general is affected by her knowledge of both Duse's life and the characters she is playing; in this poem the speaker contrasts the picture of Duse with what might be expected of lesser women, arguing that Duse is stronger, which is a part of her beauty. The poem praises Duse for the fact that her "sadness" and "sorrow" are not tinged with "bitterness": "No bitterness beneath your sorrow clings" (9). Here, the expression worn by Duse is one of sorrow, suggesting a choice to convey that element of her mood or her face's evident inability to hide her life's sorrow. The latter reading is less likely, since the expressiveness of Duse's face is praised consistently for its ability to reveal what she wants, often with great artifice, as when Shaw noted that the actress could blush on command. Here and elsewhere, what is described about Duse is inflected

with knowledge about her sad life, but also described with an inability to distinguish Duse, the actress, from Anna and Francesca, her characters. This poem is addressed “To Eleonora Duse,” not to a photo or a character, but what can be said about Duse outside the context of her performing is unclear, perhaps to speaker as much as reader. Further, the speaker makes choices to highlight and note what elements she wants, even as negative contrasts. In the line discussed above, though the speaker notes that there is “no bitterness,” raising the issue even as a negative still brings that bitterness into the poem, it is and is not a part of Duse’s persona, which should be paradoxical. Duse’s ability to overcome evident or expected bitterness at her difficult life is a sign of her internal beauty, greater than ours, the reader and speaker, who feel that her treatment might entitle a lesser person to feel bitter. But there’s a sense here that bitterness would mar her beauty: “No bitterness... clings...[instead] there lies a strength” (9-11). Bitterness would be a kind of weakness, so though something about admiring Duse called bitterness to mind, the speaker denies it.

This contrast is one of many left unresolved in the poem, as the speaker struggles to reconcile her conflicting impressions of Duse. Her ability to overcome bitterness which would be expected in regular people is one way the sonnet elevates the actress. But it is also purely conjecture; the poet and speaker do not actually have unique insight into Duse’s personal life. Further, their knowledge of Duse’s struggles and “sorrow” suggests that only people with very difficult lives can gain the kind of strength that makes Duse so admirable, which might make the speaker and Teasdale unable to be like her—so though the speaker searches for a role model in Duse, perhaps this goal is not possible. Her admiration of Duse’s strength, which “soars and sings” (11), elevates the

actress such that she is distinct from “us craven earth-born things,” speaker included (13). The “us” links the reader and speaker alike as people admiring Duse, above us, God-like. Her elevated beauty, to which one can pray, is likened to God, but is also something about Duse that God loves. Finally, the contrast between “silence” and “prayer” implies that prayer is always aloud, or that prayer is a performance by people who are not Duse; this suggests that performance is artificiality, undercutting a poem about the beauty and power of Duse’s performance. The possibility of performance to tell truth, and by extension of poetry to tell truth (versus a fantasy version of it, as suggested by Wroth’s poems mirroring Amphilanthus), is called into question. The poem investigates the identities of each of its figures and suggests that artistic authenticity might be impossible.

This sonnet, unlike “To L. R. E.,” introduces a sequence, which are read as both standalone poems and as units of meaning that interact with each other—further apart than stanzas in the same poem, closer together than other poems in the same volume. Though of course sonnets in a sequence might be treated as stanzas that make up an extended narrative, they very rarely do this; instead, authors of sonnet sequences seem drawn to the “unique combination of fragmentariness and cohesion that the genre offers” (*Spiller Sequence 2*), using it to arrange poems in an order that can be linear, circular, and recursive. Most sonnet sequences are animated not primarily by development of the theme, as over the course of a longer poem, but more commonly by a reconsideration of ideas from before through different lenses, or even a questioning of the evident resolutions in the previous poems. Thus, each sonnet can stand alone in most sequences just as it plays a role in the larger group. Not surprisingly, given the sonnet’s ability to

both suggest and ultimately deny unity and development, the sequence can also simultaneously cohere and remain fragmented. Though sonnet sequences have been written about nearly everything over the centuries, the sequence is most commonly used “to explore intense conflicts of feeling and thought,” like the individual sonnet is used to explore conflicts of personal identity. More specifically, sequences usually use a beloved other as a frame of reference for interrogating the self:

Mostly love, or worship of a loved one, is the thread, keynote, or motif of a sequence, and some sort of struggle to know or understand the self is one of the animating forces. ... [I]ts major glories seem to come in the hands of those who use it as the locus of a quest for understanding of the self in a world where a powerful and compelling Other offers a vision of disturbing beauty. (Spiller *Sequence 2*)

This is exactly the case in the Duse sequence. The poems to Duse interact thematically by revisiting the same ways of thinking about identity and artistry—veils, hair, beauty, silence—to use Duse as a way of figuring the speaker’s poetic self; each particular poem very slightly adapts the context of this major theme: Duse is examined in different photos and roles to liken her to her characters and historical models, further complicating the author’s sense of artistic self.

#### POETIC ROLE MODELS

Issues of female admiration and desire in sonnets are not new when they appear in Teasdale’s work, nor even are women writing poems to other women; indeed, other female poets have even written sonnets about the difficulties of finding a role model in



another woman who inhabits the same or a similar cultural and artistic world as a new female writer.

In searching for role models of women who found poetic identities alongside societal expectations for women, these poems seem inspired by Barrett Browning's 1844 pair of sonnets to Sand. Barrett Browning, already an established poet, was then experimenting with what was to her a new form—the sonnet. Whereas Teasdale is embarking on a new career, Barrett Browning was moving into a new mode; but in both cases the writers sought out artistic models. Barrett Browning's poems "To George Sand," in which the speaker weaves together ideas about Sand herself and the characters in Sand's novels, function as a clear parallel to Teasdale's poems, where the speaker/poet's identity is established through her attempts to reconcile her feelings for an admired female artist who performs femininity in a noteworthy way. The George Sand sonnets establish vividly as poetic concerns the role of the female author, the function of the muse in poetry by women, and the ways women were allowed to exist in and out of the poem. Barrett Browning's concerns diverge from Teasdale's in several instances (performativity of gender specifically being one difference, amplified in the Sand sonnets though also present in the Duse poems, owing to Sand's cross dressing). But in their questioning without conclusion the ways women can assume the identity of artist, these poems serve as a template for understanding the form and tensions Teasdale would later explore in her sonnets to Duse.

In writing sonnets to a woman, particularly in the case of George Sand—a woman who presented herself androgynously, who used a male nom de plume—Barrett Browning confronted the cultural and generic expectations of the sonnet, expanding the

possibilities of the form and the female author, exploring the possibilities of being a female artist, in ways Teasdale could then take up in her work. To speak admiringly of the novelist, even in non-sexual terms, was to wrestle with a convention of five hundred years. And the convention extends far beyond the sonnet: “[I]n Western culture the position of being a desiring subject speaking in public is gendered male. Women who speak in this way—desirously, publicly—have to engage with the implicit gendering of the subject position of speaker” (Distiller 1). Historically, poetry criticism assumes that the “I” who speaks, who gives voice to a universal desire with which the reader is meant to empathize, is a male “I.” Then, as now, male stories and experiences were general experiences, women’s limited; even today we think of men’s stories as universal while women’s are partial. This historical tendency in poetry developed not only because men usually wrote the poetry, but also because men were assumed to have more authority to do the speaking, through poetry and otherwise. This pattern has been exacerbated by tendencies in canon formation and analysis, where we interpret periodic absences of art by women is interpreted as a lack of production instead of a problem with the historical record, for instance, or simply a problem of emphasis through anthologies and teaching. Though by the time Barrett Browning was writing these sonnets other women had already begun adapting the form to their needs, access to exemplar texts was limited for her and other female artists.

Women sonneteers before Barrett Browning had inhabited the form in multiple ways, but usually this did not involve simply switching the gender of speaker and objectified beloved; in fact, this would have been more radical than culture allowed in the centuries when women were commonly assumed to be asexual (if their sexual

desires were considered at all). Instead, women found ways to inhabit the sonnet form while also maintaining the gender roles to which they were subject. This challenge, navigating being a female writer and a woman in a historical context in which both positions were fraught, leads to various difficulties for Barrett Browning and Teasdale. But initially, women writers attempted to glorify male beloved figures without putting them in the silenced woman's role; this is seen most importantly in the work of the first writer of a "first full-length amatory sequence authored by a woman," Wroth, whose 1621 *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* casts herself as a mirror for her beloved to see his attractiveness and value.<sup>19</sup> The sonnet form allows Wroth to refer to an established tradition while altering it for her needs: "Wroth's speaker has difficulty with the Petrarchan form she is simultaneously occupying and, by definition, altering" (Distiller 19). Her difficulty with the form stems from its understood methods in the hands of male writers: "The male-authored Petrarchan sonnet sequence was seen to be defined by a set of strictly delineated gender roles, in which the male Petrarchan subject formed his erotic, textual and political subjectivity against the body of his silenced female beloved, and his desiring gaze reflected back towards himself a construct" (Smith 4-5). That is, the sonnet even in amatory sequences is a genre of writing self-identity, but in these love poems the speaker establishes himself through his observations and skillful language ostensibly "about" a beloved—who may or may not be similar to what he describes. Wroth makes use of some of these conventions, but gender relations being what they were (and to some extent still are), she, like Teasdale, attempted to adapt the silenced

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<sup>19</sup> All these qualifiers are necessary, as other collections and sequences are likely by women and others likely existed and are lost to us; the first sonnet sequence in English, from 1560, is also attributed to a female author, Anne Lock.

woman persona to fit her female speaker. The Pampilia to Amphilanthus sequence is about the speaker's impossible love for a married man: she, Pamphilia, is all-loving for him, while he, Amphilanthus, (she hopes) loves two. In the sequence's poem 46, the speaker transforms the roles of poet and beloved, casting herself not as Narcissus, who philosopher Schlegel argues all poets inhabit because they are enraptured by their own desire and creations, but as Echo, so that her poem acts as a mirror for Amphilanthus to see his value.<sup>20</sup> The poem places the characters at a well, which serves as a surface for him to admire his reflection in but also as a source in all senses of the word. The image of a mirror or other means of offering reflection is not unique to Wroth's work: "Often, the Renaissance poet aims to secure an ideal love by displaying its image (as a mirror does). The glass can tell the truth, or it can indulge the poet's fantasy" (Burt and Mikics 74). But in Wroth's poems, she establishes one avenue a female poet can take, in this case as a passive character in a poem form that had generally been more active, to make the sonnet adapt to a new perspective. This choice is complicated, since amatory sonnets already conflate subject and object, but Teasdale works in a similar mode in the Duse poems.

For women writers, the act of speaking through the sonnet sequence is always political. Subjectivity is formed through language—that is, the very fact that we identify the "I" in a poem as a unique speaking subject, whom we take as someone with the authority to speak in this way (Distiller ch. 1). This is, on the one hand, obvious, and on the other complicated. Identity's "unfixedness" in terms of gender and social position, following Judith Butler, means "that while we cannot get beyond the heterosexual

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<sup>20</sup> One theory, by Leon Battista Albert, argues that Narcissus was the first painter, linking all arts with narcissism. For more on this Wroth sonnet, see Burt and Mikics 72-75.

matrix which constitutes identity, subjects are capable of seizing upon the available positions and subjecting them [that is, making use of them in new ways]. This, ultimately, has to be the case if women are to write their desire within Petrarchism (and indeed ... if they are to be subjects in Western culture at all)” (Distiller 3). Thus, women writers like Wroth, Barrett Browning, and Teasdale, as well as the few other major sonnet writers in between—Mary Robinson, author of the “self-consciously Petrarchan” (Distiller 19) *Sappho and Phaon: In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets* (1796); and Christina Rossetti, author of “Monna Innominata” (1881)—had to recast the roles of the sonnet through various political approaches. This was sometimes done subtly or covertly, as when pretending to be only the translator of the poems instead of their author, and other times more boldly. Each poet’s methods of appropriating and adapting the sonnet form was historically bound, emergent from a system of historical and personal contexts that allowed or disallowed other ways of engaging with the sonnet sequence: “Historical circumstance will enable and disable specific gendered meanings and responses to the status quo” (Distiller 4). Thus, while Barrett Browning could engage with Sand because of various power dynamics that reinscribed the typically heterosexual expectation on their work, and because her topic was so explicitly gender-related and identity-related, 60 years later Teasdale had a different set of options. Barrett Browning was already famous as a poet; to step into the historically-loaded sonnet form was new to her when she wrote the sonnets to Sand, but to claim the authority to write poetry at all, and to publish that poetry for the public to read, was not. Sand’s gender identity further complicated the male-writes-to-female expectation, in that Sand could stand in both as a woman, the expected subject of a Petrarchan sonnet, and as a man, the

correct object of desire for a woman (which Barrett Browning's lyric speakers would be read as unless other measures were taken, in and out of text, to change that tendency).

The sonnets to Sand take different positions on admiring Barrett Browning's artistic role model: the first poem is "A Recognition" while the second is "A Desire." The division in the titles suggests a more discrete approach than exists in practice, though. These two modes are reflected in Teasdale's sequence as well, where an attempt to catalog Duse's accomplishments is conflated with the speaker's desire to have a similar talent. Additionally, Barrett Browning includes details of Sand's novels in her discussion of gender in her sonnets, like Teasdale blending the writer with her product and the way gender and art are presented in both. Both poets see a woman's hair as a costume, in a way, wondering about the presentation of their role models as both women *qua* woman and as artists; in both cases, the poet is somewhat more conservative in approach than her role model, though Sand and Duse performed their transgressions differently, Sand through cross dressing and Duse through an evident rejection of contemporary sexual mores. Thus, the Sand sonnets help to show the tradition into which Teasdale chose to enter.

These two sonnets present as their central tension Barrett Browning's speaker's ambivalence about the role gender plays for George Sand, in life and her work. Women writers in the nineteenth century were "deeply troubled by their own historical and seemingly inexorable silence" (Billone "Sand" 578). The lack of women to admire was difficult for Barrett Browning; seeking women to emulate and celebrate, she was brought up somewhat short. The Sand sonnets come from a period wherein she deliberately sought out women artists: "By the 1840s [...] Barrett Browning was also

starting to celebrate particularly strong women in her work” (Avery n.pag.). But George Sand was a fraught case, because of her public persona and because of the gender connotations of her novels, originally published in French.

The issue of desire in the Sand sonnets is somewhat complicated, deliberately, as it is in Teasdale’s poems. The second poem is called “A Desire,” but the sonnet is not erotic in the way her later *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are. But to call the poem “A Desire” is to suggest the amatory sonnet, which was radical because Sand was queer: a woman who presented herself as man. Whether the poem is addressed to the “masculine” presentation of Sand or to the “feminine” identity behind it (and indeed whether those can be separated from each other), the sonnet has to engage with gendered conventions carefully, which these sonnets do by raising but not answering questions about ways of being a woman, and a woman writer specifically.

This latter issue is reinforced by Barrett Browning’s attention to Sand’s novels, which also deal with questions of identity—in mimicking the themes from Sand’s work, Barrett Browning tells readers that her poems seek to do what Sand’s novels do. This, too, is evident in Teasdale’s engagement with Duse; she wants her words to be a beautiful but transparent vessel for meaning, as Duse’s face seemed to be. Complicating interpretation then in both cases, are the many layers of text: in the Sand poems among those are Sand’s work, Sand’s identities, and the sonnets themselves.

Barrett Browning, bemoaning a dearth of great women writers for her to admire and emulate, turned to Sand, but there the admiration and emulation were mixed with uncertainty, perhaps judgment, about her way of performing androgyny in public. A woman writer looking for a female artistic role model has to think through the

implications of that role model publishing as “George” instead of Aurore, and, even more, her dressing as a male in public. One possibly mitigating factor, in the British context of the mid-nineteenth century, is that the novel was a feminized genre, at least in common conceptions of its audience, whereas the sonnet was masculine, if not especially popular during that century; Sand presented herself as masculine in a feminized genre while Barrett Browning presented herself as feminine in a masculine genre. In France, writing under a pen name, playing with identity and performance in her daily life, perhaps Sand’s situation was not similar to Barrett Browning’s. But nonetheless, Barrett Browning looked to the novelist as a partial role model, lacking others.

The sonnet itself provides Barrett Browning with the space to examine her own poetic identity in terms of an admired artist about whom she feels conflicted. Barrett Browning scholar Amy Billone uses the pair of George Sand sonnets to show Barrett Browning’s suggestion that “the union between brother and sister selves might be made (or at least might almost be made) within the sonnet structure itself” (578). Billone focuses on imagery of brothers and sisters as an analogy for the male/female dichotomy in George Sand’s public persona, as well as in the conflict inherent in a female writer inhabiting a male form, a male literary tradition, and indeed a male world. Any divided self can be represented in the sonnet for the same reason: its logical structure that invites writers to string up networks of conflicts in tension with one another. The sonnet nearly always investigates identity questions, usually in relational terms by pretending to be about a “subject,” often a beloved, but using that as an object to highlight something about the speaker. Billone suggests as I do that the sonnet form offers potential but



unachieved resolution from dueling parts of the self, in this case the internal self's war with binary gender expectations. The "selves" represented in the poem (speaker and subject) are conflicted about gender not only because of internal complexity but because society offers such limited options for people to enact their gender identities. Thus George Sand and her novels offered Barrett Browning a subject on which to ostensibly focus while writing through her own uncertainty about being a woman and artist.

The choice to write these sonnets as laudatory, admiring odes to an accomplished person, though, is also relevant; Barrett Browning's and Teasdale's writing both demonstrate the genuine desire to praise their subject, but also an eagerness to link the poet to the esteemed subject. This is most evident in the first Sand sonnet, "A Recognition," where the language draws a connection between the speaker and her idol:

To George Sand: A Recognition

TRUE genius, but true woman ! dost deny

The woman's nature with a manly scorn

And break away the gauds and armlets worn

By weaker women in captivity?

Ah, vain denial! that revolted cry

Is sobbed in by a woman's voice forlorn,

Thy woman's hair, my sister, all unshorn

Floats back dishevelled strength in agony

Disproving thy man's name: and while before

The world thou burnest in a poet-fire,

We see thy woman-heart beat evermore

Through the large flame. Beat purer, heart, and higher,  
Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore  
Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire !

The speaker connects herself to the “True genius” that is Sand by calling her “my sister” (1, 7). Here, the speaker seems to be convincing Sand that she is more feminine than she presents herself, that she is more like the speaker—the insistence on her “true” gender identity (“true woman!”) is a way of begging her to be a role model more like what the speaker needs. The poem reasserts Sand’s “true” identity several times: “true woman!”, “woman’s nature,” “a woman’s voice,” “[t]hy woman’s hair, my sister,” and “woman-heart” are the most obvious instances (1, 2, 6, 7, 11). But comparative and negating phrases further deny Sand’s performed, masculine identity, as in the first sentence when the speaker asks Sand whether she rejects the accoutrements of femininity “worn / By weaker women in captivity” (3-4). Indeed, every sentence of the poem attempts to persuade Sand that her gender performance is a problem, ending with a suggestion that on her death perhaps Sand will be able to live “unsex[ed],” after being undeniably a woman in the meantime. These poems, like Teasdale’s Duse sonnets, attempt to sort through many layers of identity construction: the ways the artist present herself mingle with her artistic product and characters. In “A Recognition” the speaker suggests that Sand’s attempts to appear masculine are destined to be unsuccessful: “Thy woman’s hair, my sister, all unshorn ...Disproving thy man’s name” (7, 9). Something essential about Sand’s womanhood, represented by her hair here, will inevitably reveal her true identity. But in “A Recognition” these lines also refer to a scene in Sand’s novel *Indiana*, in which a wig made of stolen hair reveals a character’s hidden identity:

“Limiting ‘woman’s hair’ to Sand’s own physical appearance and tying it to Sand’s own ‘female emotion,’” as some readings do, “does not account for the fact that George Sand, herself already a character (EBB did not call her sonnets ‘To Aurore Dupin Dudevant’ [Sand’s legal name]), plays in *Indiana* with hair that does not belong to the woman we think it does” (Billone 590). So hair in these lines serves to both reveal and conceal “true” identity; the status of Sand as essentially masculine or feminine is thus undecided. The hair could “disprove” the masculine identity that is more true to her or the other way around, that she is “true woman!” (1). (Hair is both feminine and a way of veiling or concealing in the Duse sonnets, as well.) This conflict for the speaker is rooted in her desire to admire Sand as not just a great novelist, but also a great female novelist; Sand ought to be an example of a woman artist the speaker can aspire to emulate, but in denying through public performance her female identity, Sand also indirectly denies the relationship the speaker needs from her.

The second sonnet attempts to link the speaker with Sand in a different way, as if acknowledging that both sides of her can exist, or perhaps only wishing it could be true. The titles of the poems can be read to suggest that the first, where Sand’s attempt to reject femininity is shown to be impossible, is “A Recognition” of the truth, while the second is “A Desire” for how it can only be in the imagination. Thus, the second poem’s more accepting take on the dualities of gender expressed by Sand is only hypothetical. Further, the speaker’s references to herself in “A Desire” are more subtle but connect her to the parts of her role model she wants to highlight.

To George Sand: A Desire

Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man,

Self-called George Sand! whose soul, amid the lions  
Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance  
And answers roar for roar, as spirits can:  
I would some mild miraculous thunder ran  
Above the applauded circus, in appliance  
Of thine own nobler nature's strength and science,  
Drawing two pinions, white as wings of swan,  
From thy strong shoulders, to amaze the place  
With holier light ! that thou to woman's claim  
And man's, mightst join beside the angel's grace  
Of a pure genius sanctified from blame  
Till child and maiden pressed to thine embrace  
To kiss upon thy lips a stainless fame.

Beginning the first quatrain with “Thou,” a description of Sand, and the second quatrain with “I,” a reference to the self and her view of Sand, the speaker seems to acknowledge that they are separate entities. But Billone argues that it is “a veiled strategy of appropriation” (580-81), wherein the “I” uses the sonnet form to attempt to become Sand’s “thou.” The speaker puts herself in the poem’s structure in the same place “Thou”—Sand—appeared, taking her space, but she also writes herself into a fantasy “circus” in which her soul can be separated from her performed identity. It is also worth noting that “thou” and “thee” would have been the informal, friendly pronouns to use, so Sand is not distanced from the speaker by the formal address. In that way, too, Sand is positioned as an equal to the speaker.

On one reading of these sonnets, the divisions between versions of the self, gender identity among them, are not resolvable. The sonnet links opposed ideas together but does not finally offer a solution to the tensions presented. Billone, for instance, offers an initial reading that “EBB shows how the binary divisions Sand seems to reconcile (between men and women, virtue and vice, the mind and the heart) remain hopelessly divided and that it is only in the afterlife that these oppositions might merge” (Billone 586). Billone goes on to explain how her deeper reading offers a type of resolution through a better understanding of Sand’s work, but I suggest that this moment of disharmony is precisely the power of the sonnet. While perhaps some irreconcilable unities do ultimately end up reconcilable, or there is hope of a possible resolution under certain conditions, the sonnet form itself offers the formal possibility of seeming to unite those oppositions. The resolution Billone finds in this reading exists only in the sonnet: “that [which] Sand achieves in her writing [...] cannot be accomplished in real life” (586). For Billone this is an optimistic possibility, one that gives the poet great power, but for someone like Robert Frost this is a darker power, to call into being an impossibility (see Introduction).

These poems provide a means of linking Barrett Browning’s speaker to the female writer she so admires, but they also critique Sand’s choices; Billone notes that “[I]audatory sonnets about other poets often [also] mask critiques that permit sonneteers to engage in the articulation and justification of their own poetic projects” (579). These sonnets, ostensibly of praise, also thematize the speaker’s problems with Sand’s construction of her identity and work, suggesting that rejecting the feminine in her is inappropriate or even impossible. Barrett Browning’s critique of Sand thus demonstrates

the need for Barrett Browning to find her own voice. Barrett Browning asks Sand to be the role model she wants; her speaker admires Sand but is skeptical about her way of navigating gender, and the inconclusiveness of the sonnet allows the reality of Sand's life and the speaker's concerns to coexist without resolution.

An additional complication, for reading both Barrett Browning's anxiety about Sand's gender presentation and for reading Teasdale's interest in Duse's layers of performance, is the distinction between speaker and poet. This is a distinction even careful readers of sonnets (myself included) often fail to maintain. When Billone asserts that Barrett Browning critiques Sand's constructed identity as inauthentic, as necessarily unsustainable, she does not account for the constructed poetic identity Barrett Browning takes on in her poems, and the possibility that the speakers here and elsewhere are distinct from each other and from Barrett Browning herself. Generally we read the "I" in a poem as at least potentially separate from the author, though often less so in sonnets, which means the sonnet itself is a means of identity construction, just as an author constructs a character to be the narrator of a novel. Barrett Browning in these sonnets constructs a self through the poem form, as Sand does in life and her novels. All of these layers call into question the sonnet's entire project, of plumbing the depths of the self for some tension the sonnet form might help to logically resolve. Barrett Browning in these poems looks to an artist rejecting womanhood as a way of questioning whether being woman and artist can coexist, perhaps in general but at least in the historically masculine sonnet.

The question of identity often looms large in personal sonnets like these, but as both poets search for artists to emulate, they come up short; Barrett Browning's more

mature attempts to do this kind of self-fashioning help illuminate Teasdale's project in *Sonnets to Duse*. Like Sand, Duse cannot be the speaker's ideal role model for various reasons, perhaps most importantly that layers of performance prevent the speaker from truly knowing the desired role model. The issues of gender performance are central to both sets of sonnets. In Teasdale's "To Eleonora Duse [1]" the speaker is limited to describing images of her idol, because she has never seen Duse in person; the major action of the poem is the speaker's "pray[er]" "[t]hat [she] may see before it disappears / ... The glory and the sadness of [Duse's] face" (3, 4, 7). Though the speaker reads what she knows about the actress's and character's biographies into the face she is observing, her only method of interacting with Duse is visual. For Barrett Browning and Sand, the relationship is somewhat different, but it remains visual. Barrett Browning uses the visual as a way of engaging with constructed gender, thinking of Sand's masculine dress and the ways the characters in her novels acknowledge the performativity of gender identity. In "A Desire," Barrett Browning figures Sand's life, in that her heartbeat is seen, not heard or felt: "We see thy woman-heart beat evermore" (11). This presentation of Sand as a visual being, someone whose performance of life is somehow evident, is critical in these two sonnets. Moreover, this line presents the woman as somehow silent; the silence of the female part of Sand, perhaps, or the silence of femininity more generally, makes even her heartbeat silent—and indeed the way the line's stress falls, the word "beat" ends up relatively less stressed than it would be in natural speech (Billone 583), emphasizing the ability of the visual to override the inherent—and of the poet to construct identity.

Both Teasdale and Browning in their figuring of their female role models were anxious about silence; though in many cases silence for women has been strategic, Barrett Browning especially worried about the lack of female voices in the literary canon, as role models but also representatives of her sex. Silence also led her to the sonnet form: “[After 1840] EBB grew very attracted to the sonnet form, which she saw as both arising out of and simulating the death-like silence of profound suffering” (577). This view of the sonnet seems especially negative, but it is true that the women described in sonnets—particularly blazons—are rendered as silent objects, sometimes (figuratively) violently dismembered through the supposedly romantic enumeration of their physical traits. And because the sonnet can be read as a form of silent introspection, the form invites the reader and writer to look inward, to speak ideas otherwise left silent. More generally, the space of the sonnet can be imagined as a limiting one, perhaps entombing the ideas therein, but the themes of suffering and silence are in any case evident in Barrett Browning’s work.<sup>21</sup>

Silence figures prominently in Teasdale’s interpretation of Duse, both because of the historical silence of women and because the only ways Teasdale could approach her were silent, in photographs and theater reviews.<sup>22</sup> Women’s silence seems a source of anxiety for both Barrett Browning’s and Teasdale’s speakers, though of course women’s historical and literary silence is not merely a passive silencing imposed from outside, but in some cases a repression of the canon, a pattern of misattribution, or strategic self-

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<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth most famously figures the space of the sonnet as a tomb.

<sup>22</sup> Duse was later also in at least one silent film, but that seems to have postdated these poems; the thematic implications of silent film would be rich, were there evidence that Duse performed in any early enough for Teasdale to have seen them by 1907. Duse’s 1916 silent film, *Cenere*, is currently viewable online.



silencing or waiting on the parts of women. For Barrett Browning, the issue seems to have been Sand's choice to proclaim publicly a part of her identity and conceal—silence—the feminine, which Barrett Browning's speaker thought was more “true” to her. In Teasdale's case, the speaker's anxiety about silence seems more motivated by her inability to hear and see her role model in life. But the same issues of revealing and concealing evident in Barrett Browning's poems are also present, as any observation about Duse is mediated through what the speaker knows about the theater roles for which she was photographed and the knowledge that Duse is a professional actress, a purveyor of pretense. So both writers, concerned about entering into a genre of personal identity, looked helplessly at their artistic role models and despaired at being able to find a “true” identity to try to emulate.

#### TEASDALE'S POETIC SELF FASHIONING

These elements of Barrett Browning's admiration for Sand come to bear on the ways Teasdale both strives to emulate and struggles to understand her role model Duse; read through the lens of the history of women poets fashioning a self both after and against their peers, Teasdale's poems show her early poetic attempts to become a woman, a poet, and a female artist. The first sonnet to Duse is the first poem in Teasdale's first published book, so it is important as a kind of statement of the poet's intention as she stepped into a new career. Thus, the themes raised in the first poem and its way of interacting with the sonnet form establish a poetic environment in which the following poems will be interpreted. The themes most evident in this poem are those of strength and suffering, silence, and the deification of Duse.

The second poem slightly complicates the themes of the first, focusing not on the possibility of Duse's eventual death—the difficulty of human mutability—but instead on a theme contemporary reviewers also noted about Duse: her ability to call to mind the ancient world, civilization born anew. This can be read as a way to comfort the speaker with respect to her anxiety from the first poem, but also as a way of continuing the book's introduction, adding the theme of ancient Greece and the parallel to Sappho to the sequence's version of Duse; because these ideas recur throughout the later poems, both ways of seeing this poem are useful. The first poem reflects the speaker's own identity in terms of her longing to see and meet her idol, the second furthers her sense of self by casting her as an aspiring Orpheus and Duse as a muse. This poem uses sound and silence as well as present and past as its main dualities that reinforce the sequence's aim: questioning the possibility of presenting or finding a unified self identity in art, in poetry, in sonnets.

To Eleonora Duse [2]

Your beauty lives in mystic melodies,

And all the light about you breathes a song.

Your voice awakes the dreaming airs that throng

Within our music-haunted memories.

The sirens' strain that sank within the seas

When men forgot to listen, floats along

Your voice's undercurrent soft and strong.

Sicilian shepherds pipe beneath the trees;

Along the purple hills of drifted sand,

A lone Egyptian plays an ancient flute;  
At dawn the Memnon gives his old salute  
Beside the Nile, by desert breezes fanned.  
The music faints about you as you stand,  
And with the Orphean lay it trembles mute.

This poem, different in rhyme scheme than the first in the sequence, uses Duse to new ends, highlighting her ability to reanimate the past; like the first poem, it considers Duse herself, whereas most of the following poems concern specific roles and photographs of the actress. Thus, these two poems serve to establish who she is to the speaker, separate from the characters she portrayed. But while the poem addresses Duse directly, she herself is not especially present: most of the text presents a history of music, as an ancestor to and metaphor for poetry.

The format of the poem draws the reader more deeply into the past as the sonnet progresses, formally mimicking Duse's power. Though the sentences of the poem do not parallel each other, they are grammatically similar, beginning in most cases with a simple subject—"your beauty," "your voice," "Sicilian shepherds"—and ending regularly at line ends. The first two lines are independent clauses linked with "and," so that both line endings can be emphasized in reading and the clauses match the pentameter evenly; the second sentence, also two lines, allows the reader to continue reading evenly, but makes it more difficult, because line 4 is a dependent clause of line 3. The next sentence, now three lines long, can no longer be read as evenly along the line breaks; this progression into the body of the poem is a kind of "sinking" into the mysticism of Duse that puts the reader in the position of the speaker as an awed observer

of the actress. The enjambed lines 6 and 7 are a more assertive grammatical connection than the more gently enjambed lines 3 and 4. In both cases, the first line seems to stand without the second (that is, both could be independent clauses without the content on the next line); because the first two lines are separate independent clauses connected by “And,” a reader might anticipate lines 3 and 6 also being end-stopped despite the lack of periods. But in line three “the dreaming airs that throng” is modified by a more specific location: “within our music-haunted memories” (4). On the other hand, the sentence that makes up lines 5-7 requires its final line for line 6 to make sense: “floats along” could stand on its own, implying an abstract drifting, but “floats along / Your voice’s undercurrent” limits the sense of “along” to following a pathway created by the subject’s voice. In both cases, the modifying line (4 and 7) suggests something hidden or hard to access—“within... memories,” so not visible, and “undercurrents,” something beneath, hard to see.

Formally, several elements of the second half of the poem contribute to its contradictions. Traditionally, the volta would come one line after the end of the previously discussed sentence, after the rhyme for line 5’s “seas” is answered by line 8’s “trees” and the poem takes up new line-ending sounds; in this case, though, lines 8-12 serve as a sort of historical aside, which is inextricably tied up with the rest of the poem through rhythm and rhyme. This means that the volta not only does not come where it would be expected, but it could arguably not exist or be a pair of “turns”—before and after that four-line sentence. A volta is generally considered a necessary component of all sonnets; but the attempt on such grounds to de-classify it would be unnecessarily regulatory. Indeed, my discussion of the lack here of the expected volta is typical of

sonnet studies: readers anticipate certain features of a poem like this, not to draw strict lines around which poems “count” as sonnets and which are mere attempts or adaptations, but because the expected features of the form are what draw writers and readers to them. In this case Teasdale has raised questions about how this particular sonnet participates in the common ways of contrasting its main opposition while still contrasting multiple ideas. One risk of denying an expected volta in only the second poem of a writer’s first volume is of suggesting to readers that the poet is not capable of writing “correct” sonnets (particularly in this period when a person’s parents could pay to have her book printed). But in this case the speaker’s struggle with her poetic identity is reinforced by the poem’s formal variations. Thus, the poem’s difficulty conforming to the expectations of a sonnet serves the poem’s thematic purpose, of showing the speaker’s struggle to inhabit an identity.

In the six lines that would normally comprise a sestet, too, the poem is slightly unusual; its differences suggest both the speaker’s struggles with her art in the face of Duse and, perhaps, Duse’s own unconventionality. Here, the regular rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet is exchanged for the less common enveloped rhyme scheme of lines 9-12 (CDDC), followed by another CD; unlike the more common CDCDCD or CDECDE in the sestet, this poem almost appears to be offering a third quatrain, looking briefly Shakespearian in structure. The denial of a couplet in lines 13-14 lays that possibility to rest, but evoking the other most common type of sonnet further links Duse to artistic history. Similarly, though the first “quatrain” or first half of the octave does fit the expected ABBA pattern, “melodies” and “memories” only rhyme in the final, stressed syllable; their relationship is reinforced in lines 5 and 8, and indeed their sounds

are also linked through assonance in the middle “o” sound and consonance in their “m” sounds. In addition, the last four lines can be read as an enveloped quatrain, as if the sestet is a condensed octave; in this pattern, the two halves of the sonnet have more symmetry than usual, calling their relationship into question. Of course the volta can signal several possible logical relationships, one factor, often, is their marked difference—often including the introduction of a fifth rhyming word (lines that would then be marked “E”). In those cases, the octave and the sestet signal their difference much more loudly than in this version. Here, because of the rhyme scheme and the lack of clear volta, the logical structure of the sonnet is not emphasized; the poem does not advertise its duality as obviously as many of its peers.

The CDDCCD pattern appears three times in *Sonnets to Duse*, in poems 2, 3, and 4. Since a sonnet sequence, like an individual sonnet, in some way progresses or develops its ideas, it is worth considering what this pattern does to the ideas in poems 2, 3, and 4; all three of these are about Greece, linking Duse to her character in *The Dead City* and to the three poems, one supposedly about the actress herself and two about a specific role, more closely. This relationship suggests that the actress is not entirely separable from the roles she plays, or at least that the speaker struggles to differentiate her. After these three poems that share a pattern, only one other rhyme scheme recurs—in poems 5 and 7 (CDEECD)—while the other poems (1, 6, 8) are distinct.

Though the structure of the poem—the rhyme scheme, the sentence breaks at lines 7 and 12, and the slight topical shift for the long sentence that comprises lines 8–12—denies the convention of the octave’s idea being contrasted by the sestet’s response or counter, it does still set in opposition ideas that struggle to coexist: in this case, the

present and the past are in a fraught relationship that both inspires and silences the speaker. The temporality of the “action” of the sonnet is in question because the past is described in the present tense, as if “ancient” and “old” things are presently happening. The poem suggests that Duse brings the past back to life, an embodied myth, beginning with the assertion that her “beauty lives in mystic melodies” (1). But the mystic melodies are distinct from her, and the preposition “in” suggests they give animation to her beauty, though she seems to be calling them into being two lines later when her “voice awakes the dreaming airs” (3). The words “dreaming” and “mystic” in these lines suggest the unreal or mythic, likening Duse to the ancient Greeks of myth. The temporality of the poem and the relationship between “reality” and imagination or historical/mythological recollection are most vexed in the five-line sentence that makes up lines 8 through 12; there, images of the poetic and musical past—“Sicilian shepherds,” “A lone Egyptian,” and “the Memnon”—are rendered in present tense and described with descriptive adjectives. In the preceding three sentences and the concluding one, “you” or “your” occur, tying the images to Duse, but in this longer one there is neither a “you” who might be Duse nor an “I” elaborating on the speaker’s situation. Each of these figures calls to mind a story about the origins of music and poetry (see below), but are cast in the present, as ancient musician poets who, in this context, come together to create music along with Duse. So what is present—something being awakened by Duse’s voice—is cast in terms of not just things long dormant, but also figurative. The shifting time of the poem contributes to its larger focus on Duse’s silence, which both creates and inspires the end of the speaker’s.

The sounds in this poem are lush but illusory: they are breath (2), “dreaming airs” (3), and “memories” (4), not an actual cacophony in the poem’s present; this is one element of the ambiguity of time in the poem, but the presence and absence of sound also raise the conflict of women’s historical silence or silencing. The poem attempts to reconcile evident female silence with the speaker’s desire to appreciate women’s art. Just as women artists looking for the work of other women to admire and emulate have to “read through” historical and canonical silence to find the voices of women, often suppressed or forgotten, so too must the speaker in this poem relearn how to “listen” to the “undercurrent” (6, 7). She can appreciate that women’s contributions may be both “soft and strong,” or quiet and critical, and in some cases more strong for being soft (7). In addition, the poem does work to bring historical women to life; listening to history for the sounds of women means that historical women are made present, conjured back into being, by contemporary works of women’s art, in this case the power of Duse’s performances and Teasdale’s poems. But the poem is also about music, the history of art in music, including the history of the sonnet, as in the historical reference to Sicily (8). It is about a genre in creation, the ability of Duse to call to mind something as it begins, her gift of possibility. This idea, that Duse’s talent was in offering this “nascence” might have come from reviews of the time (because, again, Teasdale never saw Duse perform); one review, contrasting Duse’s performances to other actresses of the day, makes this claim and further asserts that her subtlety, her promise of what was to come, is essentially feminine:

The French and German actresses were entirely different; they seemed to stand apart, each complete in herself. They represented a world of their



own and a perfected civilization; and she, though like them in some ways, seemed to represent the genesis of the world, and a civilization in embryo. ... it was the woman's temperament compared with that of others, her acute susceptibility, compared to which her celebrated predecessors impressed one as being too massive, almost too crude, and one might be tempted to add, less womanly. (Hansson 287)

This suggestion, that Duse was essentially a part of a history, one as it begins, and that this is "womanly," seems obviously reflected in the text of this poem, in the fusing of silence and strength, in the past and present intermingling.

Duse's power is in bringing previous art to life, but the poem also suggests that all other art suffers in the comparison to Duse, even when the poem leaves us waiting for the woman herself to make her contribution. In the text, previous instances of music "faint about" Duse as she stands, made lesser because of the contribution she is preparing to make. But the poem ends without any contribution from the subject: it hangs on a moment of anticipation. This calls to mind one of Hansson's observations, that the power of Duse's performances reside not only in the present moment but also in their ability to suggest more will come: "Eleonora Duse's acting tells of infinite suspense. Her entire art rests on this one note,—Suspense; which means that we know nothing, possess nothing, can do nothing; that everything is ruled by chance, and the whole of life is one great uncertainty" (287). This poem creates that moment of uncertainty, using the image of Duse to suggest the entire history of art and civilization, all held momentarily still as Duse stands. What she will say or do is left unwritten, as if the poet—represented by the "Orphean lay," which "trembles mute" at this moment in

the poem—is unable to do anything more until Duse does. But again the sonnet’s ability to weave together contradictions is critical here, because in terms of the sonnet structure, the poem ends exactly where it should. The poet/speaker waits, mute, for her role model/muse to break the long silence of women’s history, but at the same time she has already written a new poem, the second in a sequence, into being. The silence surrounding Duse in this poem is always suggestive of sound, and not just pedestrian noises—or the common lines an actress would speak onstage—but also the mythical, historical, monumental sounds of the sirens, of Orpheus. Her silence calls music to mind, but in her presence the gift of the poet is intimidated into silence, as well. Thus, Duse’s power over sound is at cross purposes: evoking and foreclosing music. For the aspiring poet, the tension here is of the highest order; Teasdale’s speaker, admiring the actress through layers of mystification—photographs of her acting in roles that would have themselves been unintelligible to the speaker—wants to hear and be inspired by her muse, but the actress’s unexpected silence causes the poet’s “music” or lyric art to “tremble mute” (13-14).

The sounds of silence—the poem’s mentioning sounds that are not literally heard in it—are sometimes indicators of strength; Duse refuses to make certain sounds in ways that reinforce her strength. In this poem that denial works to gather up the audience, making them wait for what she will ultimately say, but in other poems it is the refusal to, for example, cry. While women’s silence is often figured as a problem to be solved, and for the speaker “trembl[ing] mute” is a way of waiting for inspiration, not strategic withholding, for Duse silence is an opportunity for anticipation. The five lines that do not seem obviously to be about Duse or the speaker similarly withhold the poem’s

subject, waiting for a “you” to link these images to the ostensible subject, and build anticipation for the reader. The final two lines bring the poem back to the subject, Duse, who is actually never the subject of a sentence in the poem, suggesting her passive power. In this final pair of lines “the music” described in the long sentence prior “faints about you” or is “mute” (11-12). Here the ancient and mythological beauty of music is rendered speechless by “you” standing— we read “you” as Duse. But what is strange here is that her beauty “lives in” that music. To suggest at the end of the poem that the music is mute complicates this relationship; could her beauty be muted by the pause in the music, as well? The speaker’s inability to separate these ideas clearly suggests the power of her idealized version of Duse, from whom she hopes for inspiration. But the poem ends with her waiting for Duse to do something—she has just stood in the final pair of lines, and we anticipate some action, perhaps her own music—and the speaker “mute.” Thus the poem itself is in question; the fourteen lines of the sonnet are an act of speaking, not an act of muteness; thus its temporal relationship to the scene described is also unclear, and Duse’s status as a muse, too—perhaps the speaker does not need Duse’s voice at all.

The way Duse is figured in this poem draws on Orpheus as a figure for both the speaker and Duse; Duse is both Orpheus and Eurydice. The speaker casts herself as an aspiring Orpheus, a persona that breaks down at the end, when in the final line her lay “trembles mute,” a (lack of) mellifluous song that is reinforced formally by both the extra syllable in “Orphean” (the trembling, perhaps) and the end of the poem. However, that failure is also an accomplishment; the sonnet has ended where it should, using both Petrarchan and Shakespearian conventions to conclude with a powerful two-line

sentence (a “couplet” not in rhyme but in length) reaffirming Duse’s beauty. On one reading, her beauty has overpowered the possibilities of music and poetry; but on another, the Orphean poet has successfully preserved her beauty, formed it into the classical sonnet, figured Duse as both Eurydice and Petrarch’s Laura. The possibility of simultaneously being and not being is part of the sonnet’s appeal for love poetry: even after death or when remote in location the beloved can be present through the poem. Additionally, the persona of Duse is made historical but not specific in this poem. In this way, her beauty is like Eurydice’s: she is remembered primarily for the power of the love she inspired, not for the specifics of herself. Insofar as the poem is a kind of music, we can read this as the poet’s attempt to capture Duse’s beauty in poetry, so that “trembles mute” refers to the poem’s ending or the poet’s inability to capture it correctly—it being so subtle and difficult to capture. It is a beauty that needs hearing, putting pressure on the poet to describe it in lyrical language. The poet’s inability to fit Duse’s beauty into the poem is suggested by the lengthening sentences in 1-12, as well as the only instance of un-iambic meter, on “Orphean” (which can be accented multiple ways but is correctly pronounced with three syllables) in only the final line; the poet had the ability to use the ancient poem form up to a point, but the final line of the sonnet reaches a breaking point. On the other hand, the music and the “Orphean lay” are both rendered mute at the end, emphasizing the connection to Orphean legend. Orpheus is famed both for being a musician and for his attempt to save his wife, Eurydice.<sup>23</sup> But Orpheus’s appeal for poets is obvious; in myth, he was able to enchant even Hades, returning from the underworld because of the power and beauty of his music. Writers

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<sup>23</sup> Teasdale’s 1907 Sonnets to Duse predate Rilke’s more famous Sonnets to Orpheus, which link the sonnet form to the mythological musician quite clearly for us today, by fifteen years.

throughout the ages have looked to him as a muse. So as Orpheus's music honored Eurydice's beauty publicly, inviting everyone around him to appreciate her as he did, the poet here seeks to elevate Duse's beauty. Orpheus nearly brought Eurydice back from the dead through his music, and in a similar way the sonneteer attempts to preserve the subject through the poem. In many cases, though, the poem cannot be about the subject per se, because it must always be as much about the poem, the poet, the selected features there is space to illuminate in fourteen lines. This highlights the problem with the Orphean legend, that Eurydice does not make it out of hell; Orpheus's look back at her sends her back. Thus he is both successful and unsuccessful at bringing her back from the dead, as the poem both does and does not figure Duse.

Further, though, the poem suggests Sappho: an ancient Greek poet whose voice readers were then (and still are) searching for, looking at a few snippets for more. Sappho is an obvious inspiration for Teasdale elsewhere in this book, as well—two other poems are to her—but as a figure for the ancient beginnings of poetry she fits in with Orpheus, Memnon, and the Sicilians.

These other figures, as noted previously, suggest more stories of the history of poetry and music, which were historically not as distinct as they are today. "A lone Egyptian" (10) might refer to Osiris, the inventor of the flute according to Egyptian lore, and also a small character in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. In myth, the flute predated the lyre, and with the invention of the latter, the former fell into disuse—which could connect to the poem here. Mythologically, the drum predates the flute or pipe, which predates the lyre.<sup>24</sup> Lines 8-12 offer a sort of mythological history of music, perhaps

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<sup>24</sup> For more, see Rowbotham, John Frederic. *A History of Music to the Time of the Troubadors*. London: Bentley and Son, 1893. Google Books. 4-5.

offering examples of the “music-haunted memories” mentioned in the first seven lines. There, “Sicilian shepherds,” “A lone Egyptian,” and “the Memnon” all offer music (8, 10, 11); the idyllic settings are general and not current—they are described as “ancient” and “old” (10, 11).

Women artists throughout history are associated with silence not primarily because they did not exist, but often because history chose not to bear their memory forward; in this poem, Duse carries the history of music and poetry forward, changing the role of silence. Of course historically women writers often emphasized their meager gifts in their poetry, flattering their readers and muses by suggesting their own gifts were paltry, not up for the task, and in this poem and the rest of the sequence Teasdale can be read as participating in that tendency. This poem would then appear an act of flattery toward her subject, especially if read as literally addressed to Duse. The whole sequence operates on this register, with the poet Teasdale fashioning a poetic identity through her speaker who assumes a humble posture in line with other women writers historically. Duse is an unusual role model because she is one who does not do this; nor did Sand. Barrett Browning, though, the poetic forebear of this sequence, did in some ways engage with this humbling convention in women’s poetry, such as in presenting the Sonnets from the Portuguese as translations instead of her original work. Teasdale fashions her poetic voice after the models of both the admiring Barrett Browning and the admired Sand and Duse; this second poem of the sequence furthers the aims of the first in highlighting what is admirable about Duse while also constructing the speaker’s anxieties about her role.

Throughout the sequence, other poems provide further examples of these same thematic contrasts, but beginning with poem three they add in the roles Duse was playing as another layer complicating the speaker's attempt to capture the actress. Duse herself has to be read through layers of character, artifice, and photography. Some of the poems are specifically ekphrastic, "To a Picture of Eleonora Duse in 'The Dead City,'" instead of "To Eleonora Duse," for instance. Thus, the poems with that former title are "to" and "about" Duse through several layers of artistic construct, all acknowledged by the speaker and poet.

For example, poem 3, "To Eleonora Duse in 'The Dead City,'" thematizes the difficulty of inhabiting character that poem 2 also raised, in this case with the speaker assuming the dual roles of Sappho and Alcaeus against Duse's inhabiting of the other of the pair of poetic lovers.

To Eleonora Duse in "The Dead City" [3]

Were you a Greek when all the world was young,

Before the weary years that pass and pass,

Had scattered all the temples on the grass,

Before the moss to marble columns clung?

I think your snowy tunic must have hung

As now your gown does — wave on wave a mass

Of woven water. As within a glass

I see your face when Homer's tales were sung.

Alcaeus kissed your mouth and found it sweet,

And Sappho's hand has lingered in your hand.

You half remember Lesbos as you stand  
Where all the times and countries mix and meet,  
And lay your weight of beauty at our feet,  
A garland gathered in a distant land.

Most literally, this sonnet is in admiration for the timeless quality of Duse's beauty, the kind of beauty that has inspired writers since time began, here imagined as in ancient Greece. Ancient Greece is an ideal stand in for the beginning of literary time for Teasdale's purposes, as current conceptions of literature and art are inherited from that tradition, and as drama and art from that period were credited to the generative inspiration of the muses. Here, Duse is one of those muses, the beauty by whom all great art throughout Western history was inspired—because if ancient Greek art was inspired by the muses, and later art by the Greeks, Duse's influence, too, would be passed down and remembered in a kind of literary memory. Though Teasdale's speaker does not refer to Duse by name in the poem, the poem's theme is emphasized by the similarity between Duse's name and "muse."

Teasdale casts herself as one like Alcaeus and Sappho here; she is a writer of admiring verse to Duse, but Duse, too, was an artist conveying love through her art. Alcaeus and Sappho, then, both writers of love poetry to each other, they used their admiration for each other as the genesis of beautiful poetry (according to legend, at least). Though Duse did not perform for or to Teasdale, her artworks feel intimate, allowing Teasdale's speaker to imagine a reciprocal creative love in the mode of the pair from Lesbos. Further, by casting Duse and the speaker, in the guise of a heterosexual pair, Teasdale adds a layer of plausible deniability to the homoerotic subtext of the



sonnet (and sequence as a whole). The role of Alcaeus and Sappho though also suggests how generative Duse is as a muse, independent of heterosexual expectations. In Greek myth, muses were women, and in this imagining, Duse would have been a muse to these two poets history has remembered as exceptional.

The final line's "garland gathered in a distant land" suggests both Duse's mastery of her art (the laurel wreath or garland signifying poetic acclaim) and that she was famous literally and figuratively before Teasdale was exposed to her; the "distant land" can be Greece where "Homer's tales were sung" (line 14, 8) but also Italy, where Duse grew up and honed her craft, becoming famous and beloved enough to merit US tours and film work.

This poem, like Barrett Browning's sonnets to Sand, seeks to use the sonnet form to inextricably tie together the speaker and the admired figure—Duse. Duse, for the speaker, manages to simultaneously contain the past and the present, which is shown especially in the second and third sentences, but also in the verb tenses of the fourth:

I think your snowy tunic must have hung  
As now your gown does — wave on wave a mass  
Of woven water. As within a glass  
I see your face when Homer's tales were sung.  
Alcaeus kissed your mouth and found it sweet,  
And Sappho's hand has lingered in your hand.

The first of these lines is most direct: it likely refers to a picture included in the book wherein Duse wears a long, draped dark dress (see figure 2); the waves of its folds do indeed evoke images of water. The "snowy tunic" points to a difference—we imagine

the Greeks dressed in white, draped garments, not long dark clothes, but nonetheless Teasdale points to a connection between her now and the possibility of a past version of her. Even dressed in her stage clothes, Duse's power is such that she evokes the past.

Worth noting, too, is that Duse did not dress at the height of fashion; indeed, her dress is likely something Teasdale would have known about from reading articles and reviews. In a 1896 commentary from the journal *Current Literature*, for example, the writer spends nearly half her space discussing Duse's dress: "As to her dresses, they were not in the least fashionable, there was nothing of the French fashion-plate style about them; but then she never made any attempt to follow the fashion—she set it. There was an antique look about the soft folds of her dress, also something suggestive of the Renaissance in the velvet bodices and low lace collars" (Hansson 287).

Adding the issues of performance and character to the already complicated task of describing Duse, the speaker hides her own work of constructing herself. It is easy to imagine that the poetic speaker is less visible in a poem like this, or at all, than an actress like Duse; writers describe the actress as well as her role in each play, as when Duse's costume choices are highlighted as much as her choices about how to interpret and present dramatic texts on stage. But though the poetic speaker is not "visible"—she never notes, for instance, "my hair is a blonder veil than hers," or "my eyes are blue,"—her persona is read through the lines of the poem. What is important to her—femininity, voice, "authenticity"—is what she highlights about Duse, and her confusion about how she, the speaker, can be those things, in and out of the poem itself, come through vividly.

Finally, the speaker's anxiety about temporality extends forward into the future; in later poems the death of Duse and her characters drives the sequence forward and continues the development of Teasdale's poetic persona's conflicted identity.

To a Picture of Eleonora Duse [7]

Was ever any face like this before —

So light a veiling for the soul within,

So pure and yet so pitiful for sin?

They say the soul will pass the Heavy Door,

And yearning upward, learn creation's lore —

The body buried 'neath the earthly din.

But thine shall live forever, it hath been

So near the soul, and shall be evermore.

Oh eyes that see so far thro' misted tears,

Oh Death, behold, these eyes can never die!

Yea, tho' your kiss shall rob these lips of breath,

Their faint, sad smile will still elude thee, Death.

Behold the perfect flower this neck uprears,

And bow thy head and pass the wonder by.

In this poem, Teasdale's speaker addresses Duse and her picture, but more directly speaks to Death. Whereas Duse is inactive in the poem, and in fact never directly called "you," Death is personified as an agent, one who would "rob [her] lips of breath" (11). The relationship between speaker and audience, speaker and subject, is complicated by this: until line 10's "Oh Death," the presumed audience of the poem syntactically is the

owner of “thine,” which one is inclined to read as Duse.<sup>25</sup> Since the poem is called “To a Picture of” her, the presence of the woman herself is called further into question; the “thee” who would own “thine” “body” or “soul” (this, too, is syntactically unclear) is hidden in the syntax as the woman herself is hidden by layers of artifice, in the picture, in the roles of the characters she plays, in the necessary performativity of being a famous woman artist. The lack of a clear “you” or “thee” referring to Duse or her picture reinforces the theme of veiling and performing identity present in the text of the poem.

Further emphasizing the constructed nature of Duse’s identity is the speaker’s archaic language. Though this poem is readable for contemporary readers, it uses elevated or poetic diction, which separates it from the regular utterances of an admiring fan. The archaic use of “pitiful” in line 3, here used to refer to Duse’s appearance of compassion, not meagerness, as well as the uncommon word “uprears” in line 13 both serve to highlight the poetic construction of these lines. The apostrophic use of “Oh” in “Oh eyes” and “Oh Death” (9, 10) adds to this effect. The archaic verb tense “hath” and the use of “thine” instead of “your” (7) emphasize that this is constructed, in the same way, as well as locating the poem in a poetic past; the theme of other poems in the sequence, the timelessness of Duse’s beauty, appears here in the lines about Death’s lack of power over Duse’s endurance, as well as in the deliberately old-fashioned language. Other examples, including “thro” and “tho” (9, 11) emphasize visually if not audibly this impression of the language. Though in this case the continual presence of the past is established through language while other sonnets establish their connections to the past

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<sup>25</sup> The other sonnets are sometimes as vague as this one, but several speak directly to Duse; the “you” in “To Eleonora Duse [1],” “To Eleonora Duse [2],” “To Eleonora Duse in ‘The Dead City’ [3],” and “To a Picture of Eleonora Duse in ‘The Dead City’ [4]” seems to be Duse, and in some others the “you” seems likely to be Duse, or at least sometimes Duse.

through allusion, syntax, or direct reference to historical periods, the sequence as a whole maintains an emphasis on Duse's ability to exist in and out of time. This sequence draws on the historical model of the Sand sonnets, but more broadly on the entire history of the sonnet; as Duse inhabits old artists, so too do these poems. The role of the historical seems controlled for Duse, while for the speaker it is more fraught: the speaker struggles even while engaging with a poetic and literary tradition that included Orpheus and Sappho, Barrett Browning and other poets for whom "thine" was not archaic.

Despite the elevated language and poetic syntax, however, the speaker is able to assert her closeness to Duse throughout the sonnet. Indeed, "thee" would have been the familiar (versus "you," which was formal) in the versions of English in which the second person address had two forms. Thus, though the language feels formal, the speaker is also able write her way into a close relationship to Duse. Importantly, Death's kiss is "your kiss," not "thy kiss"—here, the distance of formal address is maintained, in a poetic environment where the informal "thine" was previously used for Duse. (That is, normally saying "you" would not establish formality, but in a context where "thee" was used before, it shows a difference that requires noting.) Death, too, is referred to as a capitalized title, and his domain is also capitalized, the "Heavy Door" through which he takes the souls of the dead (4). These differences show the speaker's relationships to Duse and Death, which also helps the reader track who is being spoken about throughout the poem. The speaker uses archaic language, then, not only to bring the past back to the present, but also to clarify her double-apostrophe: she shows felicity to the past even as the poem expresses anxiety about the role of the past for the aspiring poet.

The speaker longs to feel close to Duse, but the difficulty of that desire is made evident by the layers of remove between them. The speaker addresses the sonnet “To a Picture of Eleonora Duse,” not “To Eleonora Duse,” as some of the other sonnets are addressed, but also not “To a Picture of Eleonora Duse in ‘The Dead City’” or “in ‘Francesca Da Rimini.’” These layers of address, of which this poem’s title is in the middle of three possibilities in the sequence, emphasize the acts of translation involved in the speaker’s attempts to encounter the actress: though language, distance, photography, and persona—on stage and in life. The poem’s first sentence shows the speaker’s awareness of the difficulty of translation between the true woman and her facade; in praising Duse’s visage as an especially thin “veiling for the soul within” (2), she imagines that looking at Duse’s face is more like seeing the true person than would be true for most people. But of course, she does not know Duse personally; her imagination about the soul of the actress is based on a constructed public identity brought to her through news in translation from Italian. Though Duse’s public narrative was uncommonly fraught—it is likely that people felt they knew the true woman more than in some other cases, because the public was privy to so many tragic and scandalous details of her life—it is also true that this news came through news stories, not personal correspondence (which also involves constructing a narrative and identity, but can be read as much closer to the “truth” of the person). Later in the poem, Duse’s eyes “see so far thro’ misted tears,” repeating the image of veiling from the first sentence (9); this sentence suggests that Duse’s eyes are not hindered by having to look through a mist of tears, but the viewer of her likely would be. In the final sentence, Duse’s head is a “perfect flower,” the metaphor obscuring a true vision of her for the reader (13). In all of

these cases, the possibility of truly apprehending Duse is shown to be remote, for the speaker, the reader, and Death.

It is possible that in these cases the speaker's choice to hide Duse herself within the lines and language of the poem is a deliberate act of protecting her from the poem's actual addressee, Death, but because the distance between the speaker and Duse recurs in all the poems of the sequence, it is clear that Duse is remote for them both. The syntax serves to bury the subject, Duse, as in the second of the sonnets, but it also reinforces the sense of construction and age that the language already established. On the literal level, the speaker implores Death to notice what a "wonder" Duse is (14): "Was ever any face like this before[?]" she asks, figuratively pointing to the picture in the poem's title (1). But the distance between the face, a "light [] veiling for the soul within," and the person herself, here implied to be a beautiful soul, both "pure" and compassionate ("pitiful for sin"), is vast: Duse is not the subject of this sentence, and her name is changed to something more familiar in the title. The following sentence appeals to common knowledge in the phrasing "They say," but who "they" refers to is not entirely clear—the general sense of Christian belief, presumably, because "They say" that the body and soul will separate after death: "the soul will pass the Heavy Door" whereas "The body [will be] buried 'neath the earthly din" (4, 6). Both the body and soul leave the earth where the speaker is, again removed. But more to the point, "the soul" and "the body" both suggest some part of a whole different from a person herself—that is, Duse's soul, Duse's body, but not Duse herself. In the following sentence again, deliberately unclear syntax hides the subject and Duse from Death, and as a corollary, the speaker: "But thine shall live forever, it hath been / So near the soul, and shall be evermore" (7-8).

Here, the word “thine” refers to the body, which was the subject of a dependent clause in the previous sentence; it would be easy to misread it initially as referring to the soul, except that it is “near the soul” in the same sentence. This ambiguity, as in the previous sentences, prevents Death and the reader from getting a clear view of Duse. The poem ultimately concerns the mediated ways of catching glimpses of Duse, without any knowledge of the woman behind the “perfect flower” of her beautiful face.

In line 6, “[be]neath the earthly din” refers to the themes of sound and silence raised in previous poems of the sequence, adding to the sense of remove between the poem (reader, speaker, addressee Death) and Duse. As previously discussed, Duse was a stage actress, but did not speak English; Teasdale never saw her perform live. Later Duse would appear in at least one silent film, but if Teasdale saw it, it would have been about a decade after this sequence was written. Primarily, she would have known Duse through reviews and the publicity stills that were widely available—some of the poems in this sequence are addressed to her in the roles for which photos were published. Thus the recurring theme of silence is resonant literally because Teasdale would have only been able to interact with images of Duse, obviously amplifying issues of performance and appearance. Further, though, women as public figures, women as members of society, women as artists, would certainly have struggled with issues of speaking and silence. Historically, women have been overlooked in the historical narrative, not published or published under pseudonyms, spoken for and over in public discourse. The female artist, whether speaking in poetry or as a stage performer, enters a space—the sonnet form, the literary world more broadly, or the stage—long reserved for only male



participation. Thus the silence of women, Duse “buried ‘neath the earthly din” and Teasdale wrestling with the possibilities of being a poet, was especially fraught.

This sequence ends with a six-line poem that could be read as a “tailed sonnet” along with the final sonnet, but the final sonnet stands better on its own; one long sentence about a scene in the play *Francesca da Rimini* wherein Francesca dies in a fire, the poem is vivid and urgent taken as a complete whole. The shorter following poem apostrophizes Duse in the same scene but without replicating the extended syntax:

“A Song to Eleonora Duse in ‘Francesca da Rimini’”

Oh would I were the roses, that lie against her hands,

The heavy burning roses she touches as she stands!

Dear hands that hold the roses, where mine would love to be,

Oh leave, oh leave the roses, and hold the hands of me!

She draws the heart from out them, she draws away their breath,—

Oh would that I might perish and find so sweet a death!

Thus these final six lines, the “tail” of that sonnet, are somewhat confusing, since including non-sonnet poems in a sequence of sonnets is not conventional. Its theme reiterating the flames from the final sonnet, though, and its abbreviated length not suggesting a possible additional sonnet, it offers the possibility that Duse’s persona overflows the sonnet vessel, is too much to be contained in the space of fourteen lines. While the sonnets were able to stretch taut conflicts in time, silence, gender, and performance—were able to convey enormous amounts of feeling and meaning, of identity formation of Duse and the speaker—the sequence ends with the idea that perhaps Duse is still too much, or that the speaker’s ability to capture her is inadequate.

But the poems do allow enough space for the staging of Teasdale's critical identity conflicts: gender is performance; poetry is a way of performing, both generally and gender specifically; and that analogy, including imitation, is one way of dealing with these identity problems. Bringing the past to bear on her writing and her vision of Duse, Teasdale established a speaking persona whose first foray into a book of poetry is self-humbling but accomplished, feminine and entirely self-conscious of the ways femininity is present—and then she ends that introductory sequence, the manifesto of her poetic self, with the possibility that she is unable to contain her admiration in the space she chose. This interpretation, of the size as a limitation of the sonnet's ability to convey meaning adequately, is explored in more depth in the next chapter, wherein Edna St. Vincent Millay expands the space of the sonnet for the duration of her entire sequence, working on the model of George Meredith's *Modern Love*, to construct an unwanted identity and critique the way time is usually understood in poetry.

### CHAPTER III

#### TIME IN SEQUENCE: MILLAY'S SONNETS OF MOURNING

“Second Fig”

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:

Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!

In this 1922 couplet, Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) espouses a modern attitude disdainful of pragmatism, embracing instead the temporary and pleasurable. Throughout her career, Millay would write poems that celebrated this view, most of them in received forms, using rhyming lines, quatrains, and iambs to say what would have then seemed radical in modes that by the 1920s seemed old fashioned. This contrast contributed then and contributes now to Millay's reputation: she was beloved by popular readers but frequently dismissed by members of the literary elite and editors and writers both during and after her life. Her poetry seemed straightforward in style and sentimental in content, though her presentation of sentiment was surprising and new. Though well-known today, Millay occupies a space distinct from her more canonical peers, and many of her works remain neglected; some contemporary scholars still call for “recovery” of her as a poet in general (Lewis<sup>26</sup>), while others merely note the lack of scholarship (or lack of good scholarship) of certain texts, which color Millay's overall perception by the scholarly public (Michailidou). Millay's relative neglect stems both from her own idiosyncrasies and from broader tendencies in literature and culture that suppressed women's works in the midcentury.

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<sup>26</sup> Though Lewis's text is a thesis, it is one of the most recent broad assessments of the literature of Millay I found; in large part a literature review, it draws the conclusion that Millay remains relatively obscure.

Clark traces early twentieth-century women writers' dampened reputations to the disdain for "sentiment" espoused by the other writers of the period and then, too, by readers: "In the age of Eliot, defined by the failure of relationship and the antiheroics of the poetic loner, Millay was writing most of all about love, and her sentimental subject was only the beginning of her crime: more than that, she was writing in a way that was easily understood, that invites the reader in, that makes community with the reader and tries to heal alienation" (69). Immediately after Millay's heyday, the 1920s and 1930s, cultural changes devalued women's political and literary engagement, and the promotion of the housewife and domestic responsibility in the post-World War II era put Millay's lifestyle and work both out of step with the culture: "Women's gradual recession from the public sphere was also reflected in the diminishing numbers of poetry books published by women in the 1930s, as well as in the limited numbers of literary awards given to female poets" (Michailidou 70).<sup>27</sup> One critic in 1975 noted that Millay's "reputation is small" and "her position in our letters is unlikely to change much, even with a sympathetic reassessment" (Minot 261-62). In fact, the "Second Fig" poem presciently predicts her career, or at least its reception: her beautiful, life-embracing poems faded from literary consciousness while the more evidently complicated, difficult (though not necessarily "ugly") poems of some of her contemporaries have endured for the past century as essential texts for students, writers, and scholars.

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<sup>27</sup> For more context on the midcentury situation for women and poetry, see Michailidou 69-71: "[T]he 1950s and 1960s...had little of the jubilant atmosphere that followed the feminist gains of the early 1920s. On the other hand, several social trends that were particularly strong in the 1950s, such as women's limited participation in political matters, or the emphasis attached to home and the family, can be traced already in the 1920s and 1930s. ... Even though 'the new women' of the 1920s soon realized that a life combining work, marriage, and motherhood was practically infeasible, they were reluctant to challenge the patriarchal assumptions of American society and 'interpreted their inability to find exciting jobs and reliable childcare as personal failures.' In addition, following the failure of women to emerge as a political force after 1920, 'pro-women's legislation and political activism declined steadily until the 1950s'" (70).

While Millay has enjoyed a popular and critical resurgence in the past thirty or so years, she has long been recognized, like Dorothy Parker, as a personality as much as or more than a respected poet. Her best-known poems evince a modern attitude exemplified by playfulness, sexual openness, and wit, all of which made them amenable to later twentieth-century scholars searching for the women's voices that the midcentury neglected. Scholars who still subscribe to the High Modernist telling of the period's meaning could take up certain Millay poems—"First Fig" (1918) or "I shall forget you presently, my dear" (1920)—and note their innovative spirit if not form. Moreover, though, even the gatekeepers of cultural modernity had to acknowledge her persona: "Millay stood for more than lyricism and sentiment; she represented New Womanhood and the assertive female sexuality that gave focus to the culture's diffuse ambivalence about contemporary social change" (Miller n.p.). However, Millay representing "New Womanhood" was not then and is not now always the same as her poetry being taken as "new" or innovative. In 1944 one reviewer noted that the "popularity of her poetry... stems very largely from ... its familiarity: simple forms in rhyme and stanza, resemblances (whether or not fortunate) to poetry already well known, occasionally skillful reworkings of particular styles" (Scott 338). But much period criticism could not resist discussing her persona, as well:

By no means a recluse, she has courted life and shunned none of its adventures. ...[I]n short, she has taken the rough-and-tumble of a modern American girl's life and has reached its usual climax, marriage. Beginning, before she was twenty and while still a little tomboy of the Maine coast, with *Renascence*, a poem of desperate faith, lithe as a faun in

its naked search of the soul, the danger has been that life might lure her away from art. (Monroe 1924 262-63)

In Monroe's assessment Millay's work and personality blend; the life from which the poetry sprung serves as a contrast and context, but also an equivocation, as the name "Millay" signifies both poetic work and the woman's real-life story (or a public version thereof). Scott's review of Millay's work, twenty years later, also from *Poetry*, contrasts with the "modern" and "rough-and-tumble" of her life in her youth; though her poetry had always espoused a modern attitude, and later in her career engaged with politics and advocated for social change, its appearance belied its contemporary spirit. Thus perspectives like Monroe's that give Millay credit for being modern, even if that credit often does not attach directly to the poetry itself, correct another popular misconception. Today, Millay's life and persona do not need recovery; rather, the texts of her poems themselves deserve careful attention with less biographical interpretation. This chapter reads Millay's relatively neglected sonnets to show her third-person speaker's ambivalence about gender, poetics, and domesticity, clarifying the work these poems do in their cultural context for women and women artists. The task of the woman poet, the female writer of sonnets, in the early twentieth century, was in part to imagine a new, adaptive identity for the poet, as a new woman also able to make use of the poetic and artistic past, and the sonnet, as a genre able to contain and make sense of the contemporary world.

Unafraid of addressing women's themes and a female readership, Millay wrote both "glib" and sentimental, often "sad" poetry from a distinctively female, distinctively contemporary perspective throughout the 1920s and '30s (Scott). Her body of work was

unusual for “offer[ing] an alternative to the ‘new’ poetry” and for “serv[ing] as a rallying point for the rejection of free verse, imagism, and Prufrockian ennui” (Perlmutter 158). “New” poetry at the time referred to verse marked by formal innovation—recall Monroe’s discussion of the class of potential Pulitzer Prize winners in 1918—not necessarily the poem’s treading of tonal or emotional new ground. Millay’s use of traditional forms prompts readers to respond to her words within their formal environment and puts literal and figurative meanings into conversation with one another.

Using elements of the literary past not as fragments to juxtapose against each other in a collage, as Eliot used them, but as resources to combine and synthesize to conceal and reveal her poetic themes, “Millay’s actual achievement, which was not inconsiderable, was to conserve, in her early volumes, the melodic simplicity of the combined pastoral and personal lyric by breathing into it a hybridized diction [...]” (Perlmutter 159). Since the 1970s, this revisionist view of Millay’s work as an achievement of conservation as opposed to an inability to hew to the new conventions ushered in by the so-called high modernists has dominated. But critical work on Millay’s specific poems has unfortunately not proliferated: “The taint of ‘traditionalism’ did not help Millay’s cause, and the poet’s lifelong exploration of sexuality, femininity and gender stereotypes was somehow not enough to generate sophisticated critical analyses. Since Millay seemed to be a largely traditional poet and a ‘politically incorrect’ feminist model, second-wave feminists preferred to focus on other figures, classified as more modern and more overtly subversive” (Michailidou 67). This chapter remedies that scholarly oversight through close readings of especially neglected sonnets, calling

attention to the model of womanhood Millay advanced in the sequence as well as other sonnets in *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems* (1923) and the way the sonnet specifically allows her to create poetic speakers who embody conflicts between past and present, emotional and sexual. Millay uses the individual sonnet and its formal traditions to amplify the tensions of her main character's multiple subject positions, as wife, woman, poetic speaker who rejects speaking; she deepens this investigation into the form through the extended metaphor of the house as poem and through the sonnet sequence's shifting temporalities that expand and compound the complications of female identity at the time, demonstrating the continued vitality of the sonnet singly and in sequence. Thus, the bulk of this chapter focuses on a neglected sequence of mature, ambiguous, vividly emotional poems that actively estrange speaker and reader from poetic subject: *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*.

#### THE UNGRAFTED TREE SONNETS IN CONTEXT

As discussed in the introduction, the sonnet especially by the 1920s was conceived of as a vehicle for outdated ideas. But in fact the poets writing sonnets in the early twentieth century used the form to stage contemporary battles, usually deeply internal conflicts set inside fourteen lines for public consumption. The form, of public declaration of love as well as of private thought and often private reading, has long vibrated at the intersection of opposed meanings and existences. But during this time period its possibilities gained renewed use for writers whose struggles between the self and society were especially fraught. The lyric speaker of the sonnet invites reader identification while also inviting the reader to surmise that the "I" is really the author.



Millay's *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, however, does not use an "I," allowing the speaker to be deeply emotional, deeply personal, while also forcing distance between protagonist, reader, and writer. The emotional distance strengthens the emotional impact of these poems, because their primary animating feature is the pain of estrangement, even within the seemingly conventional confines of a sonnet. This allows these poems to be sentimental while avoiding outright sentiment, indulging in and sidestepping the issue that damned Millay with her contemporary and midcentury critics: "In the age of Eliot, defined by the failure of relationship and the antiheroics of the poetic loner, Millay was writing most of all about love, and her sentimental subject was only the beginning of her crime: more than that, she was writing in a way that was easily understood, that invites the reader in, that makes community with the reader and tries to heal alienation" (Clark 69). She invites in certain kinds of readers—the ones likely to empathize with the protagonist, or women—and uses shared alienation to forge a connection with them. The work I undertake in this chapter not only further recuperates Millay's sentimental, formalist, ambiguous poetry but also the sonnet's reputation during this period; I deepen existing scholarly conceptions of the early twentieth century while also extending the line of genre scholarship about the sonnet. Millay's sequence makes an argument for the relevance of sonnets even in the context of modernity because it blends "outdated" personal and feminine themes with modernist alienation, aloofness, and (an attempt at) objectivity. Sonnets formally, through their internal oppositions and concision, their repeated patterns of rhyme and meter, help Millay to inextricably weave together these seemingly disparate elements to show a main character struggling to keep the past behind her even as it refuses to leave.

*Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, seventeen poems that intertwine to tell the story of an unspeaking protagonist on the occasion of her return to her former home, where her husband is dying, draw inspiration from George Meredith's 1862 sequence *Modern Love*. The relationship between Meredith's sequence and Millay's helps to reveal both the line of influence Millay extends and the interventions her unique work performs on the sonnet sequence as a genre; reworking the already ironized sequence in the voice of her alienated, conflicted speaker allows Millay to address marriage problems both contemporary and timeless. Because a full comparison of the two sequences would overshadow this chapter's goals of demonstrating Millay's adaptation of the sonnet in her time period, I limit the discussion of Meredith, primarily focusing on how he establishes his characters and their marriage and, of course, his formal digression from the traditional sonnet; these elements of *Modern Love* are adapted in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*; this shows both the line of poetic influence from the nineteenth to twentieth century—a line I argue is more continuous than much current scholarship demonstrates—and further helps to show which elements of Millay's poems stand apart. The comparison to Meredith establishes Millay's skillful, significant adaptation of nineteenth century influences in these seventeen sonnets.

Ambiguity allows Millay to avoid the either/or High Modernists and New Critics attempted to establish around modernism, a movement based on ostensibly rejecting what came before, or rather rejecting in certain sanctioned ways certain elements of what came before. Clark argues that feminist criticism applied correctly does not expand existing discourse to accommodate women's contributions but unsettles the assumptions that have allowed extant discourse to fail to include women. Millay's poems read

without the mediation of her biography are at once contemporary and formal, as modern in character as any other formal verse of the time, but ironically the gatekeepers of Modernism struggled to account for Millay's poetry without Millay's persona. While in my other chapters I seek to recover forgotten poets, in this chapter I avoid biographical discussion; Millay's poetry has long been read through the lens of her Greenwich Village, New Woman lifestyle, which has allowed certain narratives to remain uncontested: of the free-loving bohemian, the girlish prodigy. "Millay was of course flagrantly engaged during the twenties in the bohemian leftish lifestyle of Greenwich Village, with its tenets of free love and support for the working masses.... But her radical lifestyle never put off her readers the way a radical poetics might have" (Clark 69)—and in fact, her radical lifestyle allowed her old-fashioned poetics to exist as at once by and about New Women, comforting and familiar in their presentation of her. Clark's "of course" reveals that even a generation ago Millay's biography was well-trodden ground especially relative to Teasdale's and Johnson's.

*Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, like the other poems discussed throughout this dissertation, establishes a tension of the self that is not resolved. For Millay's speaker, as for Teasdale's and Johnson's, the role of the self in society, as a woman marked and marginalized also by class, race, and opportunity, vexes the poetic speaker, who also questions the role of the woman poet in an especially masculine form. Through close readings, consideration of historical and poetic context, and avoiding biographical surmise, this chapter analyzes both the individual poems and their interactions throughout the sequence as they participate in and diverge from expected poem- and sequence-conventions. My readings reveal the deeply sentimental and alienated

perspectives on offer in the sequence, from the protagonist and the speaker, which collaborate to question (but not resolve) contemporary expectations for women. These sonnets use ambiguity and irresolvable tensions in theme, image, chronology, and form to refuse comfort and suggest the impossibility of assembling a singular or simple identity—as a woman, as a poet, as a person in the modern world, perhaps as a person in any context. These poems are self-evidently melancholy, but these dualities reveal an underlying darkness in the speaker’s conception of the world, a power I argue the sonnet wields especially strongly in this time period.

Though *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* remains relatively neglected compared to much of Millay’s work, it receives occasional attention from critics; while its speaker and story strike many readers as unusual—or harder to integrate with Millay’s biography<sup>28</sup>—its form and tone cohere in many ways with the rest of her oeuvre. Millay’s reputation during the 1920s was enormous, but then and throughout the midcentury her popularity resulted in backlash. Because she rose to fame very young, her work was characterized as precocious even well into her adulthood.<sup>29</sup> Through her lifestyle she also represented the newest opportunities for women, if not poets: “Millay stood for more than lyricism and sentiment; she represented New Womanhood and the

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<sup>28</sup> Though some critics have found ways to do so (see Minot), most scholars do not see Millay’s domestic interests in poetry as directly related to her lived experience, nor do most critics today think finding biographical linkages is the most compelling way to analyze her poetry: “Although some of Millay’s domestic poems seem clearly autobiographical, it is difficult to discern any over-all correlation between the events of her life and the periods when she wrote on domestic subjects. She alternates between writing some domestic poems and writing none at all, but for no apparent reasons. She wrote about marriage before she became a wife, culminating with ‘Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree’ (*sic*). After her marriage, domesticity virtually disappeared from her work until the 1939 volume *Huntsman, What Quarry?*, a rather strange mixture of war and domestic concerns” (Dobbs, n.pag.).

<sup>29</sup> She began publishing around the same time as Teasdale, despite being a decade younger: “From 1906 to 1910 her poems appeared in the famous children’s magazine *St. Nicholas*, and one of her prize poems was reprinted in a 1907 issue of *Current Opinion*” (*Poetry Foundation*, n.pag.); her “Renasceance” appeared in 1912’s *The Lyric Year*, before she began college.

assertive female sexuality that gave focus to the culture's diffuse ambivalence about contemporary social change. Through a poetry that was equal parts transgressive and traditional, Millay provided symbolic access to modernity for her national audience” (Miller n.pag.).<sup>30</sup> Not only was culture at large ambivalent about social change, but the high modernists especially were, infusing their work with nostalgia, irony, and anxiety about the sweeping social and political changes that defined the period. Thus Millay opposed Pound, T. E. Hulme, and Eliot at poetics and politics; they sought to use the ideological wreckage of a previous era to create something unfamiliar on the page, whereas Millay adapted the forms of the past to advocate for social change, or at least reflection. Millay, along with other women writers who used sentiment in various capacities, “began to be driven out of the canon as modernism worked its way into the literary and academic establishments” in the 1930s (Clark 36). Millay’s general neglect primarily stems from canon formation after her initial popularity; the case of neglect for *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* in particular comes down to its relationship to the poems of hers critics have rediscovered and embraced.

This sequence suffers as many sequences do from the difficulty in anthologizing an entire sequence, but also because few of the poems excise well from their surrounding poems and because as a combined narrative, it is difficult to summarize. The tenor of these poems coheres with Millay’s other work in certain aspects, but the variety of work Millay produced means that some readers will find this tone unexpected.

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<sup>30</sup> The *Poetry Foundation* leads its description of the poet with the same contrast between inherited form and radical attitude: “like Frost, she was able to combine modernist attitudes with traditional forms creating a unique American poetry. But Millay’s popularity as a poet had at least as much to do with her person: she was known for her riveting readings and performances, her progressive political stances, frank portrayal of both hetero and homosexuality, and, above all, her embodiment and description of new kinds of female experience and expression.”

Though today Millay's sexually free poems, the "transgressive" and sometimes "glib" poems about sex and merriment, such as "I, being born a woman and distressed" and the pair of Fig poems, are well known in certain circles, and though those fit well with the narrative of her modern lifestyle, other frequently anthologized poems differ in tone and focus, such as "Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare," which idealistically praises structure.

Millay's later work became more overtly political, and throughout her career she wrote sonnets in sequences,<sup>31</sup> both of which facts connect *Ungrafted Tree* to her larger career. Indeed, she used the sonnet sequence to comment on gender and genre in particular again, more directly, in 1931's *Fatal Interview*.<sup>32</sup> So despite some of the most memorable poems' merriment,<sup>33</sup> her larger collection of work has been characterized as emotional, personal, unhappy:

Her poems say a hundred times that life is sad. At least as often, her poems say that death is the bitterest pill of all; and they fight against it, wail upon it, and defy death. This, when you come to think of it, adds up to a lot of troubled emotion. Maybe if Miss Millay had ever made up her mind, we should have had less poetry from her, and that would be

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<sup>31</sup> "I, being born a woman and distressed" is in fact excised from a group of sonnets that can be read as a sequence but rarely is analyzed that way.

<sup>32</sup> Commentary on *Fatal Interview* aligns with my reading of *Ungrafted Tree*: "*Fatal Interview* is similar to a Shakespearean/Elizabethan sonnet sequence, but expresses a woman's point of view. A reviewer for the *London Morning Post* wrote, 'Without discarding the forms of an older convention, she speaks the thoughts of a new age.' American poet and critic Allen Tate also also pointed out in the *New Republic* that Millay used a nineteenth-century vocabulary to convey twentieth-century emotion: 'She has been from the beginning the one poet of our time who has successfully stood athwart two ages.' And Patricia A. Klemans commented in the *Colby Library Quarterly* that Millay achieved universality 'by interweaving the woman's experience with classical myth, traditional love literature, and nature'" (*Poetry Foundation*, n.pag.).

<sup>33</sup> One particularly famous line repeated thrice in 1922's "Recuerdo": "We were very merry."

unfortunate; nonetheless, by these conflicting emotions she has remained in an intellectual jam. There is obvious sentimentality in this contradiction; it afflicts a great deal of her verse and explains, I think, why the verse leaves us dissatisfied. Here too I suspect we come closest to the reason for Miss Millay's attractiveness for the undergraduate, or adolescent, mind. (Scott 337)

While Scott considers her "conflicting emotions" a source of reader "dissatisfaction" with much of Millay's work, in this sequence her inability to "[make] up her mind" enriches her character's persona. Rather than offering pat resolutions, these poems, along with many others of hers, refuse comfort by estranging speaker, character, and reader. Contra Scott's view, these poems see death as at least in part, potentially, a comfort. Critiquing Millay's work in general for revealing "an intellectual jam" seems, in light of these poems, a failure of empathy. Though Scott claims that "conflicting emotions" point to "adolescent" thinking, or an appeal to "undergraduate" readers as a way to explain away her popularity, Clark has since dismantled this facile view of sentimentality, noting that "In order to avoid admitting the rhetorical situation of literature, which engages it inevitably in culture, history, and desire, American modernist literary criticism endorsed a formalism which avoided ideology by calling women ideological, and rejected their sensible attachments to the everyday" (6). Conflicted emotions, and especially conflicted emotions about the everyday, connect Millay's speaker and protagonist in *Ungrafted Tree* to the reader such that the unhappy implications for women in contemporary American society are not local to the poem but broadly implicate the reader, too. Thus, the character serves as an everywoman, a stand-

in for the reader and women like her, as in many better-remembered Millay poems, including “Second Fig” and “I Shall Forget You Presently.” In persona, use of sentiment, and the connection of those with the reader and society, this sequence ties itself to the rest of her canon; however, the domestic life of this character and the specific situation in which the character finds herself, as well as in thematization of death, these poems diverge from the characters to whom Millay more often gives voice; their distinction from her other work makes their recuperation all the more critical, as the myriad facets of Millay’s deployment of the sonnet are a highlight of the early twentieth century in formal verse. Minot characterizes the distinctions between this sequence and what was expected of a Millay work as follows:

[These poems’] subject is not passionate love, but love turned cold and bitter.

The *persona* is not her usual first-person lover, but a third-person narrator who describes her protagonist coldly and objectively. [...] Moreover, this sequence is notable for its consistently grim tone. There are very few tonal shifts or emotional peaks and valleys such as one finds in most of Millay’s sonnets.

(Minot 261)

Contrasting the expectation of Millay’s other works to celebrate “passionate love” with the version of love on display in this sequence, Minot notes that the relatively static emotional pitch differentiates these sonnets from Millay’s others. I argue that these poems are more emotional than Minot seems to think, but their strategy of estrangement allows superficial readers, to avoid like the speaker full immersion in the sequence’s emotions. Nelson conversely characterizes the defining feature of this sequence relative to Millay’s other work as not a difference but a pinnacle: “Millay’s achievements in the



sonnet are perhaps most fully realized in her 1923 sequence of seventeen ‘Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree.’ (*sic*) The final number in the sequence opens as the speaker sits at her dead husband’s bedside [...] and closes in an anti-romantic flourish as she

. . . sees a man she never saw before –

The man who eats his victuals at her side,

Small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers, unclassified.

“This sort of dramatic rethinking of gender relations in fact takes place across both rethought traditional forms and innovative experimental ones” (Nelson 79). Nelson ultimately argues that the modern artistic condition, highlighted in poems like Millay’s, “highlights the entanglement of aesthetics and politics” (83) —not entirely unlike other periods, but as a general, broad movement in American literature and art specifically, engaged with form not as a given but as another tool for experimentation. This sequence shares many qualities with other Millay works but for various reasons—separability among them—has sustained fewer critical projects despite its praise; its distinctions from her other works, including its tone and emotional alienation, suit her aesthetic and political purposes to argue that women’s identities are estranged from them and often inherently irreconcilable during the early twentieth century.

These poems do employ a “consistently grim tone,” but the narrator’s attitude toward the main character does not have to be read as “cold.” Rather, the speaker’s relationship to the protagonist varies throughout the sequence, often subtly, and in fact, the connection to Meredith suggests that the main character and the narrator can in places profitably be read as the same woman. The lack of overt tonal shifts and emotional variances serve to conceal the enormous sentimental alienation at the heart of

the sequence; “coldness,” or what I might call deliberate emotional remove, functions as a strategy to suppress pain, conflict, and grief. Though the distinctions noted by Minot superficially differentiate *Ungrafted Tree*, the sequence advances a similar argument about women to many of Millay’s other poems, though the creation of a protagonist/speaker whose attitudes are evident even as she seeks to avoid implication in the poems’ action.

Millay, like Teasdale and most other female poets throughout Western literary history, situated herself at an intersection of gender identity and artistic production that popular conception did not readily acknowledge. The traits society valued—and still to a large extent values—in a woman were in some instances actively antithetical to those associated with creative production, and indeed during the Modern period male writers led by Pound and the Italian Futurists strove to further masculinize the conception of poetry. Poetry especially took on an “intellectual” character, from which women were excluded: “[M]an, at best, is an intellectualized woman. Or, man distinguishes himself from woman by intellect” (John Crowe Ransom, quoted in Clark 9). This required rejecting sentiment, which was conceptualized as opposed to intellect, and even successful women writers saw their work marginalized by this masculine conception: “Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual, and I think everybody knows it” (ibid). Even as new avenues for women opened in society, as the New Woman gained traction as a way a woman might be in society, as a part of society, not hidden away laboring in the house to support a spouse who could take part in public life, women continued to perform the domestic duties or receive approbation for refusing (or outsourcing) that work. The *Ungrafted Tree* sequence takes place in a marital home

frozen in time, allowing their protagonist to reenter her space of feminine, domestic labor with a detached, unhappy tone.

This sequence ambivalently explores the relationship between women and domestic labor through poetry, but simplified societal understandings of that relationship proved as limiting to Millay herself as to her protagonist; an example of the way women's domestic duties superseded their artistic capabilities in the public consciousness helps to show why these poems treat domesticity as both solace and burden. The kitchen specifically serves as a site of women's work, a space especially reserved for women in the household, in these poems and in Millay's public life. In 1949, nearly thirty years after the publication of this sequence, Millay's ability to keep a home and be a poet would still be fraught, as when *Ladies' Home Journal* redecorated the poet's kitchen for a photo spread and article, which included the author's comment, "How hard to think of the couplet to close the sonnet when there wasn't a place to put clean dishes!" (Gladys Tabor, *Ladies' Home Journal*, February 1949). A 2009 *New Yorker* article about the 1949 *LHJ* article and a newer slideshow of that article's images, now available on the site *Apartment Therapy*, both invited readers to enjoy the peek into the past—a time when pink Naugahyde was a fashionable material for a kitchen bench's backrest and when a famous poet and her house's decor might sell copies of *Ladies' Home Journal*—and also critiqued the cultural assumptions that made such a spread seem reasonable: "It's a deeply ironic throwback to a time when even the most independent women—in this case a Pulitzer Prize winner—were expected to hinge at least part of their worth on their kitchen" (Krajeski).

The expectation that a woman's kitchen says something about her is one of many gendered expectations taken up, examined, and tiredly set back down in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*. For the speaker as for most other women, the kitchen signified both labor and performance, acts undertaken willingly, out of love, and sometimes resentfully. The kitchen both does and does not reveal something about the woman, about Millay—one of many contradictions the poems highlight rather than seek to resolve. The sonnets, after the model of *Modern Love*, capture moments and objects from a long, mostly unhappy marriage at its ultimate end. The female protagonist, described by a third-person speaker, has removed herself from the domestic space for an unspecified amount of time, but the sequence begins with her return “to his house,” in one of the first of the sequence's many subtle contradictions, as the space of the house, its routines and meanings, are all shown throughout the poems to be very much hers. The physical space of the house and the tangible things in it serve as physical sites of memory, allowing the poems to “take place” in the day or two between the wife's arrival and the husband's death while also revealing their history together. In the 1920s, though the New Woman had been a cultural and literary trend for a quarter century at least by then, women had increased opportunities in public life, education, and sexual freedom, but those freedoms were limited once a woman also had a household to care for, because the expansion of rights and opportunities for women did not correspond with reassignment of domestic labor to anyone else.<sup>34</sup> The speaker in this poem, by removing

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<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the problem of domestic labor, including motherhood, resulted in one common argument against women's suffrage: “**Can woman be the mother of the race and the governor of the race at the same time without any loss of efficiency?**” (*Against Woman Suffrage* 4, emphasis in original); Giving women the vote “**means diverting the attention of woman from her natural duties** [which would be] **a direct loss to the State**” (*Against Woman Suffrage* 5, emphasis in original).

herself from the protagonist, argues that marriage limits even modern-minded women, because society had and has not added domestic labor to the list of responsibilities for men; while women can and do engage in new social activities, they still, limitingly, remain the primary manager of the home. This political argument further marginalizes Millay's work, as the high modernist attitude toward modernity often took an ironic, nostalgic tenor (Clark Ch. 1, Miller).

Though they seem distinct in tone and persona from Millay's New Woman poems, which embody the contemporary woman she seemed to be in Greenwich Village, the *Ungrafted Tree* poems advance a similar claim about womanhood in the early twentieth century: that sex and sexuality matter to women, and that emotions, while important, do not dominate all decisions made by women. This argument about women's control over their emotions occurs, strategically, in poems about a situation that ought to feel deeply emotional but which instead attempt to refuse expected emotions. In *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, as she describes the protagonist the speaker reveals her view that received understandings of female sexuality and chastity trap women in marriages that do not fulfill them; in another sonnet from the same volume, 1923's Pulitzer-Prize winning *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*, another speaker, this one more worldly and confident, advances a related claim that amounts to the same worldview, that women both desire and feel, but like men are able to control both. The differences between these poems espousing a social argument about the role of women in contemporary society, point to the limitations of the New Woman in society: single women could be New Women, but married women might well lose that luxury among their pots and pans and cleaning implements.

“I, BEING BORN A WOMAN AND DISTRESSED” AND NEW WOMANHOOD

First, this better-remembered sonnet, “I, being born a woman and distressed,” represents the ironic, playful tone associated with her New Woman persona, and provides a basis for some of my analysis of the speaker in the *Ungrafted Tree* sequence:

I, being born a woman and distressed  
By all the needs and notions of my kind,  
Am urged by your propinquity to find  
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest  
To bear your body’s weight upon my breast:  
So subtly is the fume of life designed,  
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,  
And leave me once again undone, possessed.  
Think not for this, however, the poor treason  
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,  
I shall remember you with love, or season  
My scorn with pity, —let me make it plain:  
I find this frenzy insufficient reason  
For conversation when we meet again.

This poem reverses the content expectations of a traditional Petrarchan sonnet by giving voice to the woman rejecting a male lover who evidently wants more. The poem is, formally, a perfect Petrarchan sonnet, with an ABBAABBACDECDE rhyme scheme and a clear volta between the octave and sestet, with a shift in the speaker’s aim

amplified by the beginning of a new sentence. Before the turn the speaker expresses sexual desire: after her attention moves to rejecting the poem's subject. Whereas traditionally a male speaker pines for an unreachable female beloved who remains unknown and generic in a sonnet, Millay's female speaker trades on generalizations about her sex to reject a man who bores her—or worse, a man for whom she has “scorn” (12). The male lacks presence in the sonnet, in much the way women's absence ironically marks many traditional Petrarchan sonnets. Though the person to whom the poem speaks, the “you” receiving its words, is called the “subject,” in fact in most of these types of poems they are an object, incidental to the speaker's actual interest in him or herself: “There is no real man involved, only a ‘person fair,’ a ‘body’” (Dobbs n.pag.). In this case, though Millay's speaker ostensibly delivers these lines to her lover, his role is limited to providing the incentive for this sonnet—similarly, the husband in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* does not figure prominently except as an idea or sometimes a memory. In both cases, the inverted speaker/subject or speaker/“beloved” relationship highlights the limitations the sonnet has always put on the subject or beloved, limitations the literary imagination has traditionally ignored because of received notions about heterosexual romance.

The speaker in this poem, who gives voice to a sexually liberated and socially free conception of the New Woman, acknowledges her sexual desires by feigning the inability to overcome them. She mentions the relationships between sexuality and rational thought several times, always subordinating the latter to the former. Rational thought can be undermined or deliberately discarded in the pursuit of sexual pleasure; this hedonistic approach suggests that women are and are not stereotypes, both more

sexual than society often wanted to acknowledge and irrational. The speaker, though generalized shows careful control over what she says throughout the poem, arguing either that she was never entirely irrational or that her “cloud[ed] mind” has recovered in the poetic present.<sup>35</sup> The linguistic deliberateness establishes a character in the octave who will be undermined in the sestet, but also hints at that character’s knowingness even in the beginning. This begins when the speaker lists the “needs and notions of my kind,” which are “distress[ing]” to her; this could be due to their overwhelming scope or their smallness. A reader who assumes women are mentally limited might well think the “notions” of her kind are few, and indeed social convention often held that women had little sexual “need” at all—that they were primarily asexual, and what little sexuality they might have was in the service of their maternal urge. However, both word choices, “need” and “notion,” also invite other possibilities. In the former case, women also “need” social and economic security, i.e., marriage. This contrast between a woman’s sexual needs and the needs forced upon her by a society that will not grant her independence allows this line to fulfill reader assumptions and stereotypes about women even if different readers believe different things about women: a reader who thinks a woman is not rational enough to overcome her sexual urges can read the line that way, while a reader who thinks her economic needs are primary will also find grounds for that interpretation. The double meaning is deliberate, allowing the speaker to outwit the reader as she does the rejected lover. In addition to referring to ideas, “notions” is a term used for small accessories used in sewing—stitch rippers, bobbins, buttons, and other

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<sup>35</sup> “The speakers [of the New Woman poems] usually are not portrayed as real, individualized women. They are witty and clever and sexually emancipated, but as women they are a stereotyped abstraction” (Dobbs n.pag.).



finishing decorations. This calls to mind both the domestic labor that dominates women's lives especially in the middle and lower classes as well as the frivolity men often attributed to women's work, as the term encompasses both the tools of sewing and the decorative materials. In all these cases, the speaker says she is "distressed" by the limitations of being a woman, but the way she says it reveals her adeptness at manipulating her listener. This opening pair of lines, therefore, already establishes the speaker's persona through her verbal aptitude; an adept reader will already be alert for a character who rejects the limitations she professes to be "distressed" by.

The rest of the octave speaks of sexual desire, establishing a caricature the sestet can reject, but even here the speaker's attitude toward the lover is not affectionate. One could reasonably read the attitude toward the lover as cruel, but the speaker's remove shows that cruelty toward him is incidental, because he is a concept more than a specific character. If anything, the cruelty is directed toward cultural assumptions, tempered with humor because the speaker upends conventions so surprisingly. She notes that she is urged by "propinquity"—nearness, not anything specific about him—to find him desirable. That he is incidental adds to the bluntness of her rejection, saying, essentially, *you're not special*—in fact, neither she nor he caused their lust; they were "urged" by that nearness. This idea that the specific man amounts to very little difference to the woman paired with him will recur in the *Ungrafted Tree* sequence, but in that case the woman will not have the option of telling the man off. When women are told that their sexual urges exist only in the context of love and marriage, they can either fall into a trap of a marriage that might well fail to fulfill them or notice that they have desires outside of that frame and reject what they have been taught. This speaker chooses the

latter, and celebrates that choice through this poem. She does this while also luxuriating in the pleasure that sex can bring, here from a woman's perspective and language: "[I] Am urged by your propinquity to find / Your person fair, and feel a certain zest / To bear your body's weight upon my breast" (lines 3-5). Her sexual desire takes a specifically feminine form: she wants to have his "weight" over her, to feel the physicality of someone heavy atop her. She notes that life is "designed / To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind, / And leave me once again undone, possessed" (6-8), again pointing to woman's experience, as women experience possession historically (folklorically) more frequently and also because possession imagines something else inside a person controlling her, which parallels the heterosexual sexual experience for a woman. These lines reject a cultural assumption that women are not driven by sexual desire by presenting a feminized sexual longing and experience which also refuses to imbue the man with any specificity. She desires him only because of his proximity and maleness; this lack of characterization of the lover implicitly questions the depth of the relationships behind romantic sonnets written by men to their beloveds throughout history. The octave thus gives voice to the character motivated entirely by sexual desire that the sestet will shift.

The sestet changes focus, turning away from sexual need to reject the lover; the speaker subverts the expectation established in the octave by subsuming her sexual desire to her intellectual interest. She rejects the lover without any evident emotion: "Think not for this, however, the poor treason / Of my stout blood against my staggering brain, / I shall remember you with love, or season / My scorn with pity" (9-12). Here, "this" is elaborated on with "the poor treason of my stout blood against my staggering

brain,” or the momentary change in priorities during their sexual experience, no longer the case in the poetic present. Her brain “stagger[s]” under the “treason” of her blood: reason rules in her but has been usurped, however briefly, by physical reaction. The speaker assures the listener, her lover, that “this” is not a reason for her to “remember [him] with love” or temper her “scorn” with feelings of “pity.” Though both “scorn” and “pity” carry strong negative connotations, in this case they read more helpfully as somewhat mild: she is scorning the lover, an act not lessened by emotional sympathy, or “pity” in the gentler sense. These multiple meanings, one mild and one cruel, reinforce the speaker’s implicit argument that the lover is the more emotional of the two, taking things more personally than they were meant. The shift here in priorities between the octave and the sestet suggests her ability, away from the act of sex, to control herself. She does not entirely negate the statements of the octave but rather uses the sestet to correctly order them. The woman’s ability both to be overcome by sexual feeling and to regain her intellectual control afterwards doubly rejects societal expectations, positioning the woman in the position of sexual and relational power. Further, doing this through the sonnet, wherein in this case the male lover is generic, unknown and incidental, allows the speaker to also undermine poetic convention, taking a speaking platform in poetry and society not often granted to women.

The sonnet ends with a final contrast between sexual “frenzy” and “reason”: the speaker enjoyed the sexual experience but her “reason” allows her to maintain control. She even rejects “conversation,” reinforced by the poem’s single speaker: she has never allowed him voice, thus is not engaging in conversation now nor planning to engage “when [they] meet again” (14). Though she allows his “weight” on her, a phrasing that

acknowledges the physical presence of his body but nothing individual about him or his character, otherwise the lover is nearly entirely absent from the poem. In fact, besides the “weight” upon her breast, there are no actual clues to the identity of the lover including gender; it might also be possible to read the lover as female, as is sometimes suggested in other Millay poems. But in this case lacking specific cues, I mark the lover as male to reinforce the gender inversion of the poetic form and speaker.

This sonnet, from the same volume as *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, makes an argument about what women want and are capable of, and models a vision of women’s relational power that was not always allowed or accessible to everyone. This poem, like many of Millay’s popular New Woman poems, generalizes the voice of a particular type of politically and socially engaged female speaker in a way that avoids sentiment: “When the speaker is stereotyped and the situation generalized in this way, identification with the speaker must be made totally on an intellectual level. Many of Millay’s burning-the-candle-at-both-ends type poems portray only a voice, and all portray the same voice” (Dobbs n.pag.). The sequence takes a similar vision of womanhood but puts the woman in a more restrictive context, resulting in a marriage instead of sexual freedom, and using sentiment on the speaker’s, protagonist’s, and reader’s parts to investigate the plight of women with less certainty. The relationship between these two speakers, both of whom embrace the ideas that women have sexual needs as well as rationality and that women can control both of these (and sometimes choose not to), suggests that heterosexual marriage is a bind that prevents the New Woman, or any modern woman, from living out her ideals; while opportunities and freedom exist for women in society, the responsibilities of domestic life and maternity

conferred by marriage constrain women's pursuit of them. The speaker of the *Ungrafted Tree* sequence describes the protagonist with deep regret at the choices women are too often forced to make in a society that does not provide room for them to make better ones—whether those would be avoiding marriage, marrying someone better suited to them, or having more freedom of self within marriage. Moreover, the *Ungrafted Tree* sonnets provide space for the speaker to wrestle with wanting both freedom and motherhood, with wanting to leave the domestic sphere while also finding satisfaction and skill in cleaning her kitchen. The roles available for women and for female poets at the time seemed irresolvably at odds with each other, resulting in the pained, sad, “grim” tone that permeates this sequence. The speaker's refusal to be explicit in her judgment, in her relationship to the protagonist, and in her knowledge of the “story” of the couple keeps the reader estranged from the sentiment of the situation, revealing the speaker's and protagonist's attempts to reject or avoid their own deep feelings. The ambiguity throughout the sequence of detail, chronology, and emotional response all heightens the effect of the critique, forcing the astute reader to wrestle with questions that, the speaker suggests, do not have answers at all.

Additionally, the *Ungrafted Tree* sonnets, like Meredith's *Modern Love* poems, differ significantly from “I, being born a woman and distressed” in the speaker's relationship to the poetic action: the character and role of the speakers demonstrate the type of gendered intervention the poems make in the history of the sonnet and their respective cultural contexts. “I, being born a woman and distressed” directly contradicts poetic expectation by giving a female speaker a voice whereas the speaker of the *Ungrafted Tree* sequence separates herself—or, importantly, allows the possibility of a

genderless speaker—from the female protagonist; this distinction, among other elements of the poems, creates and reveals the amount of conflict the protagonist feels within herself, with her changed status in her house and the world as a widow; about her role in poetry, trying to make a man's form her own; and about a woman's status in contemporary culture. A woman speaking boldly in public, in poetry, has been and was then radical, but of course what a woman says and how she goes about saying it affect public perception of that radicalism.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the gender of the poetic speakers affects how readers interpret what those speakers have to say about gender relations. In all three cases, the gender of the main character is stated plainly in the beginning: “I, being born a woman” and “So she came back” in the Millay and “By this he knew she wept with waking eyes” in the Meredith. The Meredith in this case suggests the perspective the third-person speaker will favor in his poem, necessary in this sequence because the view shifts throughout.

In “I, being born a woman and distressed,” though, the speaker writes her own subjectivity by asserting her existence and sex. In much the way African American autobiographies and slave narratives begin so frequently with “I was born,” a rhetorical choice that asserts personhood in and out of the text, this poem casts the character's birth as a current action: she is “being born,” which is literally a syntactical choice to create parallelism with “distressed”—a condition inextricable from being woman, she suggests—but also a temporal oddity, demonstrating that the occasion of the poem marks a new birth. (Also, the sexual fulfillment she has lately experienced in the poetic present provides an additional way of being reborn as a woman, giving that line three

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<sup>36</sup> And that public perception includes the other feminist or at least feminine writers who often disagreed about how radical a woman ought to be.

simultaneous meanings.) In “I, being born a woman and distressed” the poetic speaker asserts a bold presence, takes her poetic space as a deliberate reversal of what is expected in society and sonnets. Millay wrote these poems during a period of change in women’s literature specifically, discussed more thoroughly in the introduction, during which women writers sought methods to rectify the fact of patriarchal language, not to mention culture; many women writers had sought to create space for women culturally and in literature by asserting the differences between men and women and holding up women’s uniqueness as better, as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, wherein maternity is lauded, the *raison d’être* of everyone there (Cutter x-xi). But Millay, in “I, being born a woman and distressed,” takes a different tack, not seeking to reestablish the domestic and maternal roles normally relegated to women as worthy of praise, but rather avoiding those stereotypical markers of femininity entirely.

Conversely, the speaker of the *Ungrafted Tree* sonnets removes herself from the obviously female protagonist, in part because her relationship (“her” in this case referring to both of them) to the action of the sequence troubles her; domesticity serves as a site of conflict about feminine identity in these poems pointing to limitations imposed on women specifically in marriage. The unfettered speaker in “I, being born a woman and distressed” can avoid the house and home, those essential markers of Victorian True Womanhood, in part because she is not married. Thus, through their removed speaker, the *Ungrafted Tree* sonnets express anxiety about the possibilities of feminist marriage even as opportunities for women proliferated outside of marriage; her anxieties about her social roles are not limited to domestic expectations but extend to her larger role in the community as a married woman, as a person defined in relation to a

husband. “The seventeen sonnets explore— for those who decode the graphically detailed language—themes of separation and identity. Millay describes the woman’s earlier sense of suffocation within the marriage, and she goes further by showing the woman as alienated also from the community of neighbors and service people” (Fairley n. pag.). This separation of the speaker from the protagonist, even while allowing their distance to collapse at times throughout the sequence, simultaneously alludes to Meredith, establishes emotional “distance” (or the illusion of same), and makes possible the more complicated investigation of feminine identity this sequence stages. It emphasizes her loneliness by making the protagonist’s voice remote even to the empathetic reader. The speaker/protagonist divide also de-feminizes the sentiment of the sequence, both by taking the story out of an explicitly feminine voice and by allowing the speaker to figuratively back away from the protagonist at strategic moments that might otherwise be very emotional, as when the spouse dies. Finally, the unusually distanced speaker participates in a larger trend in Millay’s poetry of ambiguous subject positions:

One of the problems for readers of Millay is that there is a constant obtrusive slippage about the position of the subject, a slippage which threatens to violate modernist conventions of literariness. ... Millay’s refusal to be “consistent” in developing some universal perspective, an attitude, or even a metapoetic ... may force her reader to abandon differences, to take up the position of the spectator at the drama of character. Then Millay’s poetry becomes a gesture of definition enacted at the margins of identity, and the self she does and does not define—



does and does not seduce us into taking as the *subject* of poetry—is the borderline character of the adolescent, not Woman as Poet but the Girl, whose chief subject is love. (Clark 68)

In “I, being born a woman and distressed” exists the temptation to see “I” as literally the poet, the woman whose lifestyle was so well known and which hewed so closely to the poem’s tone. While we often assume that the “I” represents a figure more or less separate from the poet, the preceding century of poetry collapsed much of that distance, and the history of the sonnet has been famously marked by “I”s that invited association with the poet. Thus Millay’s “constant obtrusive slippage” participates in a tendency to (attempt to) unify the speaker and poet, which has at times resulted in searches through Millay’s biography for clues about who the husband character was in her real life (Minot). The refusal to link the speaker and character or the self and speaker in these sonnets furthers Millay’s investment in strategic ambiguity, where not answering questions is the very point of the project. Indeed, these poems argue through their subject position and in other ways that unification eludes us perhaps especially as we search hardest for it. These poems do not contain an “answer” to be discovered through close reading, but they do reveal irresolvable dualities that limit women and the protagonist in particular. Unlike many of Millay’s poems, though, these refuse to allow the reader to imagine the speaker as the precocious “Girl” Clark identifies, complicating the way period readers were used to approaching her work as well as the larger sense of her poetic subjectivity.

## MODERNER LOVE

Though the view of women differs markedly in Millay's sequence from her nineteenth century influences, the relationship to Meredith's *Modern Love* in particular helps to illuminate both thematic and formal strategies she employs. A brief look at Meredith's introductory poem and discussion of his strategy helps to clarify its usefulness as a comparator text. *Modern Love* contains sixteen-line sonnets, in its theme of a loveless marriage and its longer form—the final line in each of Millay's poems is seven feet long, rather than five (Henderson 52-53). The two extra feet subtly echo the two extra lines Meredith used. In both cases the writers imply formally that discussions of loveless relationships are too expansive for the sonnet form, perhaps that there is something bigger about emptiness than about conventional love. They also force an unnatural unity, as most poetic lines are three to five feet; readers have to fight their urge to pause after the third or fourth and make it to the end. Similarly, Teasdale suggested in her final six-line poem of the Duse sonnets, or tail to the final sonnet, that identity in relation to one's muse might also overflow its container; all three of these poets use the sonnet form while also questioning elements that allow it to function, just as they question their poetic and personal identities.

In *Modern Love*, which is conveyed “with a third-person combination of detachment and direct knowledge,” the marriage that is the topic of the poems is gradually revealed to be “soured” and the speaker's own (Henderson 53); Millay's version of marital love is in its way darker than Meredith's, because his couple seeks intimacy and tries, at times, to reconnect, whereas Millay's couple is never shown truly connecting to each other. Meredith's sequence differs from his more famous work in

form but not experimental impulse: “Meredith is noted as one of the earliest English psychological novelists and as an important experimenter with narrative told from a variety of shifting, unreliable perspectives, reflecting a modern perception of the uncertain nature of both personal motivation and of social or historical events,” all of which is evident in this sequence (*Poetry Foundation*). The sonnet form allows him to interact with that tradition, in this case casting the man’s unrequited love as his wife, adding a layer of tragedy to the legacy of Petrarch’s love. He also distinguishes these poems by making both characters distinct people.

Modern Love: I

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:  
That, at his hand’s light quiver by her head,  
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed  
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,  
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,  
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay  
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away  
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes  
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears  
Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat  
Sleep’s heavy measure, they from head to feet  
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,  
By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.  
Like sculptured effigies they might be seen

Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;

Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

In this opening sonnet, the opportunities for intimacy are ignored or awkwardly missed by both parties, ending with a temporal shift, or a desire for one, to their respective deaths. The wife in this poem is remote, removed from the husband. Though he tries to reach out to her, he stops short of a touch that would bridge their literal and figurative distance, noting “his hand’s light quiver by her head” (2). This distance established, the speaker adds images to suggest more about each character and their relationships: she, an Eve, weak against temptation, her sobs “like little gaping snakes, / Dreadfully venomous to him” (5-6). Her pain itself is a temptation, a way for the husband, too, to be lost; she offers only a fall to him, “venomous” even in her suffering. Thus, the pain of their distance points to deeper rifts in their marriage, which the sequence will later suggest arose from infidelity on her part—she is indeed shown eventually to be a woman who has given in to temptation. At the end, both halves of the couple lay awake imagining their deaths, which they will also spend next to each other, this time in a shared tomb. They imagine the “sword that severs all,” even while knowing final separation is inescapable, even in death. This foreboding future links to Millay’s sequence, where though time shifts frequently, the future is not imaginable; in Meredith’s sequence, the two characters spend eternity imagining a future together but always wishing to be severed. Both visions are deeply sad, but the possibility to imagine a future is available only to the *Modern Love* couple. The pain in this sonnet, as well as the rest of the sequence, is not that there was never love in this marriage, but rather that love is not and has not been enough to sustain them. Certainly the husband loves, or did

love, the wife: he tries here to comfort her, but his gesture stalls “by” her head (2). They share a bed, think forward and backward in time together, and though what they see in both directions causes them both despair, they are a unit. Their bed becomes their tomb, but even there, even suffering, they are together. Conversely, Millay’s protagonist is never united with her husband in the poetic present of her sequence.

In Meredith’s poem the third-person speaker also functions differently than in Millay’s sequence; it does also emphasize distance and emotional remove, but more broadly it allows both characters to have a more or less equal perspective. Other poems in the Meredith sequence speak in both of their voices, so that though the poems suggest the woman has likely caused the marital problems by straying (and biographical readings are quick to note that Meredith’s wife left him for another man the year before these poems were published) the sequence still gives both characters agency and allows the reader to empathize with both. The third-person speaker shows them together, not unbiased but at least removed. For Millay, though, the third-person speaker does not serve to show both “sides” of a failed marriage, but provides a kind of dramatic monologue in which the speaker attempts to present inherently emotional events dispassionately.<sup>37</sup> The change in perspective might also seek to remedy a perception of Meredith’s sequence, however valiantly attempting egalitarian perspective, as male focused or inclined toward the male view: “Meredith’s male perspective describes the wife, for whom ‘a world of household matters filled her mind’ (sonnet 5)... Millay may have set out to present the ‘tragedy’ from the other viewpoint, with a woman’s

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<sup>37</sup> This also calls to mind Tennyson’s “Mariana,” which uses a third person speaker and focuses on natural imagery to complicate the portrayal of a suffering woman; some of the details in the descriptions in “Mariana” parallel those in Millay’s sequence, suggesting a possible line of influence.

perspective, in a woman's voice. If men's and women's psychological, social, and cultural worlds differ, their narratives might also differ" (Fairley, n.pag.) The need for a woman's version of a sequence that strives to be neutral derives from the distance between men and women especially in the nineteenth century, when a man with a wife had built-in household help. The roles men play more often have limited women, in life and literature, whereas the presence of a helpful wife allows men more freedom and time. During the early twentieth century, understanding for this sharp distinction was growing in life and in literature, as in Ibsen's portrayal of stifled women in his plays, but Millay deepens that discourse by writing about a New Woman's limitations in a marriage from a position of knowing. In Millay's female-focused version of the sonnet sequence of tragic love, as in a traditional dramatic monologue, the speaker is not reliable: she denies her feelings and silences her character—herself—relegating her to an almost-entirely voiceless character in her own life. The speaker's view of the woman's life proves not emotionless but clearly opinionated, which is most evident in the spaces where the distance between speaker and protagonist seem greatest. As in the poems about meeting the husband when they were in school, the speaker throughout the sequence comments on the actions of the poem in ways that suggest her view is much more "Modern" than the described actions seem.

Unlike in the Millay sonnets, the whole of Meredith's sequence functions as an extended narrative, not entirely in order but more or less ignoring the conventions of the sonnet as an individual unit of storytelling; the differences between his approach and Millay's point to issues of both gender and genre with which the poets engage. Meredith called his poems sonnets and divided them by speaker and moment, but because he

chose to write them all in sixteen lines, in four-quatrain groups, they do not read with the traditional relationship between the octave and sestet or with the impact Shakespeare would add to the concluding couplet—in Meredith’s sequence, none of these units exist. However, putting his hundred enveloped quatrains into groups that looked like sonnets served a purpose for Meredith, even as he eschewed some of the most expected conventions of each individual unit: the speaker changes between the poems, and each unit stands on its own even as they speak across the space between sonnets. The changing speaker is not common but provides reason for the breaks between individual poems. Meredith, then more famous as a novelist, used the sonnet sequence to tell a story that the novel form would not serve; the separate but linked pieces formally required something more like this. One could argue that his expansion of the length of the sonnet mimics the marriage, gone on past its welcome, but more importantly it allows the sonnets to blend together, the pattern to continue throughout, even as other conventions—the speaker or view, most notably—change.

Millay’s sonnets all use the same rhyme scheme, which is neither strictly Shakespearian nor Petrarchan but has some features of both. The scheme, ABABCDCDEFFEGG, uses more sounds than a strictly Petrarchan sonnet, but implies the switch from an octave to a sestet formally by changing from an alternating rhyme scheme in the first two quatrains to an enveloped rhyme scheme in the third. This combination of styles allows her to emphasize the Petrarchan volta, the Shakespearian couplet, or both (or neither) as suits the content of each sonnet, while still maintaining formal unity among the group of seventeen poems. Millay’s decision to make her sonnets more traditionally sonnet-like than Meredith’s, while also taking elements of

both the most famous types of sonnets, contributes to the form's import. In many of the poems the concluding couplet carries summarizing or complicating force, as in a Shakespearian sonnet, such as in sonnets IX and X, where the justification for the memory is tacked on, a tonal shift in the couplet that emphasizes the discomfort of the rest of the poem. But in others the couplet carries less emphasis, as in sonnet VII, "One way there was of muting in the mind," where lines 12 and 13 are enjambed, eliminating the epigrammatic possibilities of the couplet; in this instance, the denial of a couplet emphasizes the lack of conclusion of thought of the sonnet's content, about the woman's role in her kitchen and its role in her identity. Throughout the sequence, the emphasis of the final two lines varies as the speaker needs to underscore or complicate the point of the preceding twelve lines. Thus conventionality along with the consistency between the sonnets shows a different sense of the sonnet as an individual rhetorical unit than Meredith chose. Many of Millay's sonnets in this sequence do not contain specific action or even conflict that would be evident out of context, and thus each poem functions individually as a unit of meaning while also coming into coherence when read sequentially (which is not to say chronologically): each uses the form of the sonnet and its expected conventions to heighten the conflicts that make up the action and overall theme of a woman's role in modernity—women generally and this woman in particular.

Millay lengthened the final line as a nod to her influence, Meredith, but also to suggest the ways she was unwilling to change herself to fit poetic expectation; adapting the historical form of the sonnet asserts her mastery, the form's need to make concessions to her, its author. Of course poets have adapted the sonnet in all kinds of ways, including Meredith's lengthening of it by two lines and omitting a volta, but



women writers and writers of color often felt additional pressure to establish that they understood the conventions of their form, as well. Millay's choice was deliberate and significant, useful to establish its relationship to its predecessor and for establishing meaning: "I know very well the sonnets of the incomplete sequence are not perfect sonnets, — I made the fourteenth line an alexandrine purposely, — somehow they had to be ended that way.... Meredith made some rather nice poems of sixteen lines each which we permit to be called sonnets" (Millay in a letter dated 1917 (no. 50), quoted in Fairley). Though Millay refers to her final lines as alexandrines, the syllable count varies somewhat.<sup>38</sup> This creates a loose cohesion that allows for slight variations to add emphasis where needed while also driving it toward the "extra" syllables, at the end of the poem: "Since new information tends to occur in sentence final position (end-focus) and coincide with greatest sentence stress, a lengthened line provides an emphatic closure" (Fairley n.pag.). Though the specific impact of those syllables varies to suit each poem's needs, these various functions for the final syllables coincide with the multiple possibilities for the other features of the poems; rhyme can link or emphasize or surprise in the same ways these "end-focus" lines do. Millay's experimentation within convention hews to the tradition of the sonnet form, which has always been durable in its flexibility. The added length in general also suggests an overspilling of the boundaries of the form, as the woman's identity is constrained by her domestic life.

Though the sonnet's prescribed form does not "constrain" in the sense of preventing self-expression, its history and structure can be used to convey that kind of

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<sup>38</sup> "As completed they are not alexandrines, or at least not pure ones of six feet and twelve syllables. Final lines most often have seven feet (with some qualifying as loose alexandrines if one allows for elision) but others have fifteen and even sixteen syllables" (Fairley n.pag).

constraint, which Millay deploys through the metaphor of the house. Historically, the sonnet took on the role of fetishized object, standing in for the beloved as the lover/speaker transformed himself into poet. Marking the sonnet a masculine form also entails marking the interior of the poem feminine; as Clark notes, the text itself becomes the feminine beloved, in some cases an outlet for the erotic and romantic energy the male writer/speaker cannot direct at its actual intended recipient as might have been the case for Petrarch, but in many cases without any actual referent—female object—outside the text (7). The slippage between beloved and text about beloved reinforces the slippage, often deliberately emphasized in Millay's poems, between speaker and poet. That ambiguous speaker, distanced from the protagonist but not from the emotion of the situation, engages with the sonnet form in which she communicates distinctly, as a space created by male writers but marked by the objectification of women. The female sonnet writer's amorous opportunities in the sonnet engage always with the form's history of professing to love women while denying them voice and agency.

#### THE FEMALE SPEAKER AND CYCLICAL TIME

The character's sense of self becomes unmoored through the death of a spouse because identity in Millay's, like in Meredith's, is relational. Meredith's sequence, like Millay's, ends with the death of the spouse, but in the former case this offers the possibility of some relief; for Millay's speaker the problem abides because her identity as a woman remains unresolved and irresolvable even when the marriage ends in the husband's death. Meredith's characters struggle in a marriage with problems; Millay's struggle with marriage.

Though the inciting event, the imminent death of a spouse, has the potential to be romantic or loving, Millay's sequence immediately quashes any such expectation as the workaday labor of the wife provides the foundation for the sequence's action. Indeed, the wife's muted emotional response to her husband's death immediately upends reader expectations of the form, most known for the extended act of attempting to woo a lover through masterful poetry: "Far from the expression of ideal love more characteristic of sonnet sequences (including others by Millay herself), this one presents the chores of an estranged wife who returns to care for a dying husband, finally to attend his burial" (Fairley 59). Built upon the routine the woman falls back into, the sequence's individual poems move forward and backward in time discussing the marriage in terms of the empty house and garden. The woman's responses to the house suggest that she has left to avoid the memories associated with it: "Millay describes the woman's earlier sense of suffocation within the marriage, and she goes further by showing the woman as alienated also from the community of neighbors and serving people" (ibid). The couple has lost a child, which contributes to the woman's loneliness and her sense that their house is unnaturally empty. The loss of the child evades direct description in the poems, suggesting that even the self-distanced speaker struggles to discuss it, but the loss of the domestic role and relationship serves to reveal sites of conflict within the woman.

The sequence's title, *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, introduces readers to the sequence by suggesting the major themes in a way that will only become fully clear after reading further; the word "ungrafted" alludes to the woman's lack of offspring and implies that not reproducing is abnormal—a problem, internal and external, for a married woman even in the 1920s. Calling the tree, and by extension the woman,

“ungrafted” emphasizes their difference from trees (and women) who are grafted. Though to be grafted is not inherently value-laden, when the prefix “un” is attached to an otherwise valueless term it suggests that the latter version is more natural. Grafting is a method of asexual reproduction in horticulture, which is important for a number of reasons in this sequence. First, the woman’s being ungrafted implies that she has not reproduced, which is a theme subtly discussed throughout the sonnets. Secondly, the title’s metaphorical description of the woman as an ungrafted tree primes readers to understand her through plant metaphors later in the sequence. Finally, that grafting is asexual highlights the lack of intimacy the woman has with her partner and suggests that their passionless state is not recent; it might be possible to guess that a loss of a child or a struggle with infertility drove a wedge between the wife and husband, but this word choice suggests that even their attempts at procreation were not passionate. This reading is reinforced in a later sonnet about the wife’s inability to start a fire with the logs she gathered from their yard (“The white bark writhed and sputtered like a fish” [IV]), which reveals the husband’s “sexual inadequacy” and the wife’s “frustration” which “removes any expectation of a union” (Fairley 61). Logs, like trees and plants, metaphorically represent the couple and their family; in this poem the logs in their yard, which are a potential source of fire or passion, fail to ignite. This reinforces the idea that their marriage was not passionate or that passion was gone before an attempt at grafting, or procreation, took place. Finally, the title’s preposition “from” tells readers what they likely already deduced, namely the relationship between the protagonist and the speaker—the sonnets are from that ungrafted tree, from the woman at their center.

The distance between speaker and character collapses several times in the sequence; as with the other major themes of the sequence, the title establishes this as a focus immediately.

I

So she came back into his house again  
And watched beside his bed until he died,  
Loving him not at all. The winter rain  
Splashed in the painted butter-tub outside,  
Where once her red geraniums had stood,  
Where still their rotted stalks were to be seen;  
The thin log snapped; and she went out for wood,  
Bareheaded, running the few steps between  
The house and shed; there, from the sodden eaves  
Blown back and forth on ragged ends of twine,  
She saw the dejected creeping-jinny vine,  
(And one, big-aproned, blithe, with stiff blue sleeves  
Rolled to the shoulder that warm day in spring,  
Who planted seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming).

The first sonnet tells readers what the sequence is about by using the same plant and relationship themes as the title, reinforcing and expanding on the them to set up the problem of time for the protagonist; time is one of the primary means through which the speaker thematizes the woman's specifically feminine conflicts in this sequence, showing her difficulty navigating her life in the poetic present with what she was taught

to expect or had previously anticipated. The woman has been absent for an unknown interval, but based on textual evidence more than a few days, and she returns here in the first poem to her former home to be with her estranged husband as he dies. She is not emotionless, but the language used to describe her feelings and the distance caused by the third-person narration muffle her reactions. She is described, watching him die, as “loving him not at all” (3), after which the scene changes to describe the nature image outside their home. This change in focus happens in the middle of a line and stanza, an unexpected shift. It also ties the next sentence, about the rain outside in their garden, more closely to the preceding ones.

The shifts that are also linkages here are emphasized by Millay’s use of traditional form; this is not juxtaposition in the modernist sense but a relation implied by the stanza form, further connecting the images and themes throughout Sonnet I. Each sonnet functions as an instantiation of an ideal form, reinforced by the repetition of that form throughout the sequence, and an individual; the woman, likewise, sees herself as a role—wife, woman—and an individual she needs to come to know better. Out in the rain, the protagonist sees “where once her red geraniums had stood, / [w]here still their rotted stalks were” standing (5-6); plants she had put labor into cultivating are now dead and rotting. These stand as a figure for a future she had planned, in the general sense, but more specifically point to a child who did not grow up. That the geraniums were once red and standing implies that the woman’s child was born—that is, it suggests that she probably did not lose the pregnancy—but did not reach full maturity. This reading is reinforced in the woman’s memory, relayed in a parenthetical aside in the last three lines of the poem, of herself planting the seeds, which we can read as metaphorically carrying

and giving birth to her child: She remembers herself as “big-aproned,” which suggests she is pregnant in this memory, “who planted seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming” (12, 14). While of course a gardener looks forward to her flowers blooming later, “musing” seems more applicable to planning a child’s life than a plant’s. The woman remembers, as her husband dies, how she looked forward once to raising children; her husband’s death reminds her of the child’s death and reinforces her loneliness. Throughout the sequence her child’s absence and the impending death of her husband disrupt the woman’s sense of time and in turn the sequence’s order. In both instances, the child’s death and the husband’s, roles the protagonist received as a woman throughout her life, through culture and literature, are disrupted; while young, single women can forge their own paths (or embark on one specific new path, as *New Women*), older women, married women, mothers, would-be mothers, do not have such options. The disruptions in the feminine-cyclical sense of time take the protagonist off a track she was once able to understand, leaving her unmoored—an uncertainty and vagueness that the sequence highlights in its non-chronological order and its non-narrative telling.

The speaker establishes the protagonist’s identity, and her own poetic identity—which is distinct but intertwined with the protagonist’s—through the protagonist’s relationships to the objects in her house and her relationship to her dying husband; these external things act as mirrors, as *Wroth’s* sonnets seek to reflect her beloved back to him or as *Petrarch’s* sonnets use Laura as a way of actually talking about Petrarch. The image of the mirror occurs in two notable places in the sequence, as well—with the husband in a memory of how they came to be together and as she performs domestic

labor in her kitchen. In both of these cases, the image of the mirror reinforces the function of the poem: to tell the reader about the protagonist (and speaker—both as the same figure and as separate personas). Modernist poetry by Nelson's definition is politically engaged and engaging, and these poems use the protagonist's struggle for herself to stage on a smaller scale the struggles women are facing at the time: "When such poems offered readers politically committed speaking voices with which they could identify, the poems were in a sense a gift to prospective readers, a text whose authorship was inherently transferrable" (Nelson 90). The transferability of Millay's work relies on a reader able to parse her speaker and protagonist's stances on the woman's identity, though, and these poems also conceal some of their political commitment behind ambiguity and alienation; however, these strategies enhance their meaning so that, as in some of Frost's misread poems, careful readers leave the text with a different understanding than superficial ones. Thus, for politically engaged writers, "[t]o publish a poem that might prove politically persuasive was, in effect, to ask readers to live by way of these words as if they were their own" (Nelson 91). While the socio-political intentions of Millay's speaker reveal themselves only with careful reading, they nonetheless invite in sympathetic readers—especially female readers—another layer of ambiguity and slippage: between speaker and audience. Like the removed speaker, the reader observes the protagonist with sympathy, wonders about her future plans and identity, comes to think about her dying husband only through the terms she provides. The reader and speaker are unified as voyeurs, non-objective viewers whose emotional, sentimental responses to the protagonist's loneliness shape the text. For a critic to call these particular Millay poems "sentimental" would be to reveal their own reaction to the



poems; on the page itself emotion features almost not at all. By complicating every major feature of a poem—form, speaker, subject, object, reader—Millay demonstrates all the more strongly the enormous emotional work of her subject, both the particular woman featured and women generally. The emotional labor of living life would be enough, but complicated mourning, which includes mourning a version of the self, and writing a kind of poem historically by men—all lead to the irresolvable problem of early twentieth century life for women. Without plainly wearing their political intent, these poems use ambiguity, concealment, and containment to refigure the work women do in and outside of the text.

The relationship between the protagonist and her husband, which is shown to be unhappy, limits the woman throughout the sequence; their courtship figures in sonnets IX and X. These poems reveal very little about the would-be husband; in concealing so many details—and suggesting there is very little to know about him at all—these sonnets reveal more about the speaker herself.

#### IX

Not over-kind nor over-quick in study  
Nor skilled in sports nor beautiful was he,  
Who had come into her life when anybody  
Would have been welcome, so in need was she.  
They had become acquainted in this way:  
He flashed a mirror in her eyes at school;  
By which he was distinguished; from that day  
They went about together, as a rule.

She told, in secret and with whispering,  
How he had flashed a mirror in her eyes;  
And as she told, it struck her with surprise  
That this was not so wonderful a thing.  
But what's the odds? — It's pretty nice to know  
You've got a friend to keep you company everywhere you go.

The husband is introduced as “[n]ot over-kind nor over-quick in study / [n]or skilled in sports nor beautiful”—entirely through negation: “Millay uses negatives to suggest a slim basis for the relationship; the pair are caught up only in the shallow conventions of ‘romantic’ love. She thus idealizes neither the man nor the woman” (Fairley n.pag). Their relationship hangs on circumstance, and, as in the Meredith, the poems suggest that this is not ideal for either partner. These negative descriptions counter the common way of describing a partner, since traits a woman would normally look for in a spouse, kindness, intelligence, athleticism, and attractiveness, are not the things noteworthy about this man. Rather, the speaker is attracted to him because of the timing: he “had coming into her life when anybody / [w]ould have been welcome” because she was “so in need” (3-4). Thus, though these lines suggest they are speaking about the husband, they reveal more about the woman, who felt in some way empty. This insight into the woman’s state when she met her husband is third-person but omniscient, limited to her perspective. Though she is spoken of in the third person, the speaker gives the reader unique access into her mind, into that emptiness this unremarkable man filled. In this way, the appeal of him is doubly sad: we can see how “in need” she must have been for a man described this way to be appealing.

The way he attracted her attention, too, reinforces his role in the poem—as a way of understanding her, not as a character the reader will know as an individual. He “flashed a mirror in her eyes at school,” suggesting their age, that she was already empty and in need so young, and maturity level, that his ability to flirt with a woman he liked was childish, bothering her by flashing reflected light in her eyes. Her relationship with him, throughout the sequence, provides a way to know her better, represented by the mirror he flashes. The repeated mirror image suggests a way for the woman to see herself, but because the mirror’s flash blinds her, it both reveals and conceals her—a version of her is shown, but also illegible. Furthermore, because he holds the mirror she sees, their relationship begins with a scene of his agency in fashioning her vision of herself. More literally, too, he arouses her sexual self, a version of the self previously not present:

[T]he woman now seems to feel that her body has in some way betrayed her. By flashing a mirror in her eyes at school, [her husband] appeared to give her her body in a new way. He appealed to her narcissism. But like the male gaze which promises subjectivity to the woman only to betray that promise in the end, desire for the other’s body that is actually desire for her own selfhood confuses the woman as to her real goal. The young woman cannot know herself by looking into this mirror. But she believes her needs addressed by the desire he seems to arouse in her: “And if the man were not her spirit’s mate, / Why was her body sluggish with desire?” (Walker 154)

His role, though powerful, is not unique: anyone would have done. The poem suggests that her nascent sexuality made the timing of his flirtation convenient, helping her come to understand herself in a new way, as a sexual being. But of course his reflection of her back to herself mediates her sense of self; he defines her in relation to himself, and she sees and accepts that vision through the mirror analogy. The generality of these two characters allows them to signify both as characters worthy of empathy and allegorical figures, standing in for men and women in society more broadly. A unique situation would require more explaining; the woman's courtship and marriage must have been at least mainly recognizable to be summed up so quickly in two sonnets. Thus these poems, of coming back into "his house," center on the crisis of the self, at once wife and not wife, at once poetic speaker and poetic object, at once at home in this form and foreign. Thinking about their history, the woman realizes that their relationship has long existed as much as a public narrative as a private relationship: "Looking back, she now realizes how the male gaze or gesture gets validated by the female talk and how telling a story assures a girl's social status" (Fairley n.pag.). In fact, the woman's larger sense of self, in relation to boys and to other women, functions in the ways she can control telling her own story: "Becoming a sexual object to a boy takes on a social role, not only a private one; the girl's relationship with her husband-to-be was always in part public" (ibid.) Telling the story of meeting him, deciding which elements to share and which to leave out, how to present herself, both allows her a power to create as well as prevents her, in some cases, from understanding her own perceptions. Later in life, when she is confronting her husband's imminent death, she rejects the opportunity to share herself or

create a self to a group of women (while also seeming to reject the opportunity to give voice to herself by claiming the “I” of the poem):

The public nature of their relationship, and her fierce desire to avoid that element of it, recurs when the neighbors attempt to visit as adult analogues to those girlhood friends: Interestingly, her realization follows shortly after the image of clucking hens in sonnet 8 as if the prolonged flashback recalling youthful romance (9 and 10) is triggered by the neighbors’ visit. The woman recalls the earlier incident when by choosing to talk she held power within the group. Millay calls our attention to the role of talk in women’s subculture, while hinting at an identification of the neighbors’ bringing jellies with the woman’s childhood friends. (Fairley n. pag)

In the sequence, however, the woman chooses not to accept that power to talk to women, letting her voice be mediated through the speaker. In the end of the sequence the woman again hides from the public, from her identity as one half of a marriage, when she imagines him giving a speech. In each of these cases, the rift in her identity caused by her inability to reconcile herself to the limited category “wife” might be ameliorated if she took agency, spoke for herself, but she avoids doing so. The memory of telling her childhood friends about the boy, though, suggests awareness of the complicated experience of telling one’s own story, which can quickly separate from the emotional reality of the event. Recounting the story emphasizes its “not so wonderful” nature, in fact makes her aware that her inner perception was initially mistaken. The memory of telling the story and the moment of noting that it comes across differently than it was

intended is again retold in the sequence, now retold well aware of its sadness.<sup>39</sup> The speaker knows how the story comes across: as an unfortunate but perhaps common way that people fall into relationships, and specifically how women fall into roles with men who are not special or “distinguished.” But it also recalls the beginning of an enduring experience of gaining social power through heterosexual relationships, of contorting the self to fit what is expected, and of adapting one’s story and self to present a façade that will please or impress others. Her later chronologically but earlier in the sequence experience of hiding from the female neighbors reveals her exhaustion at continuing to do that, to present publicly any version of the self at all. The story of the boy flashing his mirror in her eyes—the flashback and the whole sequence—concerns a kind of relationship that the “New Woman” perhaps rejected, marriage, because it was accepted and expected, from a young age, “as a rule,” and the consequences of those expectations. Though the woman has made a choice to get away, she is never free from this relationship, in part because in the sequence it is how we come to understand her. In word choice the poem is unemotional, but those choices by the speaker reveal her attitude toward the young woman—their unexplained relationship invites reading them as the same, or different versions of the same woman, but also rejects the possibility of unifying them completely. As noted above, the boy’s actions “distinguish” him from the other boys, in this case in the sense of merely being distinct from the others, not being better. The phrasing, presented below in prose to emphasize the syntax, shows that his immature action caught her attention, made her notice him, but does not suggest that she

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<sup>39</sup> This parallels Robert Frost’s “I shall be telling this with a sigh” ending to “The Road Not Taken,” where the speaker confidently imagines himself constructing the story of his life; in Millay’s case, the protagonist’s narrative collapses on itself as she attempts to construct it.

noticed anything noteworthy except that he existed: “They had become acquainted in this way: He flashed a mirror in her eyes at school; by which [action] he was distinguished; from that day they went about together, as a rule” (5-8). The lack of emotional impact created by the multisyllabic word “distinguished” is emphasized as well by “acquainted”—knowing, as the reader does, that this man is the husband she does not love (“So she came back into his house again / And watched beside his bed until he died, / Loving him not at all” l.1-3), this sterile word choice emphasizes the emptiness of the relationship throughout. At the end she does not love him, and in the beginning they became acquainted in a way she realized belatedly “was not so wonderful a thing” (12). Indeed, throughout these word choices, along with the phrasing of “as a rule,” which differs markedly from the expected “because they liked each other,” or “because they wanted to,” leaves little space for emotion to enter the sonnet. Because these are words chosen by the speaker, who exists in the poetic present and is also looking back on past actions, we can read her through them; because the couple eventually married, something we might presume generated emotions at some point, this colorless description reveals the speaker’s attempts to distance herself from any emotions there once were. Her version of their “how we met” story tells us only what she wants to share, and that does not include emotion, here as throughout.

Finally, the sonnet ends with the seemingly out of place line “But what’s the odds?”—which has an unclear referent, but introduces a concluding couplet that functions as an epigram, in the Shakespearian mode. The tonal shift, from impartial third-person narration to free indirect discourse in the second person, emphasized by the end rhymes and the bouncing rhythm, separates these lines from the rest of the poem—

another way the speaker rejects an opportunity for emotion. By shifting into a colloquial rhetorical question, the speaker redirects the focus from the memory to the decision the woman had to make then, justifying her passionless relationship as a “pretty nice” deal, to combat her loneliness and need. This sounds more like a first-person speaker than the rest of the poem, though no “I” appears, but again the speaker distances the emotional calculus from the protagonist by phrasing it as a generality, using the general you. This also serves, though, to implicate the reader in the decision. This sequence is a specific example of the decisions women have to make in society as Millay and her speaker observe it, so using the “you” here suggests that speaker and reader share the assumption that it is better to have “a friend to keep you company everywhere you go” than to remain single. Thus, this sonnet deepens the sadness of the rest of the sequence, showing that the decisions made along the way to the poetic present, the loveless marriage in which the man dies without affection, are unremarkable, the kinds of decisions young people make every day.

As in Meredith’s *Modern Love*, the sonnets that focus on the couple’s relationship derive their pain and horror from the quotidian nature of the relationship; this kind of relationship has always been common, along with the protagonist’s pain. In sonnet X, about the couple’s early courtship, Millay’s speaker provides intimate insight into the protagonist’s mind and memory, nearly collapsing the space between speaker and character to mimic the way the woman let herself merge with her spouse-to-be. This sonnet demonstrates that this decision was not deliberate, but incidental, so typical its circumstances are difficult to recall:



X

She had forgotten how the August night  
Was level as a lake beneath the moon,  
In which she swam a little, losing sight  
Of shore; and how the boy, who was at noon  
Simple enough, not different from the rest,  
Wore now a pleasant mystery as he went,  
Which seemed to her an honest enough test  
Whether she loved him, and she was content.  
So loud, so loud the million crickets' choir . . .  
So sweet the night, so long-drawn-out late . . .  
And if the man were not her spirit's mate,  
Why was her body sluggish with desire?  
Stark on the open field the moonlight fell,  
But the oak tree's shadow was deep and black and secret as a well.

This poem gives more insight into how she fell into this relationship, suggesting that her received attitudes about sex helped propel her into marriage. The dark night provides the intimacy she needs to begin to imagine that he is someone unique, distinguished to her, and eventually she feels “sluggish with desire,” again an insight the narrator gives us into her mind directly. There, except for the pronoun, this line, “Why was her body sluggish with desire?” could be spoken by her to justify her decisions. The narrator’s access to the protagonist’s mind again suggests their close relationship—leading readers to conflate them. The speaker, though, knows that desire does not indicate that someone

is your “spirit’s mate,” as does the reader; thus, the sadness of the protagonist’s youthful view, that her sexual desire must stem from true love, is clear to everyone, likely even the woman in the time of the sequence, except the young woman telling herself this must be love.

The implied consummation of their relationship at the end of this sonnet, contained in the seven-foot final line, points to sex’s function for them, as what will bind the couple together. Here and throughout, the speaker alludes to the couple’s sex life with limited, removed emotion. In this sonnet, the emotion is perhaps most vivid but the implied sex might well be ignored: “But the oak tree’s shadow was deep and black and secret as a well.” This line seems to drift away from the couple and their intimate moment in the lake, but in fact calls attention to the secrecy and darkness of their interaction, the fulfillment of her desire. Additionally, in the previous poem, her nascent sexuality is suggested as a motive for her pairing up with the first young man to “distinguish” himself to her, when the speaker says that despite his shortcomings, he happened to meet her “when anybody / Would have been welcome, so in need was she” (IX.3-4). This initially reads as suggestive of her emotional need, which might also be the case, but points more directly to sexuality. In “I, being born a woman and distressed,” Millay’s speaker (a distinct character from the speaker here) uses “need” to refer quite obviously to sexual needs: that speaker is motivated “[b]y all the needs and notions of my kind” (2) to seek out sex with the poem’s subject. Here, “needs” is used in the same sense as the contemporary, colloquial expression “men have needs”: sex motivates people, not just as a passive want but as a necessity. Some periods of history dismissed women as essentially asexual, in which context Millay’s speaker contradicts

expectation; in other periods and cultural contexts women have been dismissed as too motivated by biological needs, not intellectual like men, in which case Millay's speaker in "I, being born a woman and distressed" turns that assumption around to intellectually dismiss her recent lover. In either instance, a female speaker so boldly claiming her own sexuality and its separation from her emotions is radical, inhabiting the space made available by the New Woman movement. But the *Ungrafted Tree* sequence also casts a woman's sexuality as a "need," as in poems IX and X, and casts her emotions as controlled and less motivating than both her sexual desires and, in the sequence, the demands of daily life. Though the persona of the speaker in "I, being born a woman and distressed" is a New Woman and the speaker of the sequence is trapped in a decidedly old kind of marriage, in their view of the relationship between love and sex, the speakers reveal a shared, Modern(ist) sense of womanhood.

*Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* makes this gendered space more figuratively concrete by placing them in "his house"—the setting for the poem's action but also a figure for the sonnet genre. This analogy treads familiar ground: Wordsworth in "Sonnet [Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room]" compares the sonnet to a space (sometimes a feminine one, as in a convent), and Longfellow in *Divina Commedia* likens the sonnet to a cathedral, while in "Mezzo Cummin" he describes poetic ambition as the attempt "to build / Some tower of song with lofty parapet" (3-4). Millay takes this familiar figure and explores its interior in detail. The length of the sonnet sequence provides her with added space to do so, noting the markers of both the masculine and feminine within it, emphasizing the ironies surrounding domestic space and labor, hinting at an unfulfilled possibility for something new in the ambiguous images of

children and pregnancy. The woman's habitual return to the labor of her house, too, reinforces the prescribed roles women typically take on in sonnets, that this protagonist remains an unknown object of our study, separate from the speaker and thus voiceless. Her domestic labor limits her further: "Millay invites us to see this woman's impulses as both mediated by culture and masochistic in the sense Mary Ryan uses that term, where gratification comes from an activity which is stressful and self-defeating" (Walker 153). Putting the woman into the situation of her domestic role, like putting her into the sonnet itself, is painful even as it provides a kind of satisfaction. The way women have internalized their roles complicates their search for identity, as poets and as agents of their own lives outside of poetry. In the protagonist's case, her relationship to her kitchen closely matches the one provided for Millay in *Ladies Home Journal* years later, as Cheryl Walker explains: "Like a magazine housewife, this woman learns to

Polish the stove till you could see your face,  
And after nightfall rear an aching back  
In a changed kitchen, bright as a new pin,  
An advertisement, far too fine to cook a supper in.

The use of 'you' and 'your' ... seems to make this activity a ritual of capitalism, 'an advertisement' of the role assigned to women who must make their kitchen 'bright as a new pin' despite the fact that it then becomes unusable" (153). In the same way, making the sonnet ideal in its traditional sense would render it useless for the woman whose story is told within it.

## GENDER IN SEQUENCE AND CYCLE

The form of these sonnets, though deliberately part of the discourse of limitation and women's identity, flexes and bends in Millay's hands to better suit her needs; the metaphor of the unusable kitchen only goes so far because these poems masterfully convey the woman's identity struggles even while placing her in the object position. This sequence's interaction with other masterpieces of the sonnet form reveals ways these poems differentiate themselves in the service of conveying the contemporary woman's situation:

Millay's structure carries further a tendency to eliminate internal divisions that can be seen in some of Milton's sonnets. ...But Milton's verse paragraphs are structured with definite and long pauses where semicolons link up sentences that would otherwise warrant the full stop. Millay innovates further, seeking an even more fluid sonnet to reveal psychological drama though neither Fuller nor Friedrich recognizes her innovations. (Fairley n. pag.)

The lack of internal divisions, particularly between temporalities, counterintuitively does not coincide with additional details or transitions between thoughts; rather, the fluid structure represents the woman's experience, a mix of action and memory, without providing for the reader reprieve. A break, a full stop between ideas within the sonnets, the clear Petrarchan volta that implies a discoverable relationship between the poem's sections, would provide the comfort of a rest stop. It would show what goes where, and how they connect. Millay's speaker and protagonist both deny those rests, the protagonist because she is the ostensibly unaware object of our voyeurism, and the

speaker because her approach is ethnographic, a stream-of-consciousness narration of another person's experience. William James's 1892 "The Stream of Consciousness" proposed a new way of conceiving of consciousness, which was famously used by Gertrude Stein to compose innovative modern verse; the idea, though, also contributes to understanding the speaker's approach in this sequence, particularly the characteristic of continuity, but also the constantly changing nature of states of consciousness and that consciousness "is interested in some parts of its object to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects—*chooses* from among them, in a word—all the while" (James 19). The speaker, who in many cases throughout the sequence seems to translate the protagonist's thoughts into words, engages in this act of choosing when she shies away from specific painful memories of their marriage, and when she addresses them metaphorically by focusing on chores and rote tasks. The ambiguity about the specifics of the woman's situation—her marriage's details, where she has been, whether they had and lost a child—can be read productively as an instance of stream-of-consciousness narration, both internal and external to the character, both unique and general. "With their freer structuring, they bring us close to her inner voice. They are interesting, too, for their linking of gendered language and subject with form: the reflective condition is provoked or triggered by something external, such as a mundane chore, gathering the wood or laundry, or cleaning the kitchen (8). The household matters that fill the woman's mind become the vehicle of her understanding" (Fairley n. pag.). The form and syntax thus reinforce the gendered political argument of these poems, highlighting woman's fraught condition even as her opportunities to participate in public life expand—she remains chained to the dual burdens of domestic labor and aesthetic

maintenance. The sonnets use their conversational diction and syntax to speak in a woman's voice, at once joined with the protagonist and separate from her, but united in their womanhood, their joint subjection to the "unwarranted discourse."

Time functions throughout this sequence as a narrative thread—a tangled one—and a substantive metaphor for the woman's sense of self; the sequence as a whole, and particular sonnets in it, move throughout time, relate to each other in and out of time, and call the speaker's reliability of memory into question. This mimics a contemporary double bind for women during this period: they are expected to maintain the human life cycle—to bear and raise the next generation—whereas men get to fulfill a teleological, linear conception of time. Though women in the early twentieth century gained opportunities to succeed and grow in a linear way, their responsibility to circular time abides. Women's time cycles, as a woman begets another woman but also as women are bound to repetitive tasks of maintaining their households and, of course, to menstrual cycles; on a cyclical time model women individually do not need to change particularly, whereas men's time moves forward and, ideally, upwards—the *Bildungsroman* represents men throughout literary history as well as the cultural imaginary. In the sequence, the protagonist struggles with wanting to exist in both kinds of time, using metaphors of nature to suggest in several instances where the speaker avoids direct explanation or emotion. These themes reappear formally in the relationship between each sonnet and the sequence as a whole; each sonnet could be a self-contained poem, but its themes and ideas are always in conversation with the others, so that when it ends it is not actually over, like the woman's days at home. In addition, through rhyme and the creation of a metrical environment, sonnets reward repeated, non-linear reading; they

point back to themselves for emphasis and implication, and in a sequence they connect to each other in the same ways. This traditional formal characteristic of the sonnet sequence reinforces the woman's emotional struggle with time in its means of communicating it. Millay's specific sonnet form further dramatizes the problems of time: the third quatrain's switch to an enveloped stanza seems like a rhyme coming out of order, just like the woman's memories and the sequence's events come in an irregular order. However, this irregularity is standardized and happens in every poem, suggesting that time operates simultaneously predictably and erratically; the conventional understanding of it as linear is insufficient to the realities of life. The form of *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* is essential to convey Millay's themes of memory and loss; the sequence uses three primary metaphors for time—a day, a year, and the woodpile—to show the woman's attempts to make sense of her life as it continues after her child's and husband's deaths, but the most conventional of these metaphors—a day and a year—fail to map on to her experience. The image of time running out, as her wood pile does, seems to offer her the most comfort, but it is ironic as well and suggests, ultimately, that time cannot be forced to meet the woman's needs.

Childlessness takes the woman out of one cyclical model of time, and her mourning prompts her to reject nature's cycles, which also results in her rejection of that traditional mode of domestic femininity; thus, her inability to raise a child, to be a maternal woman, is the most important way time reveals the protagonist's and speaker's conflicted senses of self. Additionally, the ambiguity around the absence of children, whether there was a child in the past at all, strategically avoids too directly tying the woman's lack of identity to her maternal status. Ambiguity of time itself and of what is



being remembered heightens the sense of disorientation the reader feels in empathy with the protagonist without the speaker needing to use sentimental language or imagery as such. The poems' unpredictable chronology and lack of clear narratives even if the order of ostensible events were to be reconstructed to better match lived time, show the protagonist's struggle to understand how traditional models of linear time apply to her, since linear, progressive time is conventionally rolled into cyclical time—the idea that each day ends but new days follow after. Her difficulty with being “ungrafted” means that since the couple has no child to raise, when their individual lives end, nothing follows. The woman's lifespan will end without being continued by offspring, but also the traditional purpose of marriage will not be fulfilled. Though the emotional element of their marriage seems to have been over for years, if it was ever sincere, the marriage's possibilities for reproduction at least theoretically lasted until the relationship's formal termination in the husband's death. The speaker's words reveal the protagonist's sense that time should not be carrying on, or that time has stopped, is rooted in implied images of a child's life ended early in multiple places in the sequence as well as more literal images of time stopped: “And the mute clock, maintaining ever the same / Dead moment, blank and vacant of itself” (XV lines 5-6). In this poem the husband's life is explicitly linked to the stopped clock (and the late-in-ending sonnet, which lingers for two additional feet like the husband lingers before his death). But the image expands to stand for the rest of the house, their marriage, and indeed everything:

Whence it occurred to her that he might be,  
The mainspring being broken in his mind,  
A clock himself, if one were so inclined,

That stood at twenty minutes after three —

The reason being for this, it might be said,

That things in death were neither clocks nor people, but only dead. (9-14)

The broken household item, one relied on throughout each day for routine, tempts the protagonist, whose thoughts are transparent to the speaker for this section, to see an analogy that depersonifies her dying spouse. Neither the woman nor the speaker completely gives into this temptation, qualifying the observation with “if one were so inclined” and “might be” and “it might be said.” The impulse to see his death around the house reveals the sentiment present in the woman’s rehabilitation of her home, showing that as she works to ignore what is happening his death intrudes. Her refusal to articulate the analogy shown by the qualifying language in the lines quoted above is another strategy, along with her refusal to speak her own sequence, to reject the emotions of her situation, both literal in the death of her spouse and figurative in her attempt to reconcile her sense of self to her circumstances. The theme of time throughout the sequence occurs as a self-conscious figure and as a storytelling strategy, both of which reinforce the themes of feminine identity particularly for this woman who is not a mother.

Like the first sonnet, the sequence as a whole does not tell a story in a linear fashion even as it applies the metaphor of linear time to human lifetimes; since the events and memories are the woman’s, this suggests that her thoughts come out of order and her past is continually revisiting her, though she obviously finds it painful. “So she came back into his house again” tells readers that the husband dies while at the same time telling readers she has been gone. The “so” also brings us into the sequence out of order, not at a beginning, but “in medias mess” (Fairley 59). The poem reveals details

about her past at the house by suggesting that her actions are returns to habit, and it also flashes back to her now-lost aspirations of raising her child. Her habits especially return to her as she visits the woodpile and as she deals with the laundry; the hints of a lost child, or at the very least a previously content marriage, occur as she encounters objects throughout her house: “Was a pink shepherdess, a picture frame, / A shell marked Souvenir, there on the shelf” (XV 7-8). These objects provide glimpses into a past but also into a personality, into the kinds of things the couple once did. The souvenir shell, the picture frame, and pink shepherdess all represent things people collect and display, and their very vagueness contributes to the ambiguity and alienation of the sequence; though they suggest a couple doing things together, they might imply a child if we read this kind of souvenir as typically for children, but there is a deliberate lack of evidence to draw any particular conclusion. The objects, though they hint at portals to the woman’s and couple’s past, refuse to specify any particular emotion or memory.

The movements through time are similar to the structure of the whole sequence: in the final two poems the husband’s death is made explicit even as the woman remembers the past and imagines an alternate version of events while in the middle of the sequence two poems, “Not over-kind nor over-quick in study” (IX) and “She had forgotten how the August night” (X), recall how she and her husband met. Even in those memory poems, as is shown in the latter title, time is complicated; they do not simply take place in the past, but are grounded in an unspecified present around the time of the husband’s death as the woman remembers something she did not realize she had forgotten. Though the events of the sequence could be roughly arranged on a timeline, their order in the sequence and presentation through memory and realization suggest that

such a linear presentation of time is not representative. In many ways they would also resist any attempt at chronology, as particular poems feature remembered memories, or memories now interpreted through a present perspective, as in the “She had forgotten how the August night” poem, which figures a re-remembering, suggesting that something in the present has changed her way of looking back, and the sequence’s opening sonnet, which features a remembered projection that is implied not to have happened:

(And one, big-aproned, blithe, with stiff blue sleeves  
Rrolled to the shoulder that warm day in spring,  
Who planted seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming). (12-14)

In a parenthetical aside that ends the introductory poem, the speaker separates the protagonist even farther from her remembered self, calling her “one,” emphasizing the sequence’s strategy of attempting to estrange its character from sentimental memories. The planted seeds, possibility, end the poem even though blossoms appeared earlier in it: “Where once her red geraniums had stood, / Where still their rotted stalks were to be seen” (5-6). The unusual order of these images, ending on a memory of possibility instead of dwelling on the “rotted stalks,” suggests that selective remembering gives the woman power over these painful feelings, though throughout the sequence her emotions break through nonetheless. The theme of uncooperative time, emphasized by the speaker’s sympathetic attempt to render the protagonist’s non-chronological memory faithfully, is shown in images of days and seasons, which are commonly used to discuss a person’s lifetime in both literary and conversational speech. But in these poems a lifetime does not quite fit its conventional metaphors; the poems imply that the woman’s

life and the hinted-at loss of a child disrupts the natural way of understanding time and a lifetime, for women in particular.

Linear time functions as a metaphor for a lifetime in these poems, but because their subject is the end of a literal life, the end of a figurative life—her identity—and the possibly repressed memory of another lost life, either a child or the possibility of someday raising one, time tends not to be especially linear in the sequence. Linear time can be teleological, but whether or not it improves, it is characterized by a definite end. It is common to conceive of a lifetime as a day in our cultural and literary tradition; generally morning represents birth, midday youth, evening old age, and nightfall death. This metaphor is used in several of the *Ungrafted Tree* sonnets, but in most of these it is extended and questioned to show the woman's difficulty accepting and understanding a lifetime ending, both hers and her husband's. When a day is a figure for a lifetime, it is common that nightfall represents death; in "She had a horror he would die at night" (sonnet XIV) this conventional image disturbs the woman as her husband is dying.

#### XIV

She had a horror he would die at night.  
And sometimes when the light began to fade  
She could not keep from noticing how white  
The birches looked — and then she would be afraid,  
Even with a lamp, to go about the house  
And lock the windows; and as night wore on  
Toward morning, if a dog howled, or a mouse  
Squeaked in the floor, long after it was gone

Her flesh would sit awry on her. By day  
She would forget somewhat, and it would seem  
A silly thing to go with just this dream  
And get a neighbor to come at night and stay.  
But it would strike her sometimes, making tea:  
*She had kept that kettle boiling all night long, for company.*<sup>40</sup>

The woman is afraid for the moment her husband will actually die; the sonnet discusses her loneliness and fear in her quiet house as she waits for his final moment. It makes sense that night would be used to thematize a death in a sonnet, so the first line, “she had a terror he would die at night,” is ironic. In line two the phrase “when the light began to fade” is being used literally to refer to the end of each day of her waiting, but it also figuratively references death. For instance, Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” famously uses the image of nightfall as death, which is effective because it is easy to understand. Millay’s speaker’s use of this image literally also invites readers to consider its metaphoric use; her husband’s light is fading every day just as the sunlight is. In this poem, the husband is neither fully alive nor fully dead, and the poem takes place neither at night nor during the day. In the same way, she both does and does not have company. The day in question is nonspecific, which is shown by “sometimes” (line 2) and the subjunctive tense (“she would be afraid” and “she would forget” [4, 10]). These ambiguities allow nightfall and day to coexist without a particular order in the poem. The first lines refer to night, in which she sees “white” trees and

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<sup>40</sup> Tennyson’s “Mariana” seems especially vivid here: “All day within the dreamy house, / The doors upon their hinges creak’d; / The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse / Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek’d, / Or from the crevice peer’d about” (lines 61-65).

“would be afraid” of them, which casts her husband as potentially white and frightening, too—a ghost (3-4).<sup>41</sup> Then time progresses “toward morning,” when she sits up afraid of the sounds of animals nearby, “Her flesh would sit awry on her” (9). The distancing between self and flesh mimics the distance between protagonist and speaker, here presented not as a strategic distancing to avoid sentimental feelings but a forced condition, caused by an inability to reconcile the internal and external selves. The poem argues that both of these kinds of separation of identity are present for the woman, for women generally, in part because the responsibilities and expectations of domestic life conflict with some individual self that is suppressed to sustain the household. The woman wakes after the night reassured not only by the daylight but also by her husband’s continued lingering: “She would forget somewhat” that she had been so terrified by his impending death (10). The imagery of night and the ghost-like birches implies the husband should be dead in the morning, but instead the cycle repeats itself. The woman feels completely alone, as shown in the final, italicized line: “*She had kept that kettle boiling all night long, for company*” (14). Her husband’s long process of dying is lonelier than his potentially being dead; waiting for his death through the night extends the metaphorical nightfall and her literal loneliness and terror. In addition, making tea is a morning or afternoon activity, not one usually done at night. The woman could be trying to extend afternoon (as the poem resists ending with its extra syllables), which figuratively is when people are old but do not yet die, or she might be attempting

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<sup>41</sup> Instances of whiteness in the sequence all link to the passage of time and the haunting of memory, as the white trees here suggest ghosts. In II she notes that “The last white sawdust on the floor was grown / Gray as the first” (1-2) to show the duration of elapsed time as well as to signal aging and death in white and gray ashes; in IV “The white bark writhed and sputtered like a fish” (1) suggests their age and their lack of sexual chemistry; in XI “some white storm” recalls a specific but unspecified winter that ought to have ended things, but unfortunately ushers in spring.

to hasten the arrival of morning, when people are born and young. But in denying night, the woman extends her misery because she is sitting awake and waiting. Her husband's dying is extended in nonlinear order over the course of the sonnet sequence, stretching out the process for the reader like the woman. Finally, the opposed verbs in her rejected idea to fetch real company—"A silly thing to go with just this dream / And get a neighbor to come at night and stay" (11-12)—of "to go" and "to come" and "to stay" emphasize her indecision and uncertainty, by making going, coming, and staying all part of one action. "This dream" points to both her idea to get a neighbor and her "horror he would die at night," and indeed her entire experience, rendered throughout the poem in a general tense: "sometimes" "she would." These together cast the nights described in this sonnet into question, their specificity and chronology both evaded by the language and tense of the poem. The free indirect discourse of her being struck by leaving the kettle boiling, too, is general, something that "would strike her sometimes," suggesting the speaker's ability to summarize typical or hypothetical thoughts the woman has had. The tense, imagery, and chronology of the poem all contribute ambiguity to the sonnet itself and its role in sequence's larger narrative, reinforcing the speaker's strategy of alienation and rejection of the overtly sentimental. The refusal to specifically remember the pain, fear, and anxiety of the husband's passing functions not to deny those emotions but to emphasize their role in the woman's alienation from her own autonomy in her marriage.

"There was upon the sill a pencil mark" (sonnet XV), which figures the man as a stopped clock, also introduces the theme of self-fashioning, or writing oneself into existence, as the speaker does in the poems and as the parents do for their child; this theme recurs at the end of the sequence when the husband is "unclassified," or not



written into the record. “There was upon the sill a pencil mark” first shows time’s illegibility because literal and figurative time intermingle to blend the husband’s death with the child’s. Coming immediately after “She had a horror he would die at night” (Sonnet XIV), this poem seems to abruptly change topics, refocusing on the inanimate household items in daylight. However, the pencil mark on the windowsill is paired with an image of a broken clock in the following stanza, this one stopped at “twenty minutes after three” (12), not at night or twilight. On a standard analog clock, 3:20 could represent early in a child’s infancy, if it is AM, or in the middle of youth, if it is PM. But it is noteworthy especially in the context of so many other images that are much less specific—lines later the speaker refers to a picture frame without mentioning anything about the image therein. Because old age is figured as night or evening, while the clock obviously in part represents the husband it can also serve to flesh out the titular theme of being “ungrafted” by suggesting the stopped life of a child. The pencil mark, too, is a deliberately unexplained image; were it on the frame, it could be read as showing the child’s last height before his or her death. As it is, on the sill, it could call to mind the height a child with a wayward pencil could reach. On either of these readings, the pencil mark stands in for the child and allows the woman to picture its life in relation to the day outside:

Vital with shadow when the sun stood still

At noon, but now, because the day was dark,

It was a pencil mark upon the sill. (2-4)

Literally the “it” in line four ought to refer to the pencil mark in line one, so that “the pencil mark was a pencil mark.” This suggests that “it” actually refers to the child, once

“vital,” or alive, at the noon of its life; “because the day was dark” refers to the literal day and the figurative day of the child’s lifetime. Since the child is dead, the pencil mark no longer represents its growth or its activities. The “shadow” of noon, though, complicates a reading of that line as a flashback, since at noon there are generally not shadows. The “shadow” at noon signifies the difficulty of seeing something clearly illuminated, during the day; throughout the sequence the speaker has avoided directly confronting the circumstances of the woman, preferring obliqueness and indirect reference. “Because the day was dark” also operates literally to narrate the action of the poem and figuratively to show her dark mood. On the other hand, the pencil mark might be a remnant from a home-improvement project never completed, another symbol of optimistic domesticity unfulfilled. The very ambiguity of the image, and the speaker’s and protagonist’s decisions to focus on it, reinforce the estrangement the reader feels in sympathy with the protagonist. The very act of avoiding feeling emphasizes the sense of alienation, disorientation, and loss—the “grim” tone that inescapably permeates the sequence. This strategy immerses the reader in the house with the woman, whose days are always dark, now, marked by death in both these poems; her roles of wife and mother, too, have become shadows, no longer viable possibilities for her. The loss of these identities has not come with new opportunities, though; she is left with the markers of that former life and the domestic habits that used to fill it.

Another instance of the progression of daily time breaking down around the woman’s memories of her lost child and her fear of her husband’s death occurs in “From the wan dream that was her waking day” (XIII), which takes place in the same general time or unspecified present the speaker uses elsewhere in the sequence marked by the

use of “sometimes” and “would.” In the first line, she is both awake and dreaming. The poem imagines her moving through her house without agency: “without her own volition in some way” (3), at once both “fleeing, [and] motionless” (4). She moves about the house, dream-like, seeing her husband and “fearful to rouse” someone, perhaps the husband, but also perhaps their child. This dream occurs so often that it is “her daily bread” (12). Adding to the confusion of whether she is asleep the whole time and what she is doing in the dream (and if she is herself the whole time in the dream) is the syntax: the entire sonnet is one sentence, with the first twelve lines serving as a subordinate clause to the final couplet: “Sometimes, at night, incredulous, she would wake— / A child, blowing bubbles that the chairs and carpet did not break!” The dreams described in the first twelve lines culminate in the dream that stays with her upon waking, a memory of the child frozen in time, blowing unbreaking bubbles around the household items she now has to interact with again. Waking and the bubbles’ breaking are linked through the final rhyme, so that she cannot both be awake and have her child. The form further reinforces the complications of time and understanding in this dream poem because the regular rhythm throughout the first twelve lines without periods or colons pushes the reader through the complicated imagery, allowing no time to disentangle what is happening. As a result, the dash at the end of line 13 is dramatically emphasized, and the entire poem up to that point leads directly to the image of a child who exists only in dreams. The syntax of the sentence could suggest that she wakes to see this image, but it is clear from the context that she wakes only remembering this image. Though he is analyzing a different Millay sonnet, Robinson discusses the efficacy of such confusion in dealing with loss: “The poem fails to achieve the self-

negotiation it so desperately tries to effect,”—in bringing the child out of memory and in making waking and dreaming the same—“[...] the loss of loving having created the calm sense of denial that allows one to create [...] this indelible utterance *against forgetting*” (3). The utterance does not seek to specifically remember, but rather reacts against the possibility of forgetting, as dreams remember dreams and memories revisit previous memories; the fractured syntax reveals the speaker’s difficulty organizing these jumbled impressions into a cohesive story or into a version of the memory that could reconcile the fractured parts of the woman’s identity. Memory and forgetting are common themes in Millay’s poems, which the sonnet form helps to address by offering an immutable memorial to the lost child or lost love.

In the same way, the preceding sonnet, XI “Tenderly, in those times, as though she fed,” uses disjointed syntax to represent the fracturing of her ability to confront her memory while using images of caretaking and children to raise questions about the couple’s possible offspring. Though the child here occurs only as an analogy to her “helpless” husband, its presence and her facility in caring for him as she would “an ailing child” point to a maternal instinct or memory. While fondly disparaging men as a group—“what helpless things they were”—the woman also sacrifices herself as wives and mothers were and are expected to do: “She gave her husband of her body’s strength” (5). This contrast most vividly illustrates the conflict between the woman and speaker’s personal politics, the view that women’s lives are unfairly limited by the traditional institution of marriage which yokes them to helpless men, and the facts of being in a marriage nonetheless. But here the practical problem, of being back to nurse her husband, subsumes her editorializing about his role in society. After the husband falls

asleep, the woman's attention strays to fantasy, but her husband's physical presence limits her imagination as well as the clear referents of some of the poem's lines. One sentence comprises the octave, which ends on an unspecified agent "stirr[ing] the night and [speaking] to her":

Tenderly, in those times, as though she fed  
An ailing child — with sturdy propping up  
Of its small, feverish body in the bed,  
And steadying of its hands about the cup —  
She gave her husband of her body's strength,  
Thinking of men, what helpless things they were,  
Until he turned and fell asleep at length,  
And stealthily stirred the night and spoke to her. (1-8)

The final line can be read as parallel to its precedent so that "he turned," "he fell asleep," and "he stealthily stirred," and "he spoke to her," but his voice is not heard or referred to thereafter. Rather, the line is better interpreted to read as the night itself stirring to speak to her, leading her mind out of the bedroom and into the world, following the train whose whistle is "familiar" "like a friend" to "the magic World, where cities stood on end" (9, 12). This world, either the one she left to come back or the one she longs to find, is remote from her, both literally because of "the window screen" and figuratively because of her responsibility to "something asleep beside her" (14). Rendering her husband as an inanimate obstacle, a "thing," which the speaker does twice in this sonnet, and leaving the sick room to imagine "the magic World" beyond it both allow her to

avoid the sentiment of the moment, of the tedious waiting for an expected death, and to avoid thinking about her feelings for her husband and her sense of self.

The dream-like state shown in sonnets XI and XII also serves as a figure for the lack of agency the woman felt in creating her life, in the household she later rejected. The narrative suggests that her lack of love for her husband and the pain of losing their child pushed her away from the domestic space. But the images she remembers about motherhood are not the quotidian, daily tasks of maintaining a home, and keeping a child alive, but the extraordinary: their Souvenir, the leisure time with bubbles. Losing a child does not make the woman reconsider the emotional meaning of her household, but rather pushes her out of the home, out of these constrained roles for women. Just as the woman chose her husband without any specific, meaningful impetus—just “as a rule” went together until she left—the rest of her domestic life came into being like a dream, “without her own volition in some way.”

In addition to days representing lifetimes, seasons are also often used to illustrate a person’s life on both the cyclical and linear models; Millay’s use of seasons in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* demonstrates the cruelty of the cycles of time for someone dealing with death, especially in “In came into her mind, seeing how the snow” (XI). The woman wants to reject the signs of spring because they are incongruous with of lost life, but spring inevitably comes anyway. The woman’s struggle throughout the sequence, which the penultimate poem articulates—“she was shocked to see how life goes on / even after death, in irritating ways” (XVI 3-4)—is elaborated in this sonnet. This poem captures a moment in the melting snow when the woman finds her long-buried apron. This discovery points back to the first poem, in which she remembers

herself “big-aproned,” expecting a child. Since then, in the intervening poems and in her life, her plants have died, the apron has been buried in a snowdrift, and winter has settled in. Spring hurts her, because it reveals “the brown grass” of her yard, which represents death but also, in spring, the potential for new life. When she was mourning, winter was appropriate, and now the seasons are ceasing to reflect her emotional state: “here was spring, and the whole year to be lived through once more” (14). The phrase “to be lived through” shows that living the coming year will be an exercise not in joy and abundance, but in enduring until winter again. In addition, “more” is paired with “tore” in the previous line, which implies that her living through another year is painful, something she violently tries to reject or alter.

The apron merely suggests the loss of a child, like the other imagery that evokes children and offspring, but it is perhaps the most suggestive image in the sequence. Formerly “big-aproned,” in the opening poem, the woman now confronts the lost, frozen garment in her thawing yard. That previous image, suggestive of pregnancy, dies as the woman pictures the winter storm that blew the apron off the clothesline:

Clashing like angel armies in a fray,

An apron long ago in such a night

Blown down and buried in the deepening drift[.] (8-10)

Again, death is imaged taking place at night, and here the child and the memory are buried with the help of the winter snow. Her ability to forget that previous version of the self erodes as the snow melts. Now that she has returned, she encounters the sites of her memories throughout the house and yard. In addition to reminding her of her plans for her child, the apron represents a time when she was vital and had a role in the house; it

prompts her to remember “long ago” a storm that “sent her forth” to do work around the house, which she has since ceased to do. Finally, the hidden apron represented her choice to reject that life, to leave the home and its attendant responsibilities; returning has brought back her domestic self, the version of herself who needed to wear an apron to do household labor. Seeing the apron brings back a version of herself she had rejected, complicating her attempts to define herself as a woman.

The syntax and form of this sonnet further emphasize her struggle with time, since, like her life, they refuse to progress linearly. This sonnet is one long sentence, mingling the past and the present in two seasons, refusing the woman’s attempts to separate her feelings from the chores she has to do in her house, her domestic self. This sonnet is the only one in the sequence with all three quatrains cross-rhymed, so that in the formal environment its tenth and eleventh lines are out of order, even though in a traditional Shakespearian sonnet they would be “in order.” This irony calls attention to the inversion in these two lines: “night” in line nine rhymes with “sight” in line eleven, contrasting the times of the apron’s burial and retrieval. These rhymed lines also link night with winter and day with spring: “long ago in such a night / [...] / To lie till April thawed it back to sight.” Night and spring are not opposites, but both night and winter represent death and mourning, and both day and spring represent the cruel new life the woman does not want to deal with. They also evoke an image of the new life she is not nurturing because her child is dead. In addition, “drift” and “gift” are rhymed in lines ten and twelve, suggesting that her ability to forget the apron and her former plans in the winter snow were the gifts, not necessarily the re-finding of them. The image could be of forgetting or remembering—syntactically the referent is unclear. The unspecified gift



is juxtaposed with the beginning of the final couplet, “it struck her.” This violent phrasing about her realization that spring is coming also makes the gift ironic, whether it is her ability to forget or to remember. By inverting her own inversion, Millay’s speaker complicates the woman’s memories and her ability to keep them under control. This points to the distance between the protagonist and speaker; the speaker seeks to differentiate herself from the woman having to come back home, having to maintain the home, but her relationship to that self is complicated, sometimes difficult to disentangle. The confused chronology and syntax here and elsewhere point to the speaker’s difficulty maintaining her narrative distance.

Since seasons and days so completely fail to satisfy the woman’s need for a means of dealing with her memories and grief, a less conventional way of visualizing time appears in some sonnets, in the form of the household wood pile. In “She filled her arms with wood, and set her chin” (III), the wood pile represents time that can run out. In considering traditional gendered labor, it might also suggest the time he could replenish but that she is using up, without him to go cut more. The wood pile is at once teeming with life and used to provide warmth, but for some reason she does not see it as a renewable resource. Like the sequence itself, the wood pile makes linear progress without the promise of a new beginning at the end. As was clear in “The white bark writhed and sputtered like a fish,” the wood pile functions as another metaphorical figure for the couple’s unsatisfying sexual and emotional relationship, but here it takes the form of a source of fuel. “She filled her arms with wood, and set her chin” expands on the role of the wood pile as something that is running out. It, too, is one long sentence that shifts temporally to show the woman’s unnatural relationship with time. In this

poem, the woman goes out for wood and remembers having done so countless times before, a repetitive task essential to the running of her household. This is the most apt metaphor for time that allows the woman to forget. But since it is also an image of her retreat into habit, even this suggested escape from memory is ironic. As she has always done, she chooses the best logs for burning, heedless of the day she will “find / Smooth, heavy, round, green logs with a wet, gray rind / Only, and knotty chunks that will not burn” (10-12). A parenthetical aside at the end projects into the future to a day “when dust is on the wood-box floor” but no wood. The implication is that the wood pile will not be replenished, whether because that chore was the ailing husband’s or because the couple planned poorly. The end of the wood pile is the end of time, too, and the dust on the floor stands for the ashes of death, suggesting that the woman’s final escape from her memories will come in her own future death. The dwindling wood pile, which she could replenish but evidently chooses not to, is a more fitting image for her struggles with time and mourning because it can actually end, unlike days and seasons. Since she is the tree of the title, too, dead wood, which will eventually run out, is an apt metaphor for her; her choosing not to restock the wood pile shows that she does not invest in her own life, or at least her domestic life, after her child’s and husband’s deaths. She may be encouraging the coming of her own death, perhaps for want of other options.

The speaker attempts to assume an authorial role, separating her voice from her character to recast the events of the husband’s death. In the narrative choice as well as in a few images throughout the sequence—the aforementioned sonnet “There was upon the sill a pencil mark” and the final sonnet, “Gazing upon him now, severe and dead,” most notably—the speaker raises the theme of self-fashioning; the poet’s concerns and the

speaker/protagonist's concerns merge in the theme of writing oneself into being, or into memory. Though these sonnets are "about" the death of the husband, in the end the sequence characterizes him as "for once, not hers, unclassified" (XVII.14)—he ends the sequence still unwritten. Like Petrarch's Laura, the husband's presence in these sonnets only reveals more about the protagonist and speaker. However, the man's ability to create a public self endures, even in this final image and final sentence:

She was one who enters, sly, and proud,

To where her husband speaks before a crowd,

And sees a man she never saw before—

The man who eats his victuals at her side,

Small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers, unclassified. (10-14)

His body is defamiliarized to her, but he exists as a public object in the image of a man "speak[ing] before a crowd," in contrast to the version of him she encounters literally, "small, and absurd, and hers." These images in the first half of the final line establish both intimacy and diminishment; "small" and "absurd" could be tender, but here the speaker also scorns the husband. Their relationship, though, made him "hers," only ending there in the poem's final line with his "unclassified" state. "Classified" generally refers to being put in a category, emphasizing the loss of the man's and the protagonist's relational identities—they are no longer a husband and a wife, but just people again. The speaker refuses to linger in the poetic present at the moment of his death, shifting to the hypothetical vision of a man speaking and to the past, to "the man who eats his victuals at her side"—who lives daily life with her. The poem spends less than half its lines in the poetic present at the moment when the woman is looking at his body, suggesting that

this change in their relationship, in her identity, and in the relationship between symbol and referent that was her husband are all too difficult to dwell in. He is both “hers” and “a man she never saw before” (12), and this contrast stands for their entire relationship as well as her sense of self. By classifying him in relation to her, of course, the speaker attempts to define herself. In the same way, the mark on the window sill writes into existence some memory, of a child or a project or an accident, that the woman can focus on instead of the moment of death. If the pencil mark came from a child, it shows that a house that once belonged to a family is marked by the temporary presence of a child, even after that child has gone. The pencil marks, then, write a relationship into being, or at least a memory of the couple’s shared life, and preserve that relationship, whereas the husband’s death leaves him unlabeled, uncategorized. In both of these images, the speaker reveals an interest in self-identification, the relational and external markers that indicate who she is, because finding herself, in the poems and in her life without her child and husband, challenges her. Finally, reading the poems in their printed order suggests that while the woman focuses on the pencil mark, the husband actually dies. In this sonnet the action of the sequence leaves his sickroom where she is tending to him and begins to imagine him still, like the clock, ending with the realization “[t]hat things in death were neither clocks nor people, but only dead.” Read as a distraction while the husband dies, the pencil mark becomes a meaningless symbol promoted to importance by her desperate need to avoid her feelings. Focusing on the pencil mark instead of the husband allows the speaker to write a version of the woman who lacks “emotional peaks and valleys,” a stoic domestic helper, instead of a wife in mourning or a woman who does not know who she is after she ceases to be a wife. The indistinct mark takes on

added meaning, then, as a symbol the reader cannot interpret conclusively, just as the reader cannot predict how the woman will reconcile her identity in the wake of her husband's death. The themes of finding the self and writing a version of the self into being through the sonnets underlies not only this sequence but Millay's other poems as well, and, as I argue in other chapters, early twentieth-century American sonnets more generally; fashioning a self who is legible is increasingly difficult in a world where what was learned in youth so quickly ceases to be relevant. But these sonneteers strive to revive an eternal poetic form to fit their current cultural context and poetic identities.

These specific sonnets, though, unlike most of the others discussed in this dissertation, do not feign unity; the speaker avoids stating her interest in her own identity plainly by approaching the theme of identity indirectly. As she does with the theme of maternity, the speaker buries her interest in self-fashioning by denying her identity as the protagonist and by including so little direct or free indirect speech in the sequence. The only line spoken directly by the woman occurs at the end of the penultimate sonnet, "The doctor asked her what she wanted done" (XVI): "I don't know what you do exactly when a person dies." This line encapsulates the problem of the entire sequence, stated for once in a voice that unifies the speaker's and protagonist's: when a relationship ends, what becomes of the identity of the person who survives? So much of human identity, especially for women, is relational—the woman is a wife, a widow, a mother (temporarily)—so that when the other person giving her a public and private identity, even one she tried to reject, dies, her sense of self, too, ceases to exist as it did before. The speaker imbues her investigation of the woman's return to her domestic space with larger concerns of women in her contemporary

society. Even ninety years later the loss of an important relational identity like “wife” would challenge a woman’s sense of self and sense of her role in society. However, the unified voice here suggests an ironic unification of the self by suggesting that the wife version of herself perhaps always was a dual self: both the New Woman, hidden away in the marriage now speaking the sonnets, and the proficient, skillful domestic wife and mother. The unification of the self becomes a possibility at the moment of the loss of the “wife” identity. But the rest of the sequence complicates this possible unification, because the woman finds herself returning to her habitual tasks so easily, including each instantiation of the sonnet in the sequence. In returning to the husband’s house, the woman reinforces the distance between the two versions of the self. Indeed, the sequence overall seriously questions the idea that a self can be unified at all.

There are other fleeting moments of possible unification of voice in the sequence, which further this investigation into the relationship between the speaker-self and subject-self. Thoughts are occasionally rendered in what one might call free indirect discourse, as in her aside, “But what’s the odds?” in “Not over-kind nor over-quick in study” (IX.13) or as a rephrased thought in the italicized line “*She had kept that kettle boiling all night long, for company*” (XIV.14), to which the speaker has omniscient access. In these instances, the space between the speaker and protagonist collapses, revealing the speaker’s inability to completely fictionalize herself; though she takes the poetic opportunity to create a self, to redraw herself without her marriage and the pain of her lost child, doing so is impossible because the self has been forged at least in part by both culture and these relationships, resulting in domestic habits that abide even after time away.

Ultimately, her attitude about those domestic habits reveals her difficulty in reconciling her sense of self—these tasks are “[t]reacherously dear” but also “dull” (VI 10-11). When, in sonnet VI, “cautiously she pushed the cellar door,” she summarizes most explicitly the identity conflict at the center of the sequence.

[from VI]

...Traacherously dear

And simple was the dull, familiar task.

And so it was she came at length to ask:

How came the soda there? The sugar here?

Then the dream broke. Silent, she brought a mop,

And forced the trade-slip on the nail that held his razor strop. (9-14)

The protagonist performs her daily work “skillfully,” its necessity only part of its meaning: she also notes that she “whipped open” daily packages “[t]o the gape of children,” or to an impressed audience of children—hers and friends, perhaps. The task represents not only maternity but also the version of domesticity she had forged for herself, one she can acknowledge was “dull [and] familiar” without conscious thought. The routine of unpacking deliveries so fully consumes her attention that she loses track of herself; line 12 is rendered as direct thoughts, another instance of speaker and protagonist collapsing. Her domestic life fits her poorly, but also returns to her like muscle memory—becoming over the years natural to her, calling into question her attempts to reject domesticity’s “natural” role in women’s lives and public identities. As in other poems of the sequence, her lack of conscious choice and deliberate action color the perception of these tasks—routine reinforces the “feminine” sense of cyclical time.

But even as she performs her routine automatically, she rejects the comfort it might provide. Seeing the items she has unpacked, the speaker and protagonist express confusion about their arrangement. The “dream” memory of the children and “dream” life when she always performed these tasks “broke.” The metaphorical dream, though, is tangible in these lines, as its breaking necessitates her bringing a mop—to clean the mess that dream has left her with.

Finally, this poem ends on her saving the receipt on a nail in the kitchen, one also used for her husband’s razor strop; their linked routines, the daily tasks both of them used to engage in before his decline and death, both hang on the same nail, literally attached to the home. The receipt, which she likely has to save for accounting purposes, also signifies the legibility of her domestic life. Though no wage-earning labor is even suggested throughout the sequence, here we see evidence that the household ran as part of society, as the neighbor women leaving jellies demonstrated their community relationships. The domestic space extends into both capitalistic and spatial relationships, subtly suggesting larger losses to the woman’s rejection of her marriage—likely her capital and relationships she had in the community.

The tragedy of their marriage and the loss of the child primarily fill the space of these sonnets as if the pain is only intimate and personal, but in these few moments the larger repercussions of refusing to be a “wife” subtly reveal themselves. These lines about putting away groceries capture and reiterate all the major themes of the sequence: woman’s identity and self-fashioning, women in contemporary society, cyclical versus linear time as ways to reveal women’s expected roles, and the loss of the child as a complication to the woman’s outright rejection of her domestic roles. The poem and the



sequence refuse to resolve these themes, rather allowing their conflicts to shadow all seventeen poems and ultimately the speaker's and readers' senses of the possibilities for women.

Throughout *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, the connected ideas of linear versus circular time and childlessness obviously point to a struggle with feminine identity; women's roles have historically been in the home, where this character has chosen not to be, and as mothers, which this character is no more. In refusing to tell the story through the first-person perspective, the speaker suggests that this particular struggle for feminine and authorial identity is perhaps too fraught to reconcile. Further, circular time is historically and literarily associated with women while linear time and the possibilities of individual growth or progress tend to be gendered male, as in the *Bildungsroman*, a genre dominated by stories of men's growth. Discomfort with the expectations of womanhood infuses this sequence. If Teasdale's speaker views being a woman as in conflict with her poetic identity, Millay's speaker tries to separate herself from the feminine by rendering the protagonist in the third person; in both cases being a woman is fraught, but the difficulties are expressed differently.

Finally, because the sonnet form is traditionally one of monument as well as of love, these poems can also be read as memorializing her child, marriage, and husband in verse. Debra Fried argues that Millay uses the sonnet form to "reclaim that genre as her plot of ground," and in the speaker returning to her former home the woman in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* might do exactly that. But the speaker also uses the sonnet sequence as grounds to work through her memories of her lost child, her dying spouse, and the final death knell of her plans. In all of these attempts to thematize her emotional

response to death, the poems of *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* use the conventions of the sonnet form to help make use of these conventional metaphors to greater effect. The sonnet form for Millay responded powerfully to the modern condition; as it did for Meredith, the form allowed Millay to express the emptiness of love now gone, to explore without resolution the possibilities for personal identity in a quickly shifting culture where poetry's role was not yet decided. Her adaptations of the form both allude to the Meredith sequence, suggesting that the third-person speaker's relationship to the woman is both unified and separate, and emphasize the theme of time that does not progress quite in order. Layering meanings within convention, Millay writes seventeen sonnets that portray at once a mother mourning her dead child and a woman who never had a child, or both, without explicitly saying anything about it; the ambiguity throughout makes the sequence a prototypical example of Cleanth Brooks' "heresy of paraphrase." The point of the woman's story is not "figuring out" the timeline or situation, but the pain and emotion of not knowing. Finally, the Petrarchan sonnet's logical form makes the poems' irresolvability of their themes expected and tragic instead of a failure of narrative; the very impossibility of finding a solution to the woman's problems with her role is built into the sonnet tradition, which Millay uses to point to the lack of societal options for women, even New Women, in the modern domestic space.

## CHAPTER IV

### “WAITING FOR THE LIGHT”: MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN HELENE JOHNSON’S HARLEM RENAISSANCE SONNETS

Harlem Renaissance poet Helene Johnson is most known for her anthologized poems about race, to the extent that she is remembered at all. Her participation in the Harlem Renaissance was both social and literary, but her work avoided taking stances on the manifestoes of many of her peers, so her work can superficially read as apolitical in its context. Her focus was often on the personal, on race, class, gender, and faith especially. She was published in magazines including *Harlem* and *Fire!!* and most often in *Opportunity*—popular black magazines at the time that remain important for study now. Yet despite these connections to other important, and still popular, Harlem Renaissance writers, and despite her awards and positive critical reception, Johnson is mostly forgotten. She guarded her privacy closely, published no books of her poems, and disappeared from public life after only eight years as a part of the vibrant community of black writers in New York (1927–1935). Until her death in 1995, she never appeared in public or gave readings, contributing to her critical and popular neglect for the past eighty years. Though she had been a part of the literary community in Boston for two years prior to her move to New York, she is associated with her community of artists in Harlem. As a result of her short career, compounded by her lack of self-promotion, readers and editors scarcely remember her today.

Readers before 2000 would have encountered her work in small selections included in anthologies, where the editors’ process of choosing a few poems and their biographical or analytical comments would color popular perception of her. Her work

appeared in many collections even after she stopped publishing on her own in magazines, including *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949), *American Negro Poetry* (1963), *Voices From the Harlem Renaissance* (1976), and *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (1989). It merits noting, too, that despite her publication in these anthologies, she was and is far from well known; in a 1997 anthology called *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African-American Poetry*, in 566 total pages and with 28 poets in the category "The Early Twentieth Century," Johnson does not appear. While readers and libraries do save magazine issues, they were then as now more ephemeral than published books; therefore, these limited anthology publications have largely shaped what reputation Johnson has built and maintained, especially prior to Verner D. Mitchell's 2000 publication of all her magazine poetry and a few unpublished poems, *This Waiting for Love*. While male Harlem Renaissance writers received an earlier revival in literary scholarship than their female peers, female writers appear as well represented as their white female peers in "mainstream" magazines at the time; the gendered perceptions many contemporary readers have of the early twentieth century do not align with the material published at the time.<sup>42</sup>

Johnson's reputation has been limited, with an emphasis on explicitly race-focused and dialect poetry due to the specific poems anthologized and discussed in the editorial commentary of these anthologies, most notably Maureen Honey's *Shadowed Dreams*. While readers of anthologies can read her poems, often editors provide nothing beyond the poetic texts (which Johnson might have preferred, according to her

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<sup>42</sup> Honey's volume recovered many female poets of the Harlem Renaissance for critical and popular attention; for more see, for example, Gloria Hull's *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) and Erlene Stetson's *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980* (1980).

daughter). Arna Bontemps' *American Negro Poetry* quotes Johnson in its introduction but says nothing about her except, as *Opportunity* also frequently noted, that she was young: "the youngest of the young poets," in Bontemps' four-line biography, and "among the younger Negro poets," per *Opportunity*. Honey, though, devotes two and a half pages to Johnson in the "Introduction" to *Shadowed Dreams*, one of three case studies in neglected Harlem Renaissance women poets.<sup>43</sup> Honey asserts that Johnson's work is "in the vernacular of Harlem street life" and "recapitulates the fractured grammar of everyday talk" (27). The poems Honey quotes are well described by these claims, and Honey does mention the range of Johnson's work, noting that "[w]henver she strays from [the sights and sounds of the jazz age in Harlem], her writing tends to be flat, labored, inauthentic" (28). The popularity of Honey's volume and her multipage focus on one aspect of Johnson's output have the combined effect of nearly erasing Johnson's formal work from literary memory, even though the poems are available. Honey's brief assertion that the non-jazz poems are "flat, labored, inauthentic" does not withstand scrutiny; rather, Johnson's sonnets operate in deliberately chosen registers to offer complex, sometimes deliberately ambiguous portrayals of black women's interiority as a counter to cultural stereotypes about them and their poetry.

Despite her small publication record, Johnson's legacy of poems, both those published in magazines in the 1920s and 1930s and those she never submitted that have been published more recently,<sup>44</sup> are colorful, political, hopeful, and haunting. Her role in the Harlem Renaissance community and her network of relationships with other writers too provide current readers and scholars with additional means of understanding that

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<sup>43</sup> The other two are Anne Spencer and Mae Cowdery.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, ed., *This Waiting for Love*, 2000; Claman, ed., "*The Boat is Tethered to the Floor*," 2014.

literary landscape. Nearly all the scholarship about Johnson begs for further study: “Because much of her poetry is both innovative and thematically relevant beyond her time, she is one of the movement’s most important poets despite her short time in the public eye” (Patton and Honey 599). Yet Johnson’s innovation and relevance have not generated much scholarly analysis. The best readings of her poems (for which there is a want) acknowledge her network of social engagement through participation in black magazines and salons, while also noting the generally celebratory nature of her poems about the black experience. The critical and popular neglect of Johnson’s work, the sonnets especially, today impoverishes our ability to understand the way women poets in the 1920s and 1930s and particularly in the Harlem Renaissance adapted received forms to engage with their contemporary conflicts of artistic and cultural identity.

The negative criticism of Johnson’s work reinforces the necessity of my focus on her little-studied sonnets. In an entry on Johnson for *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, SallyAnn H. Ferguson offers a scathing commentary: “But Helene Johnson never fulfilled early expectations, probably because her poetry replicates to a greater degree than most the aesthetic confusion that beset Harlem Renaissance literature generally” (404). Ferguson goes on to argue that in poems like “Remember Not” (1929) and “Invocation” (1929) her “sentimentalism at once reveals Johnson’s mastery of outdated poetic forms and her alienation from the aesthetic spirit of those Harlem Renaissance artists who tried to focus concretely and candidly on African American experience.” Ferguson also argues that in Johnson’s descriptions of black characters, particularly men and boys, “the primitivism and racial condescension expose the conflicted nature of Harlem Renaissance writers, whose middle-class

upbringings and poetic visions apparently limited their abilities to capture the lives of the African American masses. Furthermore, Johnson's poetry all too often displays the self-rejection characteristic of many Harlem Renaissance writings" (404). The argument that Johnson's "middle-class" upbringing separates her from "the African American masses," like Honey's claim that Johnson's more formal verse is "inauthentic," seems to derive from a benevolent stereotyping, these two scholars' desire to be able to summarize the black experience in the 1930s in a straightforward way; yet the power of Johnson's work is precisely its refusal to hew to those expectations. To collapse poor and black as categories that must overlap, as Ferguson seems to do, and to imply that non-jazz poetry "inauthentic," as Honey does, is to reduce the black experience to stereotype and to reject the depth and richness of black poetry about other things.<sup>45</sup> These two short negative assessments though demonstrate the need for recovery and rereading of these sonnets, an important and especially neglected portion of Johnson's record.

As noted previously, in style, Johnson's poems vary widely, from the jazz-rhythms and vernacular of "Bottled" to the elevated diction and abstracted imagery of some of the sonnets; in the debate about creating a unique black poetics or mastering the conventions of white writers, Johnson chooses both. She wrote several masterful sonnets, along with the better-known free-verse poems evocative of jazz and praised by Honey. In general, Johnson's poetry celebrates the life and energy of African American life in Boston and Harlem, if sometimes indirectly. It figures the human body as physical

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<sup>45</sup> Honey's larger arguments about black female writers in the Harlem Renaissance are more nuanced; the "inauthentic" argument is made specifically against some of Johnson's work, and is not supported with poetic analysis or even poem titles.

and feeling, and associates love with eating good food—its focus on the embodied subject, often the black female subject, links her work to many of her contemporaries, Claude McKay foremost among them. Her formal and love poetry, like Countee Cullen's, reaches back to Keats and the Romantics. If Johnson comes down negatively about anything in particular, it is propriety for propriety's sake, which she gently criticizes in poems like "Cui Bono," published in *Harlem* in 1928 and "Futility," in the magazine *Opportunity* in 1926. Her most extreme negative feelings, as expressed in the poems available to us, are for Christian faith that does not acknowledge the humanity of black people, most evident in poems like "A Missionary Brings a Young Native to America" (*Harlem* 1928) and "A Southern Road" (*Fire!!* 1926). Her ability to move between registers of diction, sometimes abstract and other times sensual, musical, colorful, allows each poem to operate on multiple levels; her variety of approaches contributes to a larger project of African American writers who "implicitly challenged the dehumanizing caricatures of Black people found in American culture" by offering something outside of those stereotypes and not allowing their work to resolve into a new stereotype (Honey 19). Thus in both theme and presentation, Johnson's poetry challenges received notions of women's Harlem Renaissance participation and black women more generally. Cheryl Wall takes special note of Johnson's phrase "chromatic words," from the free-verse poem "Magula" that contrasts the staid language of white Christianity with the imagined Edenic Africa that American blacks originated from, highlighting her ability to operate in multiple registers even within a single poem. Colloquial words like "golly" and "gee" intermingle with obscure or multisyllabic, Latinate words with ease. Indeed, the achievement of Johnson's body of work is its



variety, not only of dictions but personae, perspectives within each speaker, themes, topics, and forms.

Johnson's work intervenes in this discussion of innovative continuation of the sonnet tradition by adding to and complicating the categories of identity discussed in the previous two chapters: who the black female artist is and who she can be are related but distinct questions from who the white female artist is and who she can be in the early twentieth century. In addition, because Johnson's poems are not in a sequence, the variety of her sonnet forms highlights experimentation and the adaptability of the form, not only over time but even for specific poets. While a sequence allows a deeper investment in a single character, these varied sonnets, published over a decade, present distinct views and styles, highlighting both the multiplicity of the individual and of black women more generally while also making a sustained argument for the myriad uses of the sonnet.

This chapter addresses a small portion of Johnson's published work, a number of her most interesting published sonnets, to show that her political engagement in black, female, Christian identity manifests in the sonnet in important ways: by moving between the abstract and concrete and by emphasizing the oppositional possibilities of the sonnet, Johnson creates speakers whose personal identity is not settled, using the personal and the multiple to write against dominant cultural narratives about black women, black poets, and female poets. These poems individually engage with particular sites of tension between the individual and her society. But taken together they demonstrate not only the continued usefulness of the sonnet form to contain and create these identity texts but also the fractured identity women and people of color—and thus especially

women of color—deal with in American culture, exacerbated in times and places of rapid change, as the Harlem Renaissance was. Because Johnson is so little remembered, and because class and race are prominent themes in her work and her life, I include a brief biographical overview to introduce her context and facilitate future research. The rest of the chapter reads three main themes in her sonnets: race, in “Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem”; Christianity, in “A Missionary Brings a Young Native to America” and the free-verse poem “Magula,” which offers an alternate perspective on the forced conversion of Africans; and the blending of the abstract with the concrete, in two poems both titled “Sonnet.” Each of these sections includes context for the poems read but focuses on the ways each sonnet provides the structure for its speaker to voice multiple views about the same experience, allowing the black female speakers to complicate contemporary stereotypes about race, gender, and poetic form.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

Born July 7, 1906 (though some texts give the year as 1907) in Boston, to George William and Ella Benson Johnson, Helen Virginia Johnson was an only child raised in a large extended family.<sup>46</sup> Her father left her mother and her shortly after her birth, and she and her mother lived with an uncle, two aunts, two cousins, and sometimes other family members in Boston. The cousins spent most of their childhood, beginning in 1914, in a four-story house on Brookline Avenue in Boston. Helene and her mother Ella, along with Ella’s sisters Minnie and Rachel and their daughters Jean and

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<sup>46</sup> The variation in spelling came from a family nickname. For a more detailed biography, see Wakefield, Eleanor. “Helene Johnson.” Scribner’s American Writers Series Supplement XXVI, 2016, pp. 163-76.

Dorothy (respectively), lived together, the girls taking piano lessons and going to schools in Boston.

While the house was large, and they vacationed in the summers at Martha's Vineyard, the family's wealth was a combination of money and pooled resources. Helene Johnson's daughter, Abigail McGrath, notes, "there can be no question that for a while we were a family of substance, but by the time I came around [1940] we were shabby gentility at best. Helen never aspired to be rich, that was Dorothy's thing" (Mitchell 123). Though Johnson biographical material is scarce, Dorothy West biographies, according to McGrath, portray the family, inaccurately, as "Boston Brahmins," their wealth supplied by West's father, Isaac, "the Banana King of Boston." However, McGrath explains that the children were spoiled by people devoted to giving them the best, as opposed to just money. Their childhood together, with "several aunts" and a shared value in arts and culture, sounds idyllic:

The girls had a Finnish governess and did not go to school with other children until they were "molded." They knew their Goethe, Schiller, and Shakespeare. At night, they would write pieces and read them aloud at the end of the evening as entertainment. . . . They went to the theater, joined writing clubs, and did all of the cultural things that young ladies of privilege did, except they did it with the resources pooled together by all three mothers and several aunts. . . . They were a kibbutz, a commune, and the big house in Boston and the beach house at Martha's Vineyard were part of the large family collective. (124)

The maternal side of Johnson's family, the Bensons, originated in South Carolina: daughters Ella, Minnie, and Rachel (three of eighteen children born to their parents) moved north along with their widowed father, Benjamin Benson, who had been born into slavery in South Carolina. They came to Massachusetts after the death of Benjamin's wife Helen Pease Benson, followed by other siblings; according to McGrath, other aunts lived with the family throughout Helene's childhood as well. The family spent their summers in Oak Bluffs, an African American community on Martha's Vineyard, in a house that cousin Dorothy West would eventually live in full time. Johnson, West, and their cousin Jean were educated at several Boston schools, and Johnson and West would eventually study journalism at Columbia University in New York. Johnson also took courses at Boston University, where she and West joined the Saturday Evening Quill Club, the African American literary organization behind the journal of the same name.

Johnson began her publishing career as the winner of a contest in *Opportunity* in 1925, which resulted in the 1926 publication of six of her poems; one of the judges of this contest was Robert Frost (Mitchell 16). Her poems "Fulfillment," "Magula" (sometimes written "Magalu"), and "The Road" were awarded honorable mentions—first, fourth, and seventh, respectively. She was also published in *Fire!!*, the avant-garde magazine of the "younger negro artists" (1926). The following year her poem "Bottled," probably the most studied of her poems, appeared in *Vanity Fair*.

Also in 1927, she and Dorothy West moved to Harlem. They stayed for a time at the YWCA but were able to stay in a friend's apartment for a time thereafter as they

settled in.<sup>47</sup> That generous friend, the writer Zora Neale Hurston, had befriended the cousins at a literary banquet for the *Opportunity* awards, where she and West had tied for second place in the short-story division, West for “The Typewriter” and Hurston for “Muttsy.” Thus, Johnson was among the youngest group of writers to join the artistic movement in Harlem, ushered into the fold by Hurston.<sup>48</sup>

Johnson’s poetry appeared in leading black magazines of the period, including her cousin’s endeavor *Challenge*. She is perhaps best known by students today for her poem “A Southern Road,” which was included in *Fire!!* (1926), or for her several poems in the collections *Caroling Dusk* (1927) and *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931). She was also published frequently in the African American literary magazine the *Saturday Evening Quill*, which originated in Boston in 1928, and contributed poems that same year to the short-lived literary magazine *Harlem*. In all, Johnson’s promise and power as a poet is represented by thirty-four poems originally published in magazines between 1925 and 1935, along with twenty-two collected and published by editor Verner D. Mitchell in 2000 and several later poems collected and published by editor Emily Rosamond Claman in 2014.

Johnson continued publishing in magazines, primarily those aimed at African American audiences, until 1935 and continued writing every day nearly until her death in 1995, but she remained little known or studied. According to her daughter, Abigail McGrath, Johnson continued working on her poetry “for herself because she enjoyed writing,” and, until she was crippled by osteoporosis, “she wrote a poem every single

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<sup>47</sup> McGrath claims that they continued getting mail at the YWCA so their mothers would not find out they were living unchaperoned in Harlem.

<sup>48</sup> Hurston was researching in the South while Johnson and West used her apartment.

day, sometimes tossing out yesterday's piece, sometimes rewriting" (Pace). McGrath remembers her as an eccentric and good mother: "She worked hard at being a good mother, and succeeded at being one of the best. She was a marvel" (Mitchell 125). McGrath recalls her mother hiding their poverty from her by taking free Christmas trees as an act of so-called humanitarianism ("Helen had convinced me that if we didn't take these trees home, they would never know the joys of being trimmed and bringing happiness to families") and by taking standing-room-only tickets to the ballet and opera as an opportunity to dance along (127). While her poems tend to avoid explicit political protest, in her personal life she did not shy away from activism: Johnson made a one-woman picket line to protest the firing of her daughter's schoolteacher—for being a Communist—in the late 1940s.

Johnson so assiduously guarded her privacy that though she married William Warner Hubbell in 1933, her married name and location remained unknown to the public for most of the rest of her life. She sought little fame or recognition, and in fact actively avoided curating her legacy. In her foreword to *This Waiting for Love*, Cheryl Wall recounts seeing a notice in the *New York Times* for a reading by Johnson in 1987, which had happened the day prior; Wall later learned that Johnson had not read in person, but rather had sent a tape of herself reading some poems. Wall did manage to contact Abigail McGrath, through whom Wall could mail some written questions, as Johnson was unwilling to conduct an interview in any other manner. At this point Johnson was eighty and had been out of the spotlight for fifty years, during which time she had married, had a child, divorced, and written hundreds of poems without the public knowing about any of it. Wall concludes her anecdote about the elderly Johnson

by reinforcing the poet's commitment to privacy: "Many months later, Johnson returned my questionnaire. The handwritten answers were too brief not to seem grudging. Everything about the exchange made me feel that my inquiries were invasive" (Mitchell xii). For Johnson, her poetry evidently needed to stand on its own; her personality and biography were deliberately kept quiet. McGrath notes that Johnson always wanted "attention to the work and not the person" (126). For women writers, this positioning might well be self-preserving, avoiding gendered and otherwise personal criticisms that tend to fall more harshly on women—and people of color—than on their white male peers. While her speakers do seem generally black and female, perhaps Johnson perceived separating herself from her texts could allow her poems to avoid the perception of partiality—the idea that women and people of color, women of color most of all, can only experience and convey a limited view of the world, and that their view is always inherently biased by their identity position. Her choice to eschew attention as the author could also be of her time, as she was engaged in the literary community concurrent with New Criticism, which emphasized the text itself and rejected biographical critique. Rejecting publicity serves to let the poems stand on their own without a persona to color reader interpretations.

Until Mitchell's 2000 volume, Johnson's later poetry had not been collected for publication; it is not known how many of her daily poems exist today. Mitchell's volume includes twenty-two poems from the 1960s through the 1980s. Johnson died on July 6, 1995; in that same year, her cousin Dorothy West reentered the literary public eye with her novel *The Wedding*.<sup>49</sup> West's renewed popularity in the 1990s provided

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<sup>49</sup> Mitchell claims that the protagonist of West's novel is modeled on Abigail McGrath, Johnson's daughter.

some of the latest first-person recollections of the Harlem Renaissance and of Helene Johnson. Between West's 1990s work and the remembrances of Johnson at the time of her death, access to biographical facts about her life increased exponentially, allowing scholars to begin to reassess Johnson's legacy without the mediation of anthology editors like Honey.

Johnson's obituary makes the only reference to a planned 1996 poetry collection, to be titled "Inklings and Trinkets." This book was never published, nor written about elsewhere. Most recently, a manuscript of later Johnson poems edited by Emily Rosamond Claman was published as part of The Graduate Center at City University of New York's archival research project, *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative*. This 2014 chapbook contains an unpublished manuscript, evidently arranged by Johnson herself, called "*The Boat is Tethered to the Floor*": *After the Harlem Renaissance*. The poems are in free verse, without titles; it is not entirely clear where poems are meant to begin and end, though repetition of words, phrases, and themes unite many of the pieces. Claman presents these poems with a note about coming into possession of the manuscript, but without critical analysis. This latest publication provides new opportunities in Johnson scholarship, particularly as it illuminates the evolution of her poetic style; more archival research might yield more material in the future.

Johnson's biography and associations make her a Harlem Renaissance poet, always linked to the political and artistic work of the time, but without the explicit protest poetry of Claude McKay, for instance; but nonetheless Johnson's poetry does political work toward the goal of advancing black people and black arts among



themselves and in America more generally. Johnson's celebration of blackness and black culture in Boston and Harlem is evident in most of her poems; where it is not explicit, her choice of publication venues, like *Opportunity*, reinforces her sense of her poetry as specifically African American. When her poetic commentary is critical it generally focuses on outside forces that limit or damage black subjects, such as cultural and religious restrictions. Her association with Hurston perhaps sparked an anthropological interest in people and culture, but whatever the genesis, her work is characterized by "attention to collection and collecting of culture (in its varied meanings); by [her] attempt to *represent* and preserve a voice of a culture; and by [her] attempt in her work to resist audience assumptions and expectations about her and her work" (Lynes 525). Though many of Johnson's poems are deeply personal—her various takes on age, in particular, seem very specific to her outlook—another large group do indeed observe and collect people and culture(s), not shying away from difficulty but not attempting to solve it, either.

Johnson presents the perspective of a member of the community of black people in her 1925 poem "My Race":

Ah my race,  
Hungry race,  
Throbbing and young—  
Ah, my race,  
Wonder race,  
Sobbing with song—  
Ah, my race,

Laughing race,  
Careless in mirth—  
Ah, my veiled race,  
Unformed race,  
Fumbling in birth.

(*Opportunity*, July 1925, qtd in Mitchell 24)

Johnson's speaker presents black people in several ways, united by the repetition of the poem. Her race, a group the poem asserts the speaker's membership in every three lines, is "hungry" and "throbbing," yearning for something yet to come, but also "unformed" and "fumbling," young and learning in the American context. The word "wonder" suggests both a group worthy of wonder, of admiration, and a group that is wondering, unsure. These multiple meanings serve to present the view of black people as united and differentiated, the latter trait often refused by white America. The various adjectives characterize black people both in the voice of a member of the group and in some of the words of white America, words that black people absorb naturally through culture and interpersonal interaction; African Americans can see themselves through two sets of eyes, demonstrated in some of these more negative perceptions in the poem, such as "unformed." Though Johnson does not explain her own poetry or her theories of blackness, as did many of her contemporaries, these few poems illuminate the tensions inherent in black arts at the time and offer some new themes perhaps evident in other Harlem Renaissance work.

A fuller study of her work, to complement Mitchell's biography and collection of her poems, would work deeply through those texts as well as newer, less-available

poems to provide the poetry reading community with a starting place for criticism and close reading. For this project, I focus on her sonnets, in one case using a free verse poem to highlight how the poetic form alters the presentation of the theme. Johnson engages in nearly all of her poems with issues of conflicted personal identity, often related to race, class, gender, and faith; the disjunction between inherited wisdom—and form—and personal feeling or instinct reappears consistently throughout her work. Often what the speaker or character has learned and what she thinks in the moment are presented as two (or more) equally important sides of the self, and, in many poems and especially the sonnets, Johnson presents those sides of the self as existing simultaneously, in conflict or tension in many cases but sometimes not. The woman, the poet, the black woman poet, cannot be reduced to a simple summary, a stereotype or singularity; the sonnet form itself requires a conflict between its parts, and poets like Johnson use it to create subjects who cannot quite resolve the two parts, though some of them want to. Her poems suggest that this may be true for everyone, but it is heavy and complicated for blacks, for women, for Christians, for the working class, and for people who occupy identities at the intersection of those.

Johnson uses the sonnet form to interrogate those identity categories by presenting both sides simultaneously: rather than seeking to solve these dualities, her poems argue that these tensions are at once universal and particular, that black women and black poems are both universal and particular. As I have shown in my chapters on Millay and Teasdale, for women at the time class, faith, poetic influence, and gender presented at the beginning of the twentieth century both conflict and rich depths of poetic inspiration; for Johnson, the same difficulties of the New Woman and poetic

influence obtain, though her youth—a decade younger than Millay and two younger than Teasdale—meant that the New Woman was somewhat more established during her career, and indeed Millay and Teasdale were famous while Johnson was writing and publishing. Differently than they do, Johnson presents her sonnets sporadically, not in sequences, allowing her to inhabit different speaker positions only briefly, but to accumulate a large array of ways of positioning and presenting black female subjects. Thus, I focus on her published sonnets to show the facility with which she weaves together the poetic past and contemporary conflicts in African American identity.

#### “SONNET TO A NEGRO IN HARLEM” AND SONNETS ABOUT RACE

While “My Race” allows Johnson’s speaker to give voice to multiple perspectives on black Americans, “Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem” does so exponentially. The sonnet’s inherent concision and duality amplify the internal and external conflicts the speaker experiences as she observes the negro walking down a Harlem street. The choice of the sonnet further complicates the poem’s meaning, because of its historical and formal connotations. Though a poem ostensibly about the negro, like Petrarch’s sonnets this one reveals as much about its speaker as its subject; this poem illustrates the speaker’s perception of being black, of being an insider and an outsider to her race and community, and of using the sonnet form.

If instead of the *Walden*, *Huckleberry Finn*, even *Invisible Man* individualistic Bildungsroman ideal of American Literature, we take Ammons’s and Nelson’s revised vision, that American literature, especially in the twentieth century, is engaged in the social issues that affect Americans’ daily lives, we see the ways that poets like Johnson

represent dominant tendencies. Ammons contrasts what she sees as a history of “social, adult, topical” literature to the more traditional definition of American literature of antisocial literary escape based on adolescent male fantasy; this remaps the terrain to bring toward the center social writing, both about communities and about needed change. While adolescent males do often need to differentiate themselves from their communities, adult American literary characters have also in large numbers created another model of the self/society dichotomy by reconciling the individuated self with various versions of society—local and global, past and present. This is true in the novel tradition, especially in novels written by and about women, but even more evident in poetry, which often uses society, nature, or a beloved other as a contrast to the subject, generally in a narrower, more focused way than a novel or even short story.

The short lyric poem whose lyric speaker—the Romantic *lyrisches ich*—traverses the world and the page alone, his footfalls in nature translated to the page, stands in for many American readers as the stereotype of short literature, but in fact even short poems about an individual in nature nearly always engage with his relationship to society. The independent speaker writes to someone, escapes from something, defines himself in terms of a culture he is often skeptical of—in these ways, the specter of society looms over nearly all individual-in-nature texts. But formal verse maintains necessarily an even stronger relationship to society because the writer has chosen to allude to the history of the genre, to the authors who have come before. The sonnet specifically already engages the poet in a reckoning with a poetic past, a society of previous poets with whom she can integrate and also from whom she can differentiate herself; for a black poet or a female poet these possibilities are amplified.

In the Harlem Renaissance the sonnet flourished for just these reasons; black writers including Johnson inhabit a form that already signifies literature, love, memorial, high art, and history, but use the form to speak to and about the African American experience. Johnson's sonnets have received little attention, and none of that has been about form specifically; but the sonnet's popularity among male writers of the group has been well studied. One of the masters of the genre, Claude McKay, took up the conventions of the form—its concision, its echoes of history, its multiplicities of meaning—to distinct effect, which Nelson summarizes:

McKay chose the sonnet as the vehicle for his shock and rage at the racism he encountered when he came to the United States. [...] Haunted by a past they never knew, exiled to an impossible present, blacks in America may be doubly imperiled. They exist apart from the ordinary social space of lived time and yet are urgently endangered. McKay took the romance and the consolations of the historical sonnet and replaced them with a hand grenade of protest. Compressed and rhetorically proficient anger would now be among the sonnet's resources and its cultural aims; the form would never be quite the same again. (78-79)

Imbuing a received form with the particular struggles of black Americans simultaneously puts the speaker and writer in the company of the poetic geniuses of the past and separates speaker and writer from those they are emulating; their work takes the materials of the past for distinctly new purpose. McKay's speakers at once demonstrate their relationship to the conventions of high-prestige cultural production and assert their power to defy expectations. Even in poems that are not protest poems, McKay does

political work by asserting the equality and power of black speakers and writers.

McKay's deployment of the historical form is presented by Nelson as unique, both among black writers and in the time period, but many poets worked in the form during the period. McKay's sonnets endure, and the scholarship of them stands nearly alone in early twentieth century sonnet studies. But Johnson uses the form for political ends, as well, exploiting the tension between what readers of the sonnet expect and what her speakers say.

“Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem” demonstrates Johnson's ethnographic eye, here used to capture the dual consciousness of blackness that is aware of being perceived as black, or other, while at the same time responding to the context of Harlem, a black community. The poem's form furthers this tension, of being seen as a representative of a type while also existing as an individual, or a multiplicity. Seeing and being seen as black was not and is not straightforward; black Americans disagree about what it means and ought to mean to be black in America, about how to deploy literature and the arts for political ends, and about what those ends ought to be. This poem inhabits not only the black viewer's perspective on blackness in Harlem, but multiple ways of conceiving of blackness.

George S. Schuyler's 1926 essay “The Negro-Art Hokum” outlines one side of the Harlem Renaissance debate that comes to bear on this poem—about whether African Americans had and ought to have their own distinct culture and arts. Schuyler acknowledges that certain artistic genres originated in particular black populations, but argues the distinctions among different groups of African Americans are exactly as stark as those between groups of white Americans: “[these art forms] are no more expressive

or characteristic of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders or the Dalmatian peasantry are expressive or characteristic of the Caucasian race.” Schuyler is not opposed to black arts inherently, but thinks that “African American” is an artificial category, not united culturally per se. This argument in part mourns the loss of specific heritages and cultures, but does not adequately acknowledge the vital community—and culture—blossoming among African Americans in cities throughout America. For black writers in Boston, Harlem, Chicago, and elsewhere, who collaborated about their experiences as simultaneously of two (or more) cultures, the similarity of their experiences was as important than their differences. So Schuyler’s insistence that black arts and white arts are not categorically distinct is worth noting, particularly when reading a Petrarchan sonnet written by an African-American woman.

Another side of the black arts debate is captured W. E. B. DuBois’s famous statement in *Crisis* that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy” (quoted in Patton and Honey 49). For DuBois, black art is always, inherently, making the case for itself, for black artists, and for opportunity. Whether black poetry emulates the white masters or innovates by making use of black cultural traditions (jazz music and black vernacular language in particular), it always shows the variety of talents of black artists. Johnson’s engagement in black literary groups and publication almost exclusively in black journals points to some affinity with DuBois’s views here. Merely by writing complex, empathetic, moving sonnets, Johnson engaged in political literary



action; using the sonnet form is a way of asserting poetic mastery, of writing oneself into a place of respect.

These multiple contexts come to bear on the description of the “Negro in Harlem” walking proudly down the street, not fitting in with those around him:

“Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem”

You are disdainful and magnificent—

Your perfect body and your pompous gait,

Your dark eyes flashing solemnly with hate,

Small wonder that you are incompetent

To imitate those whom you so despise—

Your shoulders towering high above the throng,

Your head thrown back in rich, barbaric son,

Palm trees and mangoes stretched before your eyes.

Let others toil and sweat for labor’s sake

And wring from grasping hands their meed of gold.

Why urge ahead your supercilious feet?

Scorn will efface each footprint that you make.

I love your laughter arrogant and bold.

You are too splendid for this city street!

This speaker observes a black man walking in Harlem, engaging the sonnet’s history of unrequited poems of praise for a beloved, and, as in those historical sonnet models, her description of the poetic object reveals as much about the speaker and her poetic agenda as it does about him.

The speaker's dual positioning establishes itself in the octave's long description of the man. The first sentence, which comprises the entire octave, describes the man as "d disdainful and magnificent," "dark eyes flashing solemnly with hate" but also with his "head thrown back in rich, barbaric song," and later "laughter" (1, 3, 7, 13). These contradictions demonstrate the precarious psychological position of African Americans, existing as insiders and outsiders, able to participate in society (particularly in places like Harlem, Northern cities with large African American populations and neighborhoods) and also apart from it. However, the man's inability to blend in is curious, given that Harlem is a haven for black people at the time. The poem demonstrates his difference both in his behavior—the song and laughter, his eyes flashing—and in his physical being, describing his "shoulders towering high above the throng" (6). The images he calls to the speaker's mind, too, separate him from the street on which he walks: "Palm trees and mangoes stretch[ ] before your eyes" as if he is oriented toward the tropics, not the urban landscape that surrounds him. Literally, the poem describes the speaker apprehending a tall black man, who is singing and laughing, walking down the streets of Harlem, but his attitude and bearing separate him from the workaday folks around him, the ones content to see the urban landscape, go to work—"toil and sweat for labor's sake" (9)—, and lose the elements of their identities that keep them separate. An aside in the octave, four lines separated by dashes, shows the character's position in the debate about fitting in with the larger culture: "Small wonder that you are incompetent / To imitate those whom you so despise" (4-5). Here, though the character obviously refuses to participate in the charade that he is the same as white America, he also refuses to fit in with Harlem's black culture, bringing Schuyler's

arguments to mind. His memories of Africa, whether ancestral or personal, remind him that the community of Harlem is a world removed from his origins. The description of his song as “barbaric” suggests that the speaker, while admiring, also has internalized a view of Africa as primitive, and the man’s refusal to hew to urban social conventions prompts consideration of this contrast. Though the speaker claims to “love” his laughter, his way of being, and says in the final line that he is “too splendid” for the city street, this admiration is removed; the speaker remains apart, observational, not changing her behavior even while enjoying his.

The speaker separates herself from the man by putting herself in the poem as the lyric “I,” and then further removes herself from the description of the man as “barbaric” through multisyllabic, educated diction; the speaker’s judgment and admiration mingle while establishing a stark divide between speaker and subject. The speaker provides little context for herself, only using the first-person “I” once, in line 13: “I love your laughter arrogant and bold.” This line and the intrusion of a first-person viewer complicates the perspective of the poem; suddenly our observation is embodied, by an “I” who is watching this man quite closely; the reader, like the speaker, watches a stranger from the same street and draws conjecture about his life. The conclusions of the speaker are called into question; is he or only the speaker looking out at images of the tropics? Is he arrogant? If the images stretched before his eyes are our conjecture, what details are literally true?

Her choice of polysyllabic adjectives demonstrate the speaker’s ability to capture two concurrent views, both negative and positive, judgmental and admiring toward the black man, which reinforces her subjectivity as both similar to him and distinct. The

language the speaker uses to describe him functions both to paint the scene and reveal the speaker's concerns; her vocabulary establishes her as not primitive, but rather learned. The man of the poem's title is "d disdainful," his gait is "pompous," his feet are "supercilious," his laughter is "arrogant and bold," and finally he is "too splendid" (1, 2, 11, 13, 14); the first four of these adjectives read initially as negative, but in the context of the poem seem to be celebrated by the speaker. Feet would not normally behave independently of the rest of a body, so the description of "supercilious feet" invites scrutiny; besides being synecdochic, referring again to the man's way of walking also mentioned in line 2's "pompous gait," it also calls attention to the feet of the poem, of the speaker like the man striving for superiority, to differentiate the self from the group of people around them that the dominant culture wants to collapse together.

The relationship of speaker to man, at once united and divided by the poem's frame, has elicited criticism for inauthentic racial imagery; this critique raises a useful question about the function of primitivism in this and other poems but is ultimately a misreading. Certainly in the Harlem Renaissance period "primitivism that included the reification of an imagined Africa" both proliferated and elicited debate, but critics then and now generally agree that rather than being primarily a "naïve nostalgia for that which never existed" this can and often does function as a way of creating history and community among the diverse members of the diaspora (Lynes 531, responding to Ferguson's critique). In an article discussing Harlem Renaissance primitivism, Tracy McCabe points out that "primitivism—the promotion of the 'not-civilized'—is not . . . a monolithic discourse that can be simply labeled as either subversive or supportive of dominant ideology. . . . It takes on diverse and often contradictory meanings in its

various social, historical, and literary contexts” (475). That is, primitivism functions the same way all poetic techniques and tools do, to varying effects within the context of the poem; in Johnson’s case, calling the negro in Harlem “barbaric” and evocative of “palm trees and mangoes” certainly draws upon the imaginary Africa, but this serves to reveal the speaker’s complicated relationship with her race and with Harlem. The speaker gives voice to an insider and outsider perspective, revealing the ways that white culture creates a dual (or multiple) identity in othered minority groups, both women and people of color.

The speaker’s positioning, as an observer, invites an ethnographic reading of her project; seeing her as both a part of the scene she observes and apart from it further illustrates Johnson’s multiple investments and the sonnet’s capability of not only containing these multiple subject positions but its function to establish relationships among them. While many of Johnson’s poems address blackness, this poem observes blackness as if the speaker can ethnographically study the negro; ultimately, the difficulty of objective study and the sonnet’s tendency to invite the collapse of the subject/object combine to reject the possibility of knowing another. This poem raises identity questions we would now think of in terms of intersectionality—Johnson and the speaker are black women, whose experiences of blackness differ in significant ways from men’s experience being racialized or essentialized by race. The subtlety with which this poem accomplishes its complication of essentialist notions of identity means that readers who come to the poem from all identity positions must disentangle the intersecting threads of identity within it: black female speaker, authority, poet.

The speaker both stereotypes the man, generalizing his heritage to the reified, imaginary Africa, and idealizes him, but in focusing on him specifically she holds him up as an example of a culture and community, of Harlem; her positioning as a person also in Harlem is illuminated by considering the roles of ethnography and autoethnography, both of which obtain. James Buzard provides the definition of the latter term: “autoethnography—the study, representation, or knowledge of a culture by one or more of its members” (61). Johnson’s speaker is a part of the culture of Harlem, so her observations of both herself and the man fit this definition. Buzard explains some limitations of autoethnography’s theorization and thus application, notably the risk of “essentializing” cultures and peoples; this risk partly motivates autoethnographers who seek to remedy the generalizing tendencies of outsider-looking-in models of traditional ethnographic study. Johnson’s speaker, straddling the insider-apart and outsider-taking-part models of ethnography by locating herself as both a member of the negro’s group—another black person in Harlem—and someone distinct from him—someone who has come to Harlem from elsewhere, a woman, a passive observer—, resists essentializing either the negro or the larger culture he might represent despite evoking the imaginary Africa. Though she cannot specify his ancestry or personal history, the speaker feels connected to him by their shared lost history. By seeing him as an individual distinct from the people around him, she creates a model of ethnography interested neither in “culture” or place in the way much historical ethnography conceived of it, but rather concerned with the individual and his journey to Harlem; place functions not as home of the natives, as it did for anthropologists like Boas, but as a shared site of new cultural creation (Buzard 62). The duality of place the speaker

creates, literally Harlem and figuratively a tropical Africa, serves to highlight the shared, lost history of the black people in Harlem. After the Civil War, freed slaves moved north in enormous numbers, and the Great Migration was further accelerated by historically devastating floods along the Mississippi River in the south in 1927; these historical conditions set the stage for Harlem to become a rich, diverse site of new black American culture, arts, and letters, but also serve as the setting for this poem's speaker to encounter a man both like her and vividly distinct.

Harlem represents a blending of cultures, the creation of something new out of varied cultures and people; like the speaker we are tempted to take the subject character as synecdochic for all African Americans attempting to fit into a broader American culture, whereas the poem does not quite allow that reading to stand. Because the character refuses to fit in in Harlem, because he is too supercilious to work like those around him, because his own scorn will erase the traces of his existence (12), the negro character can here be read as skeptical of the project of trying at all. And because the speaker might well be hypothesizing about his intentions and attitudes, we can read her as projecting her doubts onto him. Thus one possible reading of the poem is that the speaker, a Johnson-like person in Harlem, wonders if the enterprise of creating an African-American community in a predominantly white society is ultimately worthwhile. Here, though the speaker avoids putting these views into her own voice, aside from "I love," the poem invites readers to interpret the attitudes as the speaker's, or at least attitudes admired by the speaker. This is perhaps the clearest didactic message Johnson is willing to provide, skepticism projected onto an anonymous character on the city street. However, her participation in the community and the poem's oblique

questioning combine to suggest that Johnson's politics were not naively positive, even as in her poetry she did not present explicit manifestoes offering one course of action. The careful collection of details, ethnographic observation of people and contexts, allows Johnson to be both neutral and celebratory.

Formally, of course, it is important that Johnson chose the sonnet to memorialize this image; long associated with unrequited love, the sonnet is also a form of memorial, and here it operates on both levels. While white writers had embraced the sonnet for long enough that it by the early twentieth century it carried elite, memorial connotations, black writers in Harlem took up others of Dante's early purposes of the genre: its ability to speak for and to a particular group, its possibilities for vernacular and highly targeted in-group speech: "Much like its medieval archetype, it appears to be a vehicle of communication rather than a mere display of a poet's technical skills or a conventional replica of European aesthetic manners, as were the majority of sonnets produced in the 19th-century in America" (Francini 37). Because so many African American writers embraced the form, put violence and protest and dialect into fourteen lines often associated with love, its function was reclaimed: "In making it one of their chosen modes of expression, these [black] poets succeeded in recovering the sonnet's original function centuries after its birth and within a very different cultural setting. In their hands, the fourteen-line structure turns into an ideal forum, a public space for dynamic argumentation of social and political themes directed to a specific category of readers" (38). In this context, the speaker becomes (auto-)ethnographer for her people, a collective voice entering a communal discussion of how they see themselves, in person and in representation not as unified or stereotype-able, but as varied, diverse, worthy of



celebrating. The speaker shares, through the sonnet, a singular experience that both represents broader experience and has the potential to invite further discussion. The single “Negro in Harlem” and the “I” observing him is transformed, through the history of the African American sonnet, into a representation of a group’s struggle to reconcile the streets of Harlem with the mangoes and palm trees of a mythical home.

Putting the description of the man in the second person—“You are disdainful and magnificent” (1)—puts the reader in the position of the man. This puts a community of readers in a position of understanding themselves as the man and the observer, seeing through the poem’s perspective both views. Normally the “I” of a poem invites the reader’s empathy, acting as the reader’s “eyes” to the vision the poem presents, but here because the “I” is so delayed, the “you” comes to also be a source of empathy. For readers whose experiences are similar to Johnson’s, people reading *Caroling Dusk* and *Ebony and Topaz* (both 1927, both aimed at African American audiences), both of these positions are likely familiar. The sonnet thus invites people to empathize, to see from multiple sides someone like themselves and vividly distinct. Through ethnographic observation of her environment, Johnson’s speaker creates a shared experience among her readers. The form invites singular expressions to a larger audience, a speaker choosing an audience with whom to discourse: “in Dante’s times the sonnet was not, as it would be for modern readers, the highest formal expression of lyrical poetry; rather it was primarily ‘an invitation to converse,’ a ‘single voice launching an appeal to a chorus of voices’. Nor was it merely an isolated text, but a metrical item likely to be read in association with similar compositions in a larger context” (Francini, quoting Guglielmo Gorni, 37).

But the use of “you” in a sonnet, particularly the speaker’s empathetic view of “you” in this poem, amplifies the contested relationships between author, speaker, subject, and reader even further. A conventional sonnet is often addressed to an unattainable beloved, the echoes of which are clearly visible here: the Negro in Harlem is admired but remote to the speaker. Her admiration for him, her blazon-inspired description of his physical appearance, are recognizably traditional. The reader’s ability to read “through” her perspective is, as has become clear, contested. But the relationship between author and reader is direct, through the “you”; this is not entirely untraditional, as sonneteers have often addressed their beloveds as “you” (though not always, and not Petrarch), with varying degrees of ambiguity. But the directness of that form of address, as an entreaty from author to audience, is not always well recognized. In some poems, the “you” is obviously the reader, while in others “you” functions on multiple levels; but in cases where the beloved is figured as “you,” it is possible to read the entreaty to the unreachable love as one also aimed at the desired reading audience. The author supplicates herself to her audience while the speaker (who may or may not be similar to the author) supplicates herself to the beloved subject. This dual relationship of speaker to subject and author to reader mimics the poem’s relationship to blackness, the relationship between the character of the speaker and the character of the negro she observes; in all these cases, the sonnet form amplifies the contrasts between these registers of meaning while yoking them together.

The language of the poem returns again and again to the anger of the Negro in Harlem at his situation; paired in nearly every line with his beauty, this anger speaks to the political and artistic situation of black people, particularly artists including Johnson

herself. The adjectives in the opening lines establish the poem's extended contrast: the general descriptions "disdainful" and "magnificent" (1) lead to physical traits "perfect" and "pompous" (2). Here, the "magnificent" and "perfect" might either contrast with or include the man's negative attitude—the speaker's phrasing does not flesh out the relationship between these observations. As the poem continues, the man's inability to fit in is both a cause of and an effect of this "scorn" (12); he is shown rejecting a society that has rejected him, by a speaker who professes to admire him. A question left open by the ambiguous description is whether she admires the man in spite of his anger or for it. She does not suggest what the man ought to do, but rather takes a perspective that is nearly omniscient, as if allowing the man to explain his contrasts. This is especially seen in the clause that links stanzas one and two: "Small wonder that you are incompetent / To imitate those whom you so despise" (4-5). The man is unwilling and unable to blend in with white society, but because these lines follow "Your dark eyes flashing solemnly with hate" (3), the "small wonder" refers to his own attitude, not the racism of white people. "Incompetent" stands out in this line, a word perhaps borrowed from a former boss, here reused to give the man his own narrative of his inability to keep a job here in Harlem. The word also ends the first quatrain, rhyming with "magnificent" from the opening line; his incompetence and his magnificence bracket his identity, and the lines between attempt to resolve that contrast in a way that is sympathetic to him. Seen in the context of a world that was not at all kind of black men and black artists, the man's inability to fit in—he is "incompetent / To imitate those whom [he] so despise[s]" (4-5)—his magnificence and pomposity can be read as defensive, the speaker giving him the description he needs in the face of larger cultural scorn. This troubled, circular

relationship between his anger and his social exclusion is amplified by the poem's ethnographic approach, wherein the speaker assumes a neutral observer status while also filling in the description with interpretation. The reader, therefore, cannot achieve an objective view of the scene, because the poem is as much the interpretation of the speaker—and thus about the role of this particular speaker—as it is about the Negro in Harlem.

More radically, though, "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem" puts the reader, of any race, in a position of admiration for the black male subject, and thus allows a white reader to transgress racial sexual boundaries. In her analysis of Frances E. W. Harper's antislavery writings, Carolyn Sorisio notes that historically, women were meant to avoid discussing the body in any way, including discussing corporeal slavery. The depiction of the black body was even more controversial than the presentation of white bodies; in addition to the undignified sexuality of any body's presence, the black body was marked as other in cruel ways—see Johnson's appropriation of "barbaric" in this context, and its import deepens. Perhaps a reader still considers a black male body barbaric, but in Johnson's rendering it is also worth celebrating, for its perseverance and connection to its history. Here, the body is a metaphor for the poem itself. Contemporary readers might judge the sonnet inappropriate (in a different way, but in its blazon-infused iterations it, too, is sexual and embodied, defined by form as much as content, both historical and specifically of its time), but Johnson shows its evolution, forces the reader to confront it in a new context, always making use of the old. The censure aimed at Harper when she spoke publicly (at all, and about abolition in particular) was specifically embodied, condemning her flaunting herself bodily: "African American

women who entered the public sphere could be perceived as confirming notions of their bodies as ‘unruly, grotesque, carnivalesque’” (Carla L. Peterson quoted in Sorisio 47). These criticisms rely on offensive stereotypes both racialized and gendered, and their near history at the time of Johnson’s career are instructive in reconstructing cultural attitudes that are harder to access today. In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, it is not clear that Johnson would have experienced such severe judgment, at least not merely for her physical existence—perhaps for her views or politics, which she also kept private. But her refusal to be a public poet, a person the public could know and engage with and associate with her poems, suggests an awareness of the multiple pressures on black women, even half a century after abolition.

Detailed depictions of the physical pain of slavery then were a matter of as much debate, one that felt immediate to abolitionists, as their rhetorical choices might affect the tide of not only public opinion but national policy. It was as much a concern then as now that too much emphasis on physical suffering could be painful for survivors, but also that gratuitous focus on embodied trauma could reduce African Americans, slaves especially, to “erotic objects of sympathy rather than subjects in their own right” (Marianne Noble quoted in Sorisio 49). That is, the non-traumatized, non-marked reader, generally white, experiences voyeuristic pleasure from watching and reading about the physical suffering of the black subject. This exacerbates an existing social taboo, of women participating in discussions of the physical in any capacity.

The “Negro in Harlem” has a body that is “free,” in that he is not a slave, but always marked different. Though he is associated with these trappings of Africa, he is not African. That is imposed on him by the viewer. It is a narrative fit to his body;

ultimately, he is physical and has no agency. So he is not free; he does not tell his own story. The viewer interprets in his actions defiance at the ways white people reject him, but again, that version of events is imposed from outside. The sonnet is “to” him but ultimately not actually about him. Johnson offers him one version of his own story, not knowing whether he has one he is already prepared to tell. Addressing a related concern, Marianne Noble describes “sentimental wounding,” a practice which she suggests positioned slaves “as erotic objects of sympathy rather than subjects in their own right” (quoted in Sorisio 49); thus, the invitation to empathy here accompanies a strategic practice of presenting the black body as not a subject but an object. Johnson uses both of these modes of presenting the Negro in Harlem to demonstrate the dual identities forced on African American men and thus the conflicting relational possibilities for everyone else who encounters them, including the reader.

In “Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem,” Johnson’s “sentimental wounding” or fetishizing of her subject’s physical body is ameliorated by relating his physical bearing to his character and context, but in her sonnet “A Missionary Brings a Young Native to America,” we see the traces of slavery’s history dealt with in a different way, again avoiding gratuitous eroticism and representing the character’s mental struggle with her status.

#### CHRISTIAN FAITH IN “A MISSIONARY” AND “MAGULA”

The physical presence of the black body combines with a deep, emotional ambivalence about Christianity in “A Missionary Brings a Young Native to America”

and the free verse poem “Magula.” Johnson argues that for twentieth century African-American Christians, being faithful is a conflicted, often painful process of remembering how Christianity came to be imposed on their families. The relationship between these two poems helps to add depth to reading them, as they take similar characters—the “Young Native” and “Magula”—at different times in the mythologized journey of the black Christian from “unenlightened” Africa to “salvation” in America. These poems use Christian images and the missionary history of Africa to explore the mixed effects of bringing Western organized religion to people who already had their own established and deeply felt practices and beliefs, and of bringing those people across the Atlantic to the United States. While both poems deal with similar issues of faith, the sonnet form allows Johnson to present the struggle of personal faith more deeply within the individual subject, as I will show.

“Magula,” sometimes written “Magalu,” is a free-verse poem that reimagines the temptation of Eve as an interaction between a black African and a missionary. This poem figures the lush tropical setting as a kind of antireligious temptation; its seductive beauty contrasts to the austerity we associate with devout Christianity. In the beginning of the poem, a list of exotic flora and fauna suggests familiarity and impresses the American reader with his or her (likely) *unfamiliarity* with the African landscape:

Summer comes.

The ziczac hovers

Round the greedy-mouthed crocodile.

A vulture bears away a foolish jackal.

The flamingo is a dash of pink

Against dark green mangroves,  
Her slender legs rivalling her slim neck.

(ll. 1–7)

Beginning in the present tense, with “Summer comes,” the speaker suggests that she, and perhaps we, have been in this place prior to this moment, and are observing something in flux. The list of animals foreign to most American readers serves to make each one both fantastic and typical. Commenting on the pastoral setting here, biographer Verner Mitchell points out subtle points of conflict: “In drawing our attention to the flamingo’s fragility and vulnerability—her slender legs and slim neck—the poem . . . suggests an extended analogy between the devoured or soon-to-be devoured animals and vulnerable Magula” (Mitchell 13–14). The rich, unhurried interplay between these images of beauty and danger set the scene for the subject of the poem to face temptation, an Eve in her garden, suggesting deeper layers of Christian faith’s presence in the text.

The speaker is unspecified until the first-person singular pronoun intrudes in line 13—“I met Magula, . . . / . . . listening to a man with a white collar / And a small black book with a cross on it” (ll. 13–15). The “I” of these lines looks at a common natural scene and remembers a time in the past (“I met”) when Magula and the priest were there too. This moment replays a common pastoral trope, as noted by Katherine Lynes, of “a maiden waiting for love in an idealized setting,” though the extent to which she is actively waiting is not clear (533). However, Magula’s “[e]ager-lipped” countenance as she listens to the man suggests that she is susceptible to him, even hungry. Religion, on this model, separates people—in this case specifically black Africans, but elsewhere in Johnson’s work others too—from their natures, their preferences, and their bodies. The



pastoral scene and the music and poetry the speaker can offer are all at risk if Magula chooses to “let him lure” her “from [her] laughing waters” (20). The waters are Magula’s, her own laughing landscape, perhaps personified as the speaker, who could “Fill up [her] throat with laughter and [her] heart with song” (19).

Though the man with the Bible seems to be talking directly to Magula, the speaker of the poem talks only to the reader; her plea is voiceless, without quotation marks, suggesting that Magula does not literally hear it. The speaker pleads:

Oh Magula, come! Take my hand and I’ll read you poetry,  
Chromatic words,  
Seraphic symphonies,

Fill up your throat with laughter and your heart with song. (16–19)

The laughter and music previously associated with the lake (l. 8) are now at risk for Magula; the speaker’s offer to give them to her again figures the speaker as the landscape itself. The multicolored words, the music and rhythms of nature, contrast starkly with the priest, who is figured with a white collar and a black book, offering a creed that is similarly black-and-white in its proscriptions. The speaker asks an unanswered (and, for Magula, unheard) question, contrasting Magula’s landscape, bodily autonomy, and sensuality with the superficial comforts of religion as offered by the missionary. The question is:

Would you sell the colors of your sunset and the fragrance  
Of your flowers, and the passionate wonder of your forest  
For a creed that will not let you dance? (22–24)

As in other Johnson poems, the restrictions associated with organized religion seem to be more problematic than faith per se. The “creed that will not let you dance” represents all the religious losses, present in culture more generally too, that confine and restrain people, women in particular. Just as the priest’s black-and-white appearance denies the brilliant colors of the landscape around him, his faith denies the music and laughter Magula enjoys now. The dance Magula would lose is part of her current culture, one that readings of Africans as primitive often ignore. The speaker suggests that her poetry is an acceptable substitute for organized religion, not merely superficial fun, because the natural setting can fill not only her “throat with laughter” but also her “heart with song.” That song, or poetry, could also fill someone’s heart, for its own sake instead of in the service of worship, is a subversive claim.

The poem “A Missionary Brings a Young Native to America,” published in 1928 in the magazine *Harlem* (Mitchell 43), suggests what Magula has to look forward to if she chooses to go with the priest. This violent, painful sonnet is about a “young native” woman or girl who has been brought to the United States by a Christian missionary:

All day she heard the mad stampede of feet  
Push by her in a thick unbroken haste.  
A thousand unknown terrors of the street  
Caught at her timid heart, and she could taste  
The city grit upon her tongue. She felt  
A steel-spiked wave of brick and light submerge  
Her mind in cold immensity. A belt  
Of alien tenets choked the songs that surged

Within her when alone each night she knelt  
At prayer. And as the moon grew large and white  
Above the roof, afraid that she would scream  
Aloud her young abandon to the night,  
She mumbled Latin litanies and dreamed  
Unholy dreams while waiting for the light.

Her internal struggle is between her traditions and freedom on the one hand and the constraints of this new faith on the other. As in “Magula,” there is an unspecified speaker—in this case actually no first-person pronouns at all. The sonnet form captures an image of conflict within a character to whom it does not grant the authority to speak. The imagery is violent: she hears “the mad stampede of feet,” and “[a] thousand unknown terrors.” Later, she is overwhelmed by the newness of the city, and this experience of feeling lost or drowning is figured as a “steel-spiked wave of brick and light”—a vague but violent image that puts the reader in the native’s position, confused and unmoored.

The conflict with religion specifically comes into the poem in lines 7-8, after being suggested by the title; the structures and requirements of Christianity are like a “belt” “chok[ing] the songs” of her past. However, in this sentence the poem also shows the effort the native is putting into adapting, as it says she tries to pray even when she is alone. Despite her attempts, the conflict between her instincts and what she is instructed to do remains into the night; her recitation of prayers is superficial and when she does sleep, she dreams “[u]nholy dreams.” The poem ends with her “waiting for the light.”

This ending makes plain that this moment of stasis, of waiting through her suffering for the light—of day or knowledge or death—is not a solution to the character’s problem, though; the imagery of violence in the poem is reiterated by the adaptations taken by the sonnet form, which reinforce the tension the character experiences.

Though a sonnet, “A Missionary” is neither English nor Italian in structure; instead, it is comprised of a quatrain and two quintains. Its rhyme scheme (ABABCDCDCEFEFE) is somewhat subtle—internal rhymes, alliteration, and assonance call attention away from end-rhymes as the primary aural effect; and the lack of end-stopped lines prevents readers from hitting the last word of each line very hard. Throughout the poem the enjambment emphasizes the speaker’s struggle to fit within the perceived confines of a form that is unfamiliar; the syntax works against the line endings to heighten the tension of the native’s internal contortions. Where an Italian sonnet generally has a volta, a break in stanzas and ideas between lines eight and nine, this poem enjambes those lines, forcefully preventing the illusion of an expected volta. On the other hand, an English sonnet would have its turn after line 12; this poem does offer a final summary image there, though lines 13 and 14 are not separate syntactically from line 12. So in these structural ways, the expected form of a sonnet is reshaped to contain the struggles the native is experiencing; it adapts, as sonnets do, but in denying readers some expected patterns, it demonstrates the ill-ease with which the native adapts to her new environment. The suggestion in the formal structure is that just as the content of this poem challenges the traditional structure, the natural inclinations of the native challenge the “alien tenets” of her new church. Magula, still in Africa, not yet converted, is figured

in free-verse, with lines of flexible lengths and loose, conversational rhythm; but here, the young native and her story are trying desperately to fit into an inherited form.

The iambic pentameter is broken only twice, both times to emphasize the ill-ease with which these ideas fit the women: “A belt / Of alien tenets choked the songs that surged” (7-8) forces a stumble at “alien”—the iambs are sure from the word “choked” on, but “alien,” generally a three-syllable word, has to be read as two to fit. In the context of this poem, where seven preceding lines were even metrically, the metrical hiccup in this line calls attention to itself and the words in question. The “alien tenets” of a new church, one the native likely did not choose to join with full agency, fit poorly at this moment, figuratively choking the reader, too. The words suggest there is a freer song beneath the iambs, one that has been violently tamed. The return to metrical regularity could be read to suggest that this is temporary and the native will adjust, but it might also suggest (as the language does) that her assimilation is forced, violent. The other, lesser metrical irregularity is in line 13: “She mumbled Latin litanies and dreamed[.]” Here, the meter is loosely iambic, but the tongue-twisting sounds of “mumbled Latin litanies” replicate the native’s experience of mumbling difficult, unfamiliar words. The experience for the reader in both instances is analogous to the experience for the native: unfamiliar, imperfect, strange.

The young native, who is not even the subject of the poem’s title, is active in the poem only in very limited ways; most actions of the poem are done to her. Her struggle is deeply interior, but without a sense of self-determination. In this poem, a stampede of feet pushes by or past her; unknown terrors catch at her timid heart; a steel-spiked wave of brick and light submerges her mind in cold immensity; a belt of alien tenets chokes

her (that is, chokes away her songs). Conversely, the actions she takes are hearing, tasting, feeling, kneeling at prayer, mumbling, dreaming, and waiting. Her status as the direct object of the title sentence alerts the reader immediately to her lack of agency and authority here.

The missionary, the subject of the title, serves primarily to establish the religious conflict and contextualize the young native's current situation. Except as a figure for Christianity, the missionary is absent from the poem itself. It seems clear that he is not the speaker; the unspecified speaker has unique access to the native's feelings in a way he would not. The sonnet, a Western, high-culture traditional form, does not allow its subject, a young native without prior knowledge of Christianity or the American city, to be its speaker, further emphasizing the native's struggle with her incongruous new life. As in Millay's poems of sentimental suffering, this poem distances the speaker from the pained subject as part of its project of approaching emotional conflict logically; using the organization of the sonnet to lay out the problem, the speaker feigns a disinterested position, rejecting her relationship to and empathy for the subject's struggle. In so doing, the poem casts the young native as disempowered in every conceivable way—not the speaker of her own sonnet, not the subject of its title, not the actor in most sentences, not likely the person who decided she ought to be Christian, not likely to be the person who decided she should be in America.

But despite her lack of agency, the young native is shown to be strong; she has survived literal and figurative violence and continues to endure in the darkness of her cell. In fact, the violent verbs do not act directly upon the native herself, but rather on parts of her; she is greater than her "timid heart," "her mind," and "the songs that surged

within her.” Though violence is enacted on every part of her, in the sonnet she survives the night. In a dual image, “a steel-spiked wave of brick and light submerge / Her mind in cold immensity[,],” evoking both drowning in the words “wave” and “submerge” as well as a beating in “steel-spiked” and “brick” (6-7). The “cold immensity” reminds the reader that though Christianity to its faithful offers the comfort of its scope—its immensity—to her, it is not familiar yet, but cold and impersonal. That phrase also points to the experience of drowning. The native’s strength of will, or perhaps strength of body, to endure assaults on her heart, mind, and culture (that is, her “songs”), balances the regulating force of Christianity.

The final lines seem to summarize the poem, but in fact they call its equilibrium into question. The closing pair of lines—which again, are not a couplet or a sextet as would be common in a sonnet—read, “She mumbled Latin litanies and dreamed / Unholy dreams while waiting for the light” (13-14). Initially, this looks like a synopsis: on the surface, she attempts, uncomfortably (through the awkward aural effect of “mumbled Latin litanies”), to mimic the Christian faith she is being made to embrace, whereas within her, “unholy dreams” cannot be entirely suppressed. But this reading is complicated by the final phrase “waiting for the light,” because “light” in a Christian context represents Jesus: “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12, King James Version). So on this reading, with “light” as the enlightenment of Christian faith, the native is waiting for her conflict to be resolved through her truly coming to believe the teachings of Christ. On the other hand, the word “light” appears in the violent image of “a steel-spiked wave of brick and light” (6); this

suggests that the enlightenment of faith is painful, not voluntary, perhaps only awaited because it is all she knows to expect. The “light” of Christ can also be read as death, again perhaps the only escape from this conflict the native can imagine. More literally, light can refer to day, the native’s waiting for time to pass. The light of day and enlightenment of finally coming to understand and accept Christianity operate together as additional layers of meaning in this final word. The several coexisting possibilities for the final word extend the resonance of the poem beyond its literal end, replicating for the reader the native’s experience of waiting for clarity to come—or rather working hard to achieve it.

The multiple coexisting meanings of “light” emphasize the speaker’s inability to know or say what she wants. “Waiting” makes passive her decision making, but because she waits for something indeterminate, time’s ability to solve her problem is remote. If “light” works literally, as the morning that will at least interrupt her night of internal conflict, that offers another complication. In Honey’s introductory essay to *Shadowed Dreams*, she deduces from the volume and variety of black women’s poetry a “preference for nighttime over day,” which she illustrates with Johnson’s poem “What Do I Care for Morning” (15). Honey argues that favoring night serves to “assert the primacy of Blackness in a world that favored white things.” The young native’s desired light fits into this reading of the dichotomy between night and day, because she must sublimate and eventually reject her own preferences and traditions, her blackness, in favor of the ideals of the white missionary. The violence of her relocation and forced conversion have taken the private, “quieter, calmer, less dramatic” nights from her, replacing them with undirected periods of personal struggle (Honey 15). The



coexistence of these meanings offers both hope of salvation and despair, and arguing that hope and despair in this context are the same.

In this and several other poems, Johnson links organized religion to the violent repression of culture. Other under-studied Johnson poems including “A Southern Road,” “Fiat Lux,” “Regalia,” and “Worship,” the last of which presents organized religion as desirable, if complicated, all further color our sense of Johnson’s investment in the topic, though each presents a different version of faith and its desirability. More to the point, Johnson’s investment in the sonnet form varies, as well. While “Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem” and “A Missionary Brings a Young Native to America” both engage directly with race and history, other sonnets take up distinct identity questions. Because Millay’s and Teasdale’s sequences are internally linked by topic and publication, their investment in the poetic form remained in large part consistent from poem to poem, but these sonnets were published separately and have distinct speakers. This limits some bases for comparison, but also expands the conversation about functions of the form during the early twentieth century to include race and gender and the subjective difficulty of generalizing about either or both of those, since Johnson uses the form in distinctive ways, adapting the Petrarchan form, deliberately moving between specificity and abstraction, and emphasizing multiplicity, all of which she accomplished despite her relatively small publication record.

#### ABSTRACTION AND CONCRETENESS IN TWO “SONNETS” FROM *OPPORTUNITY*

Two significant poems, both titled “Sonnet,” appeared in *Opportunity* late in Johnson’s publishing career, as did some non-sonnet poems. What makes these two of

particular note out of the small number of sonnets or sonnet-like poems in Johnson's collected works is the choice to call them "Sonnet," whereas her other poems of the genre have distinct titles, some of which add content not present elsewhere in the text. These two poems both use abstraction and non-specificity to complicate messages that may initially seem simple, even trite; in so doing they take up the tendency shown in the previous poems to engage with specificity and abstraction and amplify it to speak for a group and an individual simultaneously, complicating attempts to generalize about the black female experience of black female poetics.

The context of *Opportunity* magazine shows what about these poems differs from what readers would have expected and what would have cohered: for example, unlike *Fire!!* for instance, *Opportunity* often published formal, rhymed verse. Thus the choice to write sonnets that advertised their sonnet-ness and publish them in *Opportunity* would make sense, though the magazine did not primarily feature poetry: each issue, which came out monthly between 1923 and 1942 (and less frequently thereafter, through the 1940s), contained editorials, scholarly studies about African American life, visual art, and literary contributions. Established by the National Urban League, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* sought to provide a forum for black voices and conversations about black issues, including publishing research done by the National Urban League. In the first issue, January 1923, the editors reflect on the end of the previous year and beginning of a new one while "the weary struggle of the Negro population for status thru self-improvement and recognition ... goes on, ... marking, we hope some advance in the right direction." Thus, the editorial board of the magazine offers it up as "an increased

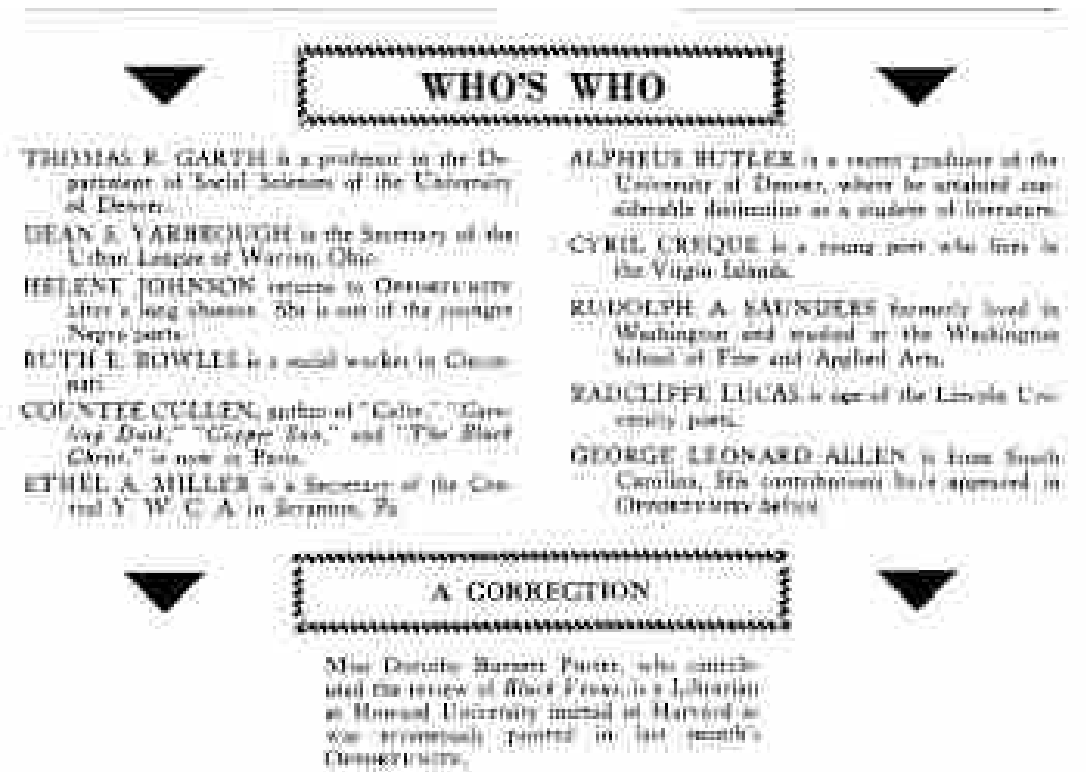


Figure 4 "Helene Johnson returns to *Opportunity* after a long absence. She is one of the younger Negro poets." July 1930.

technique” for doing so. The title states its purpose and makes use of the National Urban League’s slogan, “Not Alms, but Opportunity.”

Literary works were not its main focus, but the magazine sponsored literary competitions beginning in 1925 which served as a springboard for many members of what would become the Harlem Renaissance; in *Opportunity* these writers are referred to as the “new group of Negro poets” and Johnson is consistently referred to among the youngest of this group in her “who’s who” entries. The prizes awarded were donated by Mrs. Henry G. Leach, a member of the National Urban League’s board, and who, according to the January 1925 issue, was “a long, thorough sympathizer with the struggles of Negroes for social as well as artistic status.” In 1926 three Johnson poems were runners up, and her attendance at that year’s awards dinner in New York, along with West, introduced her to many of the poets and writers who would become her

peers.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly *Opportunity* brackets Johnson's career; her earliest and latest work appears there, beginning in May 1925 with the free-verse "Trees at Night" and ending in May 1934 with a light-hearted poem in couplets, "Plea of a Plebian." The only published poem thereafter is May 1935's "Let Me Sing My Song," a free-verse poem in *Challenge*. Fifteen of her poems appear in *Opportunity* in the decade of her active publication. Some of them explicitly treat race, as was much of the content of the magazine, but some, including the two "Sonnets" toward the end of this period, do not do so overtly.

The first of the two sonnets, "Sonnet [Be not averse to Beauty]"<sup>51</sup> appears on its surface to advocate an anti-Calvinist embrace of life, but its abstraction and diction raise questions about the straightforward reading:

Be not averse to Beauty or to love.  
Entreat them in your daily prayer and song.  
Make them your truth and know the peace thereof,  
And they will nourish you, sweetly, and long.  
Ah, let your swaddled psychic strength unfold,  
Grow in awareness, delicate and keen.  
But keep the tingleness of life and mold  
Your way in Beauty, vigorous and clean.  
Believe in things; all living is belief.

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<sup>50</sup> This award was judged by a panel that included Frost, who called her poem "The Road" the "finest" among the submissions.

<sup>51</sup> I use the titles editor Verner Mitchell provides in *This Waiting for Love*, because that volume offers the most complete collection of Johnson poems currently available; Mitchell adds bracketed titles to these two "Sonnet" poems to differentiate them from each other, but does not hew to convention in using the full first line.

The doubting heart when hungry must be fed;  
And freely, for the meal is fine, tho brief,  
Beauty's the wine, and Love the loaf of bread.  
They are the sacrament of life I think,  
So eat your warm white bread and drink and drink.

In a Shakespearian structure, the speaker entreats the reader to find a connection between indulging in earthly pleasures—"Beauty and love"—and religious observation. The sustaining effects beauty and love can have on the spirit recall Keats's "Endymion," which famously begins, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." In Johnson's quatrains, this becomes somewhat less direct due to unclear pronoun references, but "Beauty and love" "will nourish you, sweetly, and long" (1, 4). The emphasis on nourishment in this poem though references the sacrament. The speaker urges the reader to "Entreat [Beauty and love] in your daily prayer and song," here tying Christian prayer together with song, a possibility that was absent for Magula and the young native in earlier poems. The speaker, too, assumes a daily prayer practice, narrowing the possible referent of the "your." Her presumed-Christian reader must "entreat" these earthly pleasures in prayer specifically. In addition, the word "entreat" normally functions transitively<sup>52</sup>—one would most commonly entreat someone to do something—whereas in this one-line sentence beauty and love function as the who, not the what, so that beauty and love are being asked for something (their own presence?) in prayer. With that syntactical problem, the line reads both as Christian and not quite: even Catholics, who pray to

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<sup>52</sup> "Entreat" can also be intransitive in the sense of "to make an earnest prayer or request to" someone or something, which requires a recipient, and per the OED this sense is seen "chiefly with *subord. clause* or *const. to* with *inf.*" that is, generally still in the asking someone to do something sense.

many figures, do not pray to Beauty or love per se, and other denominations explicitly repudiate the Catholic tendency to pray to anyone but God. Intransitively and archaically, the word can mean something more akin to “treat,” as in “deal with,” in which case the line reads as saying make beauty and love the subject of your daily prayer and song; this meaning seems more logical, except that this sense of the word is considered obsolete. In either case, if the use of “entreat” calls back into usage an obsolete function or if it works to emphasize the missing object—the deliberately absent “God” that would make the sentence read as expected—its use complicates the line’s meaning. Thus already the poem’s first two lines establish both the ostensible subject of the poem—the role of beauty and love, or earthly pleasures, within a religious or otherwise ascetic framework—and the indeterminacy that undergirds the progression of that subject.

Religious attitudes toward indulgence generally tend toward the negative—gluttony being among the deadly sins—but the rest of the sonnet treats indulgence in beauty and food, which takes the form of the Eucharist, as desirable. The ability of beauty and love to “nourish” the reader makes it necessary for life, in a way that is and is not religious. After the first mention of nourishment in line 4, line 10 brings back this analogy: “The doubting heart when hungry must be fed.” The line answers its preceding line’s vague platitude-like statement, “Believe in things; all living is belief.” Because all these abstract terms can mean multiple things, attempting to pin down their relationships in these two lines and throughout the sonnet raises the possibility of equivocation. What does it mean to believe in things, as opposed to believing in, say, God? In the context of the poem, it suggests indulging, appreciating that things form the material of this world

while living in it. More philosophically, it is difficult not to believe in things, to believe in sense perceptions; William James and other Pragmatist philosophers argue that the concept of truth requires a belief that seems to work when it is applied in the world, or, more basically, “all living is belief.” But the role of the doubting heart and its food suggests higher belief, complicating the possibility of reading “belief” as pragmatic. The speaker thus entreats the reader to believe in things, left unspecified but probably the objects of the material world, and to feed “the doubting heart when [it is] hungry,” or to indulge in more materiality. This relationship between abstracted ideal and singular instantiation mimics the sonnet’s relationship to its ideal form, making poetic production an act of faith as well as, perhaps, an act of God-like creation.

The sonnet consists of a list of imperatives that seem metaphorical, leaving the tenor of the metaphors unspecified. The speaker begins confidently, listing directions for the reader to follow in order to be nourished, but by the end of the poem that confidence seems misplaced, in part by the deliberate non-specificity throughout and also by the final couplet’s jarring “I think”: “They [beauty and love] are the sacrament of Life I think, / So eat your warm white bread and drink and drink” (13-14). The “think,” coming before the rhyming word “drink,” is not required by a preceding rhyme pattern, and in the context of the previous twelve lines the sentiment along with the introduction of a self-referring “I” are also unexpected. In the sacrament of Eucharist, of course one does not “drink and drink,” except (in a Catholic service) the priest if the wine has not been finished by the parishioners, which furthers the unexpectedness of the final lines. The line before the couplet establishes that “Beauty’s the wine, and Love the loaf of bread,” so that the speaker effectively implores the reader to drink and drink of Beauty

in the world, as it nourishes the living soul the way Jesus's body and blood nourish the religious soul in Church. The "I think" calls this advice into question, though; the speaker gives advice as a priest or preacher might, but without the divine inspiration that guides those men of God. Further, the feminine speaker making a bold claim to rationality in a poem otherwise controlled by faith and feeling transgresses gendered expectations; she both troubles the certainty of her advice and puts herself in a more authoritative position with a single "I think."

The religious metaphor that holds this poem together thus finally emphasizes its subtle blasphemy: the speaker uses religious faith as an analogy for indulgence in the material world. Further, by introducing a self who gives advice with the caveat "I think," the speaker contrasts her role against the religious figures who give similar kinds of life advice. Calling the speaker's authority into question highlights the function of the female poet, whose speaker is often assumed to be female as well, or more pertinently in *Opportunity* magazine, the black poet and speaker. Whereas God and His messengers—priests, the Bible writers, the prophets—are not to be questioned, the black female poet writes a speaker whose subjectivity not only can be questioned but must be, because the poem refuses to resolve its abstractions and contradictions. If the earthly, sensual, embodied are associated with the feminine and the rational, Godly, abstract with the masculine, the poem's operation between those two registers seeks to reconcile the Bible's oldest human division. The poem on its surface seems to try to advise about the role of earthly pleasures, but even those pleasures, Beauty and love (sometimes "Love," the differing capitalization of which is another indeterminacy in the poem) are often theorized in terms of religious faith. Christian religious traditions often explain love



preached against the wicked in the streets of the towns—and the jail doors of Demopolis and Greensboro and Uniontown opened to receive her. When she needed food or clothes she en-

life, became a terrible winding sheet. It caught against her stove one night and Nancy Vaughn left the world she had admonished in a pillar of flame.



## Sonnet

By HELEN JOHNSON

*YOUR dark head lies complacent on my breast. Therefore, think me not utterly so blind.  
Your lovely mouth is satiate. I fear That I heed not that you have been untrue,  
You know me far too well. Your childlike rest That soon you will forsake me, leave me bare,  
Reflects my placid constancy too clear. Will pity me for ever trusting you,  
Of late even my thoughts are not my own. The while you learn that other arms are false,  
You hum the tune I'm humming in my mind. But what avails it to foretell the end?  
You know me thoroughly, flesh to the bone. Wisdom may caution, but it will not mend.*

Figure 5 Original layout of "Sonnet [Wisdom may caution]" in *Opportunity* magazine.

between humans as a metaphor for God's love for humanity and the way people ought to love God; earthly beauty, similarly, is often seen as a gift God gives to humanity. But on the other hand, both of these are temptations people should avoid in some interpretations of Christianity, particularly Calvinist and similar traditions.

This poem, like many of Johnson's other sonnets, refuses to consolidate or console, and because it seems initially to offer a way to live, that refusal destabilizes more dramatically than some of the poems that seem more complicated on the surface, like "A Missionary Brings a Young Native to America." And using the English sonnet form with a perfect three-quatrain and couplet rhyme scheme and evenly iambic pentameter meter, forces the reader to do what the speaker demands, namely to indulge in beauty, in the form of love and poetic achievement. Introducing so subtly the role of the speaker and her authority to give this kind of life advice draws in the common theme

of subjectivity in the sonnet that has linked Johnson's poems together. While most of the works in *Opportunity* more explicitly address blackness than this poem, the poem suits the publication's goals both by demonstrating the talent of a black writer and by complicating how the presumed-black speaker presents herself and her advice.

Johnson's other sonnet called "Sonnet" in *Opportunity* is structured differently, with an unusual stanza break (more about which in a moment) making it read like a modified Petrarchan sonnet instead of a Shakespearian one, and its topic, too, is distinct; but their shared title invites questions about what they both do with the sonnet form.

Your dark head lies complacent on my breast.

Your lovely mouth is satiate. I fear

You know me far too well. Your childlike rest

Reflects my placid constancy too clear.

Of late even my thoughts are not my own.

You hum the tune I'm humming in my mind.

You know me thoroughly, flesh to the bone.

Therefore, think me not utterly so blind

That I heed not that you have been untrue,

That soon you will forsake me, leave me bare,

Will pity me for ever trusting you,

The while you learn that other arms are fair.

But what avails it to foretell the end?

Wisdom may caution, but it will not mend.

The two-column, symmetrical publication of *Opportunity* presents a minor interpretive problem for the second of these two sonnets, “Sonnet [Wisdom May Caution]” (figure 5), because it is broken at line 7; some other fourteen line poems are treated the same way in the pages of *Opportunity*, such as “From Life to Love” by Countee Cullen, which appeared in January 1925. Mitchell’s book, the only collection of all of Johnson’s magazine poems, retains the mid-poem break, which is not replicated in the republishing of Cullen’s poem for instance. The rhyme scheme continues over the stanza break, but as line 8 begins with “Therefore” reading it as a new idea makes sense. Mitchell’s decision to retain the break replicates the initial formatting, but because it is so unusual to break a sonnet at all, and even more to break it after the seventh line, this editorial decision merits consideration. For the purposes of this project I do not seek to definitively answer whether Mitchell presents the poem “correctly,” but rather to give the text of the poem its due attention.

“Sonnet [Wisdom May Caution],” like “Sonnet [Be not averse to Beauty],” speaks abstractly, in this case from one half of a couple to the other about their relationship—the pair appear most obviously as lovers, but can also be read as mother and child, to distinct effect. The poem moves between present, past, and future orientation, complicating the interpretation of its narrative. Its I/you relationship, most obviously between a female speaker and her male lover, functions like many historical love sonnets do, using the “you” to mean the lover as well as the reader, who observes the relationship and hears a perspective on the lover that the lover is not literally hearing. This relationship and the theme of unrequited, or at least complicated, love, both suit the sonnet form well, along with the complexity of the speaking subject and the variations in

the expected form; this sonnet is in many ways typical, which the generic title reinforces. However, because the possibility of the “you” being a child also exists in the poem and on either reading of the “you” the meanings are multiple, the typical-looking approach to the sonnet form contributes to the complexity.

On the most obvious reading, the one supported by the expectations the form evokes of romantic and unrequited love, the speaker addresses a lover with whom she cuddles in the present tense and feels a parallel emotional closeness. The first seven lines discuss their present moment, one of post-coital rest, and how attuned to each other they are, while the second half uses that closeness to demand the lover not assume he can get away with cheating. The closing couplet, which in rhyme scheme replicates the Shakespearian form though the break and turn at line 8 also evokes the Petrarchan, switches to addressing an abstract listener with a rhetorical question and a line that sounds like a platitude or a response to one: “But what avails it to foretell the end? / Wisdom may caution, but it will not mend.” Thus the poem, first about closeness and written with concrete details, then about distance and written abstractly and hypothetically, thematizes its dualities, turning in the middle, somewhat like a Petrarchan sonnet, and again at the end, like a Shakespearian one.

The speaker’s lack of self in the beginning of the poem establishes her as the Petrarch figure, evidently wholly subsumed to the desired relationship to the beloved. The first line makes him the subject, also racializing him: “Your dark head lies complacent on my breast.” Both adjectives refer to him, and her breast, the first mention of the speaker as a character in the poem and as an incarnate person, appears as a pillow for the “dark,” “complacent” lover. In the next line, another sentence that makes the

beloved the subject again omits the speaker entirely: “Your lovely mouth is satiate.” Thus the poem establishes the speaker/lover’s relationship in familiar terms; what the poem in this portion reveals about the speaker is revealed in terms of the relationship and desired relationship with the beloved. As in works by Petrarch, Wyatt, and other sonnet writers throughout time, “the poet is entranced by the image of [her] own desire,” making it the syntactical subject if not actual focus of the poem (Burt and Mikics 26). The blazon tradition can render people as separate objectified parts, but in this poem the focus on their bodies and body parts entwined heightens the intimacy. This sexual intimacy established through bodily description also alludes to Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Nuptial Sleep,” which figures the same imagery of a couple embracing after sex but in a more removed third-person form; this poem, using the “I” and “you,” heightens that intimacy to painful effect when it turns to reveal the pain of betrayal.

The scene of intimacy collapses as the distance between the “I” and the “you” becomes clear throughout the text. The third sentence introduces the “I” of the speaker, but also highlights the absence of details about the speaker while separating her “I” from the rest of the sentence which is again about him: “I fear / You know me far too well” (2-3). The line also suggests their sexual relationship, the biblical way of “knowing” another person. This line, slightly altered, repeats at the end of the “stanza”: “You know me thoroughly” (7). Unlike the lover, the reader knows nothing about the speaker yet, except her presumed sex, implied by “breast.” Indeed, what little is revealed about the speaker, that she has a “placid constancy,” here suggested to be negative, appears in the poem because the lover’s “childlike rest / Reflects [it] too clear” (3-4). Their closeness

results in his actions revealing things about her, suggesting that what little we know about him, too, reveals more about her than is initially obvious.

However, the limits of the connection are implied even in this section about their closeness. Though the poem presumes to give voice to the speaker's thoughts, she notes that "Of late even my thoughts are not my own," evoking both the sonnet tradition and some doubt about her focus on him (5). Following her description of him as in "childlike rest," the reference to her thoughts being his also raises the question of the quality of those thoughts: her love, perhaps, has made her, too, more childlike, or interested in the childlike. These lines are mostly short, aligning with the ten-syllable lines, so that her observations about him suggest a kind of inventory-taking, a listing more than a development of ideas, which is reinforced by the repetition of "you know me"—the stanza does not deepen their love or reveal something true about her or love in general. And indeed, that line appends to "You know me" the added words "thoroughly, flesh to the bone." "Flesh" and "bone," notably, are both corporeal things to know. The slightly odd phrasing, "flesh" without an article linked to "the bone," with the definite article, calls attention to the pairing, as well, serving both to emphasize the words—and that neither of them is "soul" or "mind" or "personality"—as well as to emphasize the concrete image of "the bone," the depths of her body that he knows, not figuratively but concretely. Though previously the speaker notes that they share thoughts, the phrasing, "my thoughts are not my own," begins to suggest not that he knows all her deepest thoughts but rather that her thoughts are limited, focused on him. Thus though the pair are figured in repose, linked syntactically and in bodies and thoughts, this linkage carries with it already the suggestions of problems.

The second stanza reveals to the reader what those problems are, beginning with a “turn” that functions more as a culmination than an actual shift, and ending in a Shakespearian couplet with a “take away” that seems, deliberately, insufficient to the preceding twelve lines. The “Therefore” that introduces line 8 functions to cast the previous stanza in the light of a list of background information necessary to contextualize the claim, as in the “whereas, whereas, therefore” structure of a resolution in a political organization. It produces what feels on first reading like a marked and dramatic shift in emotional tone, and suggests that reading the first seven lines as uncomplicated and loving is too superficial. The speaker’s allegations indicate not only that the lover has “been untrue,” but moreover that despite how well he knows her, he believes she will not notice his betrayal. The “you know me” asserted twice in the first stanza contrasts with “think me” to begin the second, emphasizing his willful ignorance of this part of her, of her ability to see clearly. Thus in the poem’s environment his choice to think her “utterly so blind / That [she] heed not that [he has] been untrue” is as much of a betrayal as his act of cheating (8-9). However, this allegation introduces temporal confusion, somewhat echoing another temporal oddity in the first stanza, that complicates the poem’s meaning yet further.

Though the poem initially takes place in a calm moment of embrace, which gives the speaker time to muse about the relationship, the poem leaves that scene and does not return to it, instead shifting between perspectives. Even in describing the present-tense setting of the poem, the past is also figured: details like “complacent” and “satiated” suggest the moments after sex, and the phrase “of late” brings a longer timeline into the present tense, as well (1, 2, 5). Language wielded well allows for this, of course, but

taken in conjunction with the other instances of chronological indeterminacy, these are noteworthy. More strikingly, the list item “You hum the tune I’m humming in my mind,” which describes both the poetic present moment and their psychological link, requires some disentangling: either it alludes to a past moment when one of them has hummed or sung the same tune, such that it is in both of their mind’s now, or her thoughts are so subsumed to him that she is forced to hum along with him mentally.

These instances of unfixed time continue in the second stanza:

Therefore, think me not utterly so blind  
That I heed not that you have been untrue,  
That soon you will forsake me, leave me bare,  
Will pity me for ever trusting you,  
The while you learn that other arms are fair. (8-12)

In this portion, careful parsing of the temporality illuminates the layers of abstraction that create tension between the speaker’s love and knowledge. In this long sentence, the longest in the poem by far, the tenses and events vary widely: in the poetic present, the speaker reaches the culmination of her observations, now speaking more directly and in the imperative, telling him not to think she is too blind to notice his actions. “Think,” the action he is hypothetically engaged in, and “heed,” the action she is revealing she is engaged in, are parallel and both made negative by “not.” But the reader only can be sure of the heeding, because the lover’s thoughts are not revealed (except insofar as they are the same as the speaker’s, which is not certain). The triple negative in these two clauses—“think me not,” “heed not,” and “untrue”—shrouds the allegation of cheating in unnecessary complication; though the speaker makes the claim, her way of



doing so implies some reluctance or evasion. But she goes on to claim that she also heeds that the lover “will forsake me, leave me bare, / Will pity me for ever trusting you” all of which is in the future tense. Though it is certainly possible for a lover to find hard evidence that her partner plans to leave her and plans thereafter to pity her for trusting him, the context of the preceding lines which emphasize trust and mental connection suggests that this future is something the speaker is able to “know” presciently, as he knew the song she had in her mind. The unclear temporality of the final clause and line, “The while you learn that other arms are fair,” adds to the sense that her future vision might not be entirely accurate. That line might be interpreted to say that while she trusted him he was learning “other arms are fair,” or that while he is pitying her, after he has left, he will also be learning that other arms are fair. The former reading is sadder; the latter suggests that she will remain on his mind even into his future sexual encounters. The pun on “fair” introduces another racialized element, in contrast to his darkness and the speaker’s presumed blackness, but also sounds like common poetic diction that one would expect to encounter in love poetry, which the speaker appropriates to added effect. All of these ambiguities reveal the speaker’s uncertainty, even as her tone throughout seeks to establish her as confident in these assertions. Were the poem to end at line 12, with this ambiguous future projection, it would read on the surface as confident in calling out the lover, and on further reading as conflicted, perhaps sad about their situation. But instead it ends with a generalization in response to a rhetorical question, which paradoxically deepens the poem: “But what avails it to foretell the end? / Wisdom may caution, but it will not mend.”

Though reading this poem as if the “dark head” belongs to a lover makes the most sense, the poem also suggests, if briefly, a possible reading of the “dark head” as a child. By raising that figure, the speaker links women’s relationships with lovers and children, arguing that both kinds of relationship put women at risk of hurt. The evidence for reading the other person as a child begins with their positioning, head on breast, and is furthered by the following line, “Your lovely mouth is satiate,” which could point to the child’s drowsiness after feeding. On this reading, the child knowing its mother “flesh to the bone” makes more sense, as a baby does not know its mother’s thoughts especially (except insofar as those thoughts are dominated by the baby) but does know her body intimately. However, the adjective “childlike” to describe a literal child would be odd, at least; thus the word deliberately evokes the relationship of mother to child as an analogy (3). Through the analogy the speaker makes a more general claim about women and those they love, asserting that looking forward to the end and anticipating that pain will not prevent or solve the pain that is inherent in loving someone else.

In both cases, in the relationship of mother to child and the relationship between lovers, “Wisdom may caution, but it will not mend,” which is to say, applying the lessons of the past to the future, anticipating what will come, solves nothing. Thus, the tense and temporal complexity fit in to the “moral” well: the switching from past to future detracts from the lovely moment described in the present. What prevents the poem from being too pat, from offering an actual moral (that being wary does not protect us from or cure pain, which might also suggest that being wary detracts from experiencing good times), are ambiguities that undercut the possibility of reading the relationship as serene and undisturbed. That reading requires attaching unattached

objects to “caution” and “mend,” namely something like “Wisdom may caution [me/one], but [wisdom] will not mend [the pain of the dissolution of the relationship].” Leaving those specifications out of the line, though, invites the possibility that what needs mending is the relationship itself, or the speaker’s role in it, or perhaps life more broadly—varied possibilities beyond the lover’s betrayal. Thus, the poetic platitude that makes up the couplet rather than resolving the poem in a simple moral solution compounds the possibilities by emphasizing the ambiguities of the speaker’s attitude toward her lover, toward herself in and out of relationships, and toward the sonnet form.

Together this “Sonnet” and “Sonnet [Be not averse to Beauty]” imply an experimental approach to the sonnet form, one curious about how the form can function to capture subjective complexity about issues that feel well-worn within the form. Looking at faith and love in ways that feel superficially commonplace allows Johnson’s speakers to multiply possible meanings and emphasize the multiplicity of black, female subjectivity. Both poems use terms (“entreat” and “avails”) in ways that are now considered archaic and that carry religious valence; both use somewhat elevated diction more generally (more in the first half of “Sonnet [Be not averse to Beauty]” than in its latter half). This linguistic approach is deliberate; Johnson often used more vernacular language in other kinds of poems. In these two instances the diction contributes to the effect the sonnet form also contributes to, of creating a poetic environment in which the reader anticipates historicity, beauty, and resolution. Though attentive readers know that sonnets often revoke those expectations even as they suggest them, Johnson takes advantage of the expectations the form creates to explore faith and love from the perspective of speakers who are deeply conflicted and uncertain about their relationship

to a larger world that will see them as a representative of othered groups. Both approaches reflect a more realistic, human approach to these lofty topics, admitting that a simple platitude cannot encompass the range of an individual's feelings and experiences on something as abstract as love or faith; Johnson thus uses the sonnet form in these poems to emphasize their realism.

Johnson's use of the sonnet form hinges on its unique internally opposed formal structure to suggest that individuals and the groups to which they belong operate as collections of oppositions as well. While some of the speakers and subjects of these poems struggle to reconcile versions of the self and work against the expectations of the sonnet form, ultimately these sonnets and the larger collection of Johnson's sonnet and sonnet-like poems make an argument that black women's poetry represents a wide range of investments—in race, gender, faith, love, poetics, and more. Unlike Teasdale and Millay, Johnson published no sequences or books; the separate and ephemeral nature of her publications amplify the multiplicities her poems present. A sequence allows a sustained investment in a single subject, and historically functioned as an extended attempt to woo with language; while Johnson certainly invests these poems with deliberate language, her project focuses less on love than on the establishment of a poetic self through mastery of an inherited, elevated form. The individual sonnet's ostensible focus on a beloved other often reveals the lyrical speaker, or actual subject, obliquely. This puts the reader in the position of reading between the lines, so to speak, to uncover the speaker's internal investments and tensions that animate the poem. Johnson's audience, primarily African-American readers, due to her choice of publication venues, would have been equipped—in ways white readers were not—to

understand the multiplicity of perspectives her black subjects present about themselves and their relationships to Christian faith, America, and the history of poetry. Johnson's poetic project, to challenge expectations of the sonnet, of black women, and of black women's poetry through variety and internal conflict, merits greater attention and scholarship; her contribution to the Harlem Renaissance and to early twentieth century poetry more broadly has been neglected to the detriment of all readers. Moreover, her deployment of the sonnet complicates common understandings of the Harlem Renaissance use of the form, which is often thought of, in Nelson's terminology, as a "hand grenade of protest" but for Johnson also functions as a subtle, complex argument about the irresolvability of the black female subject.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The long history of the sonnet continues today in many writers, male and female, American and international, of all races in many languages, for precisely the reasons Teasdale, Millay, and Johnson found it useful in the early decades of the twentieth century: it exists both singly and as an ideal; it recalls the past while adapting to the present; it presents an internal argument, a mark of its history as a legalistic form, while temporarily creating (or seeming to create) a much-desired unity; it can feel contained, at just fourteen lines, while expanding and multiplying meanings far beyond the page. While the sonnet's two-part structure—octave and sestet or quatrains followed by a couplet—suggests a problem and a solution or a duality, in the verse of Teasdale, Millay, and Johnson we see the possibilities multiply in the relationships between its parts, sounds, and meanings.

The early twentieth century revolved around sudden change for people whose lives had already been marked by rapid shifts in daily life and social order at the end of the nineteenth century. The period has long seemed to readers and writers to demand an analogous change in literary and artistic forms, which has contributed to the study of the period being focused for much of the past century on experimental verse, on “breaking the pentameter.” But as we now know, traditional verse forms were popular then, too, for readers and writers; Teasdale, Millay, and Johnson did not just mimic the sonnets of previous centuries, but rather appropriated the form to suit the needs of their time period, disparate identities, and poetic visions.

Sara Teasdale began her poetic career in the first decade of the century with admiring sonnets about an actress whose performance of femininity—literal performance of characters but also of a self—seemed a model of new womanhood, of a new way to exist as a woman in a changing world. Eleonora Duse’s agency on stage inspires and intimidates the sequence’s speaker, but in professing her admiration she, like Petrarch, finds a way to write herself into existence. The poems together explore silence, layers of veiling and revealing, and the possibilities of art to move through time and space. The speaker writes and attempts to decipher layers of texts and images: of photographs of performances, of Duse behind her hair, of costumes. As Teasdale’s speaker attempts to reconcile the various levels of remove that prevent her from truly seeing or hearing her idol, she comes to reveal in the poems that she, too, exists as layers, some in tension with one another, of art and performance.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, one of the few poets of the modernist period known for sonnets, in the sequence *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*, used the form to expand the space allotted to women. Extending the line of the poem on the page as her protagonist expanded her role in “his” house, Millay considers the ways women and artists can inhabit space on the page and in the world. The sonnet sequence works against the shifting chronology of the poems and the cyclical time portrayed in the woman’s habits, all of which together show the artist’s attempt to organize the world into something at least legible, if not straightforward. The continuation of the sequence, of the even pentameter feet, after the death of the husband, the death of their child, and the dissolution of their love, creates a dim view of the possibilities of social change for women, particularly married ones.

Helene Johnson, writing separate sonnets to be published primarily in African American magazines, contributed a variety of sonnets and ideas within them, showing that black women cannot be reduced to a type and that black women's interiority is as complex and multifaceted as the white men's that readers were used to encountering in sonnets. Exploring the dual lenses through which black people and women can view themselves—as themselves and as the dominant, white culture observing the other—through an ethnographer speaker, she complicates notions of community and black art. In poems about faith, her speakers wrestle with the dark history of forced conversion to a worldview they nonetheless want to embrace, and with the violence of assimilation in society and in the poem form. Moving between abstract and concrete, between the expected and the unusual, her speakers deny the reader's attempt to reduce the poems of the black female poet, thus advocating for the complexity of the black woman and the black woman poet.

This dissertation has used the work of sonnet scholars of the nineteenth century and sought to extend the line of scholarship into a neglected period; it has taken up a time period in American poetry best known for *vers libre* and has sought to enrich understandings of American Modernism by revivifying the rhymesters. Tying together two areas of scholarship that have historically been little connected, this project contributes to a larger critical project of opening the doors for further study of the period's sonnets and other formal verse, particularly by those writers who have been neglected for reasons of race and gender. It also, I hope, suggests for some readers new approaches to reading sonnets and sonnet-like poems from the early twentieth century. Though only Millay literally extended the lines of her sonnets, I have shown here that



women sonnet writers of the early-twentieth century like Teasdale, Millay, and Johnson figuratively extended the line of the sonnet's long history by treating it as relevant, flexible, and resonant.

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